

Tricky Conscience

A novel

Cenarth Fox

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Dedicated to the memory of
Marie Ryan
Book lover extraordinaire

1

I have an inner voice that guides me.

Socrates

THE GUN APPEARED. The woman flicked through a *Vogue* lift-out, annoyed at the many wrinkle-free females. At 68, and with a lifetime of smoking behind her, Sheila's skin belonged in the before section of the before-and-after ads for women of a certain age. Botox be my friend.

She drained her coffee, put down the mug, and nearly died. The moving gun caught her eye. It waved. Was it loaded? Of course. Then her panic took off as her grinning grandson stepped into the kitchen doorway, and pointed the weapon at his babysitter.

'Bang, Grandma, you're dead.'

Shit.

When holding a loaded gun, the only person more dangerous than a maniac or drunk is a four-year-old playing a game.

Sheila couldn't move, let alone speak. The grinning child didn't know he could kill his Gran. How he found the gun was irrelevant. All that mattered were his aim, and the strength of his trigger finger.

Grandma thought about throwing herself on the floor and screaming, hoping to make Angelo drop the weapon, and come to her aid.

But what if he thinks it's all part of the game?

"I can see, you, Grandma," he might say, run towards her and pull the trigger. "Gotcha, Grandma, you're dead." And she would be — literally.

Sheila's life flashed before her.

I've survived a brute of a husband, chemo, two miscarriages, and a criminal son, only to be shot by a toddler. And what if he fires and doesn't kill me outright? What if I die here, blood oozing over the Italian marble floor? My only grandchild will be mentally scarred for life.

Expecting the unexpected doesn't prepare you for this.

Jesus, what now?

Angelo upped the ante as he moved closer to Grandma. His tiny hands grasped the weapon, with two tiny fingers against the trigger. Sheila's survival instinct kicked in as she reached for her coffee mug.

Must I kill my grandson to survive?

'Listen to me, Angelo,' she said gripping her mug. 'You must not point a gun at anyone.' The child grinned.

That's bullshit, Gran, and you know it.

Angelo scored a water pistol last Christmas, and endlessly fired the toy gun. What's the difference? Same basic shape of weapon, same method of operation — just aim and fire. Mind you, being squirted with a Super Soaker doesn't pack quite the same punch as a .357 Sig bullet from a Glock 31. One of those slugs can tickle your internal organs.

Sheila trembled. She drew the mug closer. It had to be behind her for the throw to work. A flick wouldn't do; only a fair dinkum fling.

Angelo threatened Grandma.

'Put your hands up,' he demanded.

Sheila's thoughts fizzed.

Should I pick up the coffee mug at the same time?

'Gran, put your hands up,' repeated the child, aiming at Sheila's chest.

What a waste. I've beaten breast cancer only to have a bullet do what the cancer couldn't.

She raised her hands, clutching the mug with the "weapon" above her head. Threats were useless, counterproductive.

Keep It Simple, Stupid.

Throw mug.

Hit floor.

Surely he won't get angry and come after me. If I scream like mad, he'll panic and drop the gun. Oh no! What if he turns it on himself?

Angelo loved his new game. Grandma always teased him. Now he could tease her back. He inched closer, the gun stock still. Wee Ange had *potential assassin* written all over him. Sheila forced a smile — just.

'Look, darling, Grandma's got her hands up. You win. Now let's play another game.'

'Not before I shoot you.'

Sheila decided it was kill or be killed. It was throw-the-mug, dive-on-the-floor, and scream-like-crazy time. Angelo prepared to shoot.

Just as he started to squeeze the trigger, the cat jumped from the kitchen bench, and the dog sat up in its basket and barked. Angelo was distracted and Sheila threw the mug — hard. It struck her grandson in the face. Good shot Gran. Angelo fell back squeezing the trigger.

The cable holding the fake French provincial chandelier in the dining room took a direct hit. The light fitting swayed then crashed on the custom-built dining table. The cat and dog fled. Sheila dived.

In the crash tackle, Angelo dropped the gun, and imitated a banshee. Grandma grabbed the weapon and hurled it down the passage.

'It's all right, little man,' she said, clutching the child, kissing him, stroking him, and weeping more than the boy.

Terror consumed Angelo. The gun's recoil stunned him. The noise of the weapon, the sudden speed of the animals, the surprise and pain of the flying mug, the crashing chandelier, plus the rugby tackle from his desperate grandmother, all delivered Angelo to the gates of Hell. This was the worst game he'd ever played, and all the soothing words, kisses, hugs and pats proved ineffectual — totally.

Shock gripped adult and child. Sheila couldn't stand. Her adrenalin surged. She struggled to breathe.

What have I done to my grandson? What do I do now?

She clung to the child. Their tears joined forces. Time meant nothing, and only became relevant when Sheila's son and his wife came home.

'Hey, Ange, where's my little man?' called his father.

Luciano "Luca" Parisi made money from crime. He owned a restaurant, and claimed to be a professional punter with property investments, but Class A drugs made him rich. His wife, Kellie, enjoyed the trappings of new money, asked no questions, and did as she was told.

Violence was second nature to Luca but even he was rocked at the sight of his mother and son on the kitchen floor.

'Mum,' screamed Luca.

'Angelo,' screamed Kellie.

The child invented a new form of hysterics, as his mother tried to comfort him.

'Who did this?' demanded Luca, helping his mother to sit. Not, "How are you?" or "Are you hurt?" just, 'What happened? Tell me!'

She shook her head. Speechless, her shock became the shakes.

Luca looked at his wife who got the message.

'Come on, baby,' she cooed at Angelo, removing the terrified toddler.

Luca investigated. The cat had knocked over a vase of flowers, the dog had re-arranged his food and water bowls, the coffee mug had bounced off the gun-toting grandson and shattered, chairs lay higgledy-piggledy, and the chandelier, in bits, decorated the dining table and surrounds.

'Tell me, Mum, was it the bikies? Tell me, who did this?'

Luca had still not managed to ask about his mother's health; revenge his only thought. What's compassion?

Sheila clenched her fists. Anger replaced shock. She glared at her belligerent son and her belligerence out-muscled his.

She whispered. 'You did.' She roared. 'You did this, you fucken idiot!'

Luca couldn't speak. His brain needed help.

What is the woman talking about?

Sheila staggered to her feet. 'Your son had a gun.'

Luca recoiled in disbelief. ‘He what?’

‘Your gun; he had your gun with real bullets.’

‘He couldn’t.’

‘Angelo had your gun and fired at me and only by some miracle he missed. Your son came this close to killing me because of your fucken stupidity.’ She screeched. ‘You did this!’

Now anyone who called Luca Parisi “stupid” clearly had a death wish. Obviously, that didn’t apply to Sheila. Luca respected his ma although that respect was about to be tested.

She attacked her “boy”, raining slaps and blows. Luca was obviously younger, and certainly stronger and fitter. But he couldn’t fight back. How can you fight your mother?

True, his hands-on violent days were over, but the man who’d assaulted more victims and rivals than he could remember, couldn’t lay a finger on his current assailant. She was his mother — his mia madre.

‘Mum!’ he cried as she laid into him.

He tried to grab her flailing arms. Her language matched her ferocity, and she hurt him. I mean, you cop a decent slap across the head and see how it feels. Luca grabbed her wrists, so Sheila switched to kicking, and Luca’s shins screamed. She jerked a knee, pinpointing the family jewels.

Too much, Ma.

Of course, he’d never strike his mother, but this was an emergency.

With one swinging right cross, he slapped Sheila into next Tuesday. She collapsed. Stunned and exhausted, she resumed her prostrate position on the Italian marble. She sobbed. Luca’s plums throbbed.

‘Sorry, Mum. You were going mental. I dunno what came over me.’

Yes he did. It was her knee to his nuts. He sat, nursing knackers.

Silence. Upstairs in his bedroom, little Ange sobbed, being comforted by Mummy. Downstairs, the dog and cat had emigrated. Sheila’s laboured breathing dominated. Finally Luca spoke.

‘Where’s the gun?’ She pointed. He limped to the weapon and cursed.

How could I have been so fucken stupid?

Luca, or Mr Meticulous, remained free to walk Lygon Street despite his many criminal activities, because he *didn’t* make mistakes. He gave the cops *niente*. He said nothing online or by phone, which could ever help the police. He left no paper trails for tax officials to follow. He never got his hands dirty. His expertise lay in planning crimes, getting others to do his bidding, and in keeping on the right side of organized criminals back in his Calabrian homeland. Luca desperately wanted to be known as the Mafia boss Down Under.

This business with the gun was a catastrophe. Had the cops arrived with a search warrant, finding the gun would have put him inside with bail refused, and his record would see him sent down for years.

I am a moron!

Last night Luca discussed the weapon with lackey, Alan “The Animal” Darcy, planning a hit on a drug rival. Animal departed and Luca still had the gun when he went to pee. His wife called, and he entered their bedroom. Being on a conjugal rights’ promise, Luca cracked the double.

He was pleased to see his wife, *and* he had a gun in his pocket. Kellie, wearing an off-the-shoulder come-hither look, distracted Luca, who stuffed the gun in the wardrobe beneath his cashmere sweaters, planning to secure the weapon once his baby-making duties were o’er. He so enjoyed the horizontal dancing, he forgot the gun and the next day, little Angelo, looking for places to hide from Grandma, discovered the lethal object, and the rest you know.

Sheila dragged herself up and sat, slumped across the table. Luca walked past his mother as she decorated the *Vogue* lift-out with vomit.

‘I’ll be back, Ma,’ said Luca, omitting “How are you” or “I’ll get help”. In the garage, Luca placed his gun in the secret hiding place, made when the house was being built.

At night, alone, the builder did as instructed, and knew that to say anything about this extra job was sealing his death, and

that of his family. Luca terrified you, and with his Calabrian connections, Mr Parisi was someone you did not cross — ever.

Luca returned. ‘I’m sorry, Ma, that should never have happened.’

Sorry was a big word for Luca. Still no, “Can I get you something?”

‘That won’t happen again. I’ll just go check on Ange.’

And with that, the criminal left his ma pondering her near-death experience, and the almighty whack courtesy of her loving son.

Luca owned the Lygon Street pizzeria his father created. Today it was Luca’s domain. He sat at the permanently reserved corner table, and tucked into his gnocchi. At 1950 hours, Animal arrived.

He was the archetypal underling. Luca bossed, bullied and berated his employee who kept on coming back for more.

‘Sorry, I’m late, boss.’

Luca ignored him.

‘I done that job.’

‘And?’

Animal passed an envelope under the table for Luca.

The Italian-Australian didn’t make drug baron overnight. He started small, cleaning locomotives before driving them. As a teenager, he ran drugs for anyone who employed him. He saw the wealth in drugs.

His father made money through pizzas, building up the family restaurant but gambled and drank away the profits.

He belted his boy, and Luca despised the old man. If Luciano Senior hadn’t died of nicotine addiction, Luca might have arranged a hit. His father provided Luca with a perfect upbringing for drug dealing — violence, no mercy, and profit always profit.

The police didn’t impede Luca. For him, enemy numero uno were the rival drug barons. No honour among thieves. Kill or be killed.

‘I seen them new pushers, boss. They’re workin’ for that Irish prick.’

'Where's he live?'

'I think in Brunswick.'

'You think?'

'I'll have the address soon.'

'Get it, and then you can borrow my untraceable gun.'

2

A quiet conscience makes one strong.

Anne Frank

BERNIE SLIM WAS NOT WELL-NAMED. His fondness for cinnamon doughnuts and black coffee meant his abdomen and belt often came to blows. At 33, Bernie's stubble was less designer and more homemade. It failed to improve his image, and his marital status of *single* seemed set in stone. By day, he wore a white coat and protective eyewear in his role as a scientist working for the Australian arm of *Labcope*, the international pharmaceutical company.

In his swish laboratory in St Kilda Road, once Melbourne's premiere boulevard, Bernie tested chemicals in the Research and Development section, known by some as *R & D*, and by others as *Retire and Die*.

Creating a new drug is expensive. It can take ages, and may produce little of value. Medical research is high risk costing big bucks. It can also trigger gigantic rewards.

Bernie's current project began years ago with scientists, all of whom were retired or dead. He and a colleague soldiered on trying to create new drugs for patients with specific mental conditions. At times, he thought he was creating an upmarket pill for migraines. It meant painstaking, repetitious work with seemingly no end in sight.

Late in the working day, Bernie's boss bowled into the lab. He often pulled this trick, hoping to ruin any plans his fellow scientists had for an on-time departure. Mutual hatred thrived between workers and boss.

Not content with a double-barrel surname, Ralph Hetherington-Smythe insisted on a posh pronunciation of his first given name. ‘Call me Raife,’ he demanded with a low-budget smile imported from China.

Bernie referred to Hetherington-Smythe as Hyphen — *the* Hyphen. But never to his face. Good God, no.

‘Ah, Slim, I need someone to attend the TGA conference on Friday.’

Bernie groaned inwardly. He hated conferences almost as much as he hated Dr Hetherington-Smythe, but Bernie needed his job and so produced an insincere forelock-tugging routine.

‘*Pharmaceuticals of Tomorrow*,’ said the Hyphen. ‘Might help you justify your existence in this over-funded backwater. Enjoy.’

The brochure landed beside Bernie, and Ralph departed.

‘Wow, who’s a lucky boy,’ said a grinning Lois, Bernie’s older colleague. He enjoyed her cheeky barb as she put away her equipment and notes.

‘I’m off,’ said Lois.

‘So what’s on, tonight, dear lady? Going clubbing again?’

Lois clubbing? Hardly. She had no social life as caring for her octogenarian mother meant the scientist was fully occupied at home. Lois wanted to retire years ago but needed the money to pay for her mother’s carers during the day. Lois felt obliged to keep her mother at home for as long as possible. Meet Lois, her mother’s keeper.

Bernie knew about caring. His father suffered life-changing injuries in a car crash, and now lived in a wheelchair. Bernie’s saintly mother cared for her husband night and day. When Bernie thought about marriage, which wasn’t often, he pondered the lyrics of an old song.

I want a girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad.

‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ said Lois.

‘Goodnight,’ called Bernie and tidied his bench. He perused the conference brochure. The topics and speakers held little interest but two words tickled his fancy — *refreshments* and *luncheon*.

At least these gigs serve quality grub.

Walking home through the Royal Botanic Gardens and Gosch's Paddock, he pondered his evening meal. He needed to "eat healthy". Both his mother and sister stirred him about his "middle-aged spread".

'I'm not middle-aged,' argued Bernie.

'No, but your spread is,' said older sister, Madeline.

It was Monday night and the Garbos had been. Bernie put away his bins then did the same for an elderly neighbour who opened her front door.

'Ciao Mr Bernie; how is my kind and lovely friend?'

'Buona sera, Signora,' said Bernie. 'I'm ready for Gary's walk.'

'Oh, did you hear that Gari? Mr Bernie will be taking you to the walk.'

Gari to the Signora, and *Gary* to Bernie, was really Garibaldi, a small dog of unknown parentage, who kept the Italian widow company. She was too frail to walk the hound, and Bernie offered to help. His kindness had a touch of selfishness, as both man and beast needed the exercise.

Not that Bernie ever worked up a sweat. Gary's creaking joints meant the short walk took forever. En route, Bernie collected Gary's droppings, properly disposed of same, then knocked on Signora Conti's door.

'Come in, Mr Bernie, please to come in.'

Bernie did as he did every time he returned with Garibaldi. This small act of kindness meant the world to the widow. She lived alone and refused to move. Her children and grandchildren had given up trying to persuade their beloved mother and grandmother to live with one or more of them. Bernie's visits became the highlight of her day.

'How was your walk, Gari?' she said to the dog. 'Did you walk nicely for your friend?'

Gari had taken a vow of silence whenever food was within a mile of his senses. He settled for chewing.

'Now I have made some lasagna for you, Mr Bernie,' she said handing her neighbour a container wrapped in a tea-towel.

'Oh Signora, you shouldn't have.'

'You no like my lasagna?'

‘Truthfully Signora, I don’t like it.’ Her eyes widened. ‘I love it.’ She beamed. ‘I just don’t want you to go to any trouble.’

‘I tell you something, Mr Bernie. The day you have the wife, I stop the cooking for you. Okay?’

Bernie nodded. ‘You could be cooking for another fifty years, Signora.’

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in but then she laughed and Bernie joined the fun. Garibaldi kept chewing.

‘Oh and here is some chicken for your gatto, Alberto.’

Bernie called his cat Albert because of that famous scientist, Herr Einstein. His Italian neighbour had chosen the Italian version of Albert.

The dog-walker now had two items of food to carry home. Both residents in Bernie’s Chestnut Street abode would dine well tonight.

The pharmaceutical conference was as expected. Bernie found the first speaker more interesting than his topic. A ludicrous bow tie, speech impediment, and a failure to master elementary button pushing made the lecture almost tolerable. But then came the highlight.

At morning tea, Bernie, with quality black coffee in hand, surveyed the range of edible goodies. No cinnamon doughnuts, but the upmarket biscuits looked intriguing, and those Danish pastries called to him like the Seirēnes of ancient Greece. “Go on, have two Danish,” they sang. He was about to yield when a voice interrupted his snack selection.

‘Good to see *Labcope* putting in an appearance.’

The woman beside him looked like a model. To have a stunner “chat up” Bernie was so unusual it put him right off his food.

Her hair glistened and her understated jewellery screamed class.

‘We don’t usually see you lot at these high-brow events.’ Even her sarcasm was subtle, and she nibbled and sipped with style.

Bernie recovered from shock and attempted to join the conversation. 'You come here often then?' was his pathetic attempt at being funny.

Help me, someone.

'So Bernie, what's your real interest? I would have thought this gig far too sophisticated for a homeopathic juggernaut like *Labcope*.'

Bernie twigged that the gorgeous woman deduced his name and employer from his plastic nametag. She remained anonymous.

'You wouldn't be a journalist by any chance?' he asked.

She smiled and Bernie's interest in Danish pastries evaporated.

'Do I look like a journalist?'

No, you look like a living doll who is so far out of my league I could be arrested for even standing next to you.

'Well I notice you're not wearing a nametag.'

'Oh that,' she said producing said item from her Gucci bag. All Bernie saw was the name Claudia. 'Mustn't damage the jacket.'

The price difference between Bernie and Claudia's jackets was the equivalent a Third World country's GDP.

'How did you find Professor Bow Tie's address?' he said.

Claudia laughed and Bernie's mouth went dry. 'Let's just say the thought of a quality coffee kept me going.'

Bliss. This has to be love; a stunning woman who adores good coffee. Say, Claudia, do you fancy a cinnamon doughnut?

He tried a new tack. 'I must admit I'd much rather be back in the lab.'

'Turning out placebo goodies with the TGA's blessing.'

'Actually I'm in Research and Development.'

Claudia's face turned serious. 'You have *R and D* for vitamins?'

'I'm working on new meds for mental health issues.'

Claudia's surprise continued. '*Labcope* researches the brain?'

'Afraid so. Beneath all those over-the-counter pharmacy specials, there's a serious scientist desperate to discover some new magic bullet for depression, autism and schizophrenia.'

Bernie's confidence grew. Wrong. He failed to see the danger ahead.

Claudia showed genuine interest.

'I'm impressed. So what's your take on Norman Doidge's work?'

Bernie hesitated. Claudia pounced.

'You're working on brain disorders and haven't read *The Brain That Changes Itself* and *The Brain's Way of Healing*?'

Bernie tried a pathetic joke. 'They're next on my list.' That died. He dug an even deeper hole. 'Would you believe I'm waiting for the movie?'

Claudia's head shook. 'And you've never heard of YouTube?'

Bernie groaned. *Shit*. His flippant remarks backfired. Claudia turned her back, and Bernie's mood turned black. Not only had his "date" dumped him, he'd admitted being pig ignorant about the work of a leading psychiatrist doing wonderful things in Bernie's so-called area of expertise. From there, Bernie's conference went rapidly downhill.

At lunch, he spotted Claudia, surrounded by admiring delegates who ignored their vittles, and feasted on her body.

If Lois retires and Claudia takes her place ... ah, dream on.

That night, while Albert slept, Bernie googled Norman Doidge, bought digital versions of his books, and explored neuroplasticity.

Bernie's thoughts kept returning to the lovely Claudia.

Maybe I can still impress Ms Gorgeous. But where does she work?

Online he watched films about examples of the brain healing itself. It was impressive and Bernie felt ashamed of his ignorance. It wasn't exactly his work area but certainly related.

In one film, stroke patients learnt how to re-do things they once took for granted. Impressive stuff. And this got Bernie thinking. Did it relate to his research? Could chemicals help in this repair work? Could he create some formula to produce a brain changing action?

After a few solid hours, he made more coffee, and flopped on the sofa. Albert refused to budge; perfectly reasonable as it was his sofa.

Bernie flicked on the box and surfed. Normally an SBS and ABC man, he found their offerings didn't appeal. He landed on some commercial network showing a documentary about true-life villains.

Organized crime figures had no compunction about maiming and murdering, not just their rivals, but judges, lawyers, journalists; anyone who opposed their "business". Innocent bystanders were killed in the crossfire. Their fault. "Serves 'em right for being there".

God, this is so gruesome. Why does anyone watch this?

Bernie did then retired, still tasting lasagna, while pondering the evil humankind heaps upon itself. Deep in Bernie's subconscious, an amoeba of a thought plopped from the mudflat to dry land.

Nice idea, Bernie.

Next morning, he sat in the *Labcope* staff canteen, consuming a cinnamon doughnut and black coffee. Life was grand until Josh arrived.

Every company has a Josh; someone who grates on colleagues, could bore for their country, and yet who thinks they're interesting.

Piss off, Joshua.

'Maaaate,' he oozed, sliding in next to Bernie. 'How they hangin'?'

'Morning,' replied Bernie wanting to stand and depart.

Josh loved himself and, as a *boastard*, (a bastard who boasts about his sexual exploits), could kill a conversation in a nanosecond.

Why do some men boast about their "success" in the bedroom? Mind you, for Bernie to reciprocate, fictional tales would be essential.

'You know that receptionist on the ground floor,' leered Josh, 'the one with the amazing legs?' Bernie knew what was coming.

Just say, "I'm not interested", or "Piss off, dickhead".

And for Bernie, what made these appalling reports worse was that Josh had a wife and children at home.

'I gave Ms Amazing Legs a lift home last night,' gloated the slime ball. He edged closer and whispered. 'She was very grateful.' He winked and Bernie silently groaned.

To be fair, Josh included his spouse in his Casanova conquests. Whenever the randy Josh persuaded his wife to grant him his conjugal rights, the next morning in the canteen, Josh would approach Bernie, and tap the scientist on the shoulder. That was the signal.

Last night, I did it with the missus.

It was too much information. Bernie hated himself for being so weak.

I don't like this man. I don't want to hear about his intimate boasts. Or wait. Oh no. Maybe I secretly do. Maybe I stay and listen because I get some perverted thrill at being part of his sordid existence.

Bernie returned to his lab and Lois looked up. 'Gossiping in the canteen again? What do you men talk about?'

Sex thought Bernie, and resumed his work.

3

My conscience shall dispose of my hand.

[Charlotte Brontë](#)

WHEN BERNIE SLIM and Luca Parisi were turning 20, a young Melbourne lawyer started making waves. She had ambition to burn, and balls to boot.

Suburban solicitors were a dime a dozen but Jessica Reid was not suburban. Adversarial by nature, she took to criminal law like a commercial television network to dross. She kept winning. Crims loved Jess because so often the redhead helped them skewer the pigs.

Jessica chose not to be a barrister because of her need to do other things. She wanted to play at politics.

The woman was born with a how-to-vote-card in her hand. Her parents belonged to the Sandringham branch of the Liberal Party, and Jessica joined the Young Libs in her first year at Monash.

She loved the conflicts in politics, the deals, the dirty tricks, and the backstabbing — and that was just within her own party. She fantasized about the power a government minister enjoyed, and craved the top job in her home state of Victoria.

She never missed party meetings, volunteered for everything, and earned a PhD in sucking-up. Jessica paid her dues, and if the Libs had a Rising Young Star Award, she would have been nominated — often.

At 28, as a lawyer and bright young thing, her day job saw her dealing with barristers defending criminals in Melbourne's County Court. She believed her job helped prepare her for a life in politics, and she saw crooks and politicians as being pretty

much the same. Oh, except she knew crooks stabbed you in the chest.

A young tearaway and his father entered Jessica's office. The court case beckoned. The villain had been charged with threats to inflict serious injury, and riot, and been granted bail provided he lived with his family. The court case beckoned.

'You sure you're up for this, Miss?' asked the father. 'I mean is there someone more senior?'

Jessica looked at the father. Her expression zapped Mr Sexist who instantly became Lot's wife. When Jessica's advice and choice of barrister saw the young thug found not guilty, her reputation within the criminal fraternity continued its upward trajectory.

She loved the law but politics more.

Her growing reputation defending riff raff hardly seemed the path to winning Liberal Party preselection, but Jessica disagreed. She liked being different. Besides, rubbing shoulders with criminals taught her survival. She discovered ruthlessness, and shady characters taught her how to bluff, threaten and lie — excellent attributes for any aspiring politician. If Jessica ever wore a tee shirt, the logo would be *Don't Mess with Jess*.

Her parents wished their girl had chosen Wills and Conveyancing, even Family Law. Her mother pleaded.

'But darling, if you must work in criminal law, why not prosecute?'

'Your mother's right,' added Jessica's father. 'You won't win preselection working for criminals. Delegates choose feminine not feisty.'

Jessica didn't argue. The more people pressured her to follow the "rules", the more she rebelled — and triumphed.

With a state election due, she won endorsement for a super-safe Labor seat, lost, but did frighteningly well. Movers and shakers took note. Labor were back in power and Jessica, although not yet a member of parliament, shone as a future Liberal Party star.

In the meantime, she returned to those drug dealers and thugs at the criminal law grindstone. It would be years before another preselection battle.

As the next State election drew nigh, Alan “The Animal” Darcy came to see Jessica the solicitor. A mid-level career crim never destined for greatness, Alan lived in hope.

‘Take a seat, Mr Darcy,’ said Jessica. ‘Can I get you a coffee?’

‘Beer’d be nice.’

‘Time is money, Mr Darcy.’

‘Call me Animal, everyone does.’

‘So, what’s the charge?’

She knew but made her clients explain their predicament. This often revealed possible flaws in the police case, and allowed her to perfect her skill of spotting fibs.

What a gift, and what a godsend for any politician. Naturally, her clients lied for a living, and Jessica’s antennae picked their porkies. Every politician would surrender his or her chauffeured limo to be able to tell when someone was lying.

‘The cops set me up.’

‘That’s a new one,’ she said, watching her sarcasm sail through to the keeper. ‘Tell me about it.’

Animal knew this solicitor took no prisoners, and got blokes off.

She’s not bad looking. Not the sort I’d take home to meet me Mum, but I’d certainly let her “get me off”.

Jessica ignored the looks and comments from crooks. She knew criminal law, and almost always got the best possible deal for her clients. When they offered favours or gifts, she spurned them with ease, and never let villains within a mile of her private life.

Colleagues and friends joked about her sordid cases, and a few heavy-hitters in the Liberal Party began to worry that, by mixing with felons, their rising star would be tainted. ‘At least let her prosecute,’ they said.

‘So, Mr Darcy,’ began Jessica.

‘Go on, call me Animal.’

‘How exactly did the police set you up?’

Animal yielded to the iron maiden. ‘The usual way; two cops pulled me over, and planted drugs in the boot of me car.’

‘You saw them plant the drugs?’

‘Course I didn’t. That’s how they work. One cop distracts you while the other pretends to search, and then allegedly finds the gear.’

Jessica wondered if Animal could spell *allegedly*.

‘And did you handle the drugs in any way?’

‘What drugs? I just told you the cops planted ‘em.’

Jessica decided that Animal had slightly more intelligence than the average crim. She made notes for the barrister she knew could make the arresting officers squirm. They did — squirm that is.

In court, Animal did exactly as instructed. Jessica’s notes and suggested plan of attack were delivered superbly by the barrister, and after the trial, Animal sported a grin not often seen in the County Court.

‘I gotta buy you a drink, Miss,’ he beamed. ‘I reckon you’d be a champagne drinker.’

Jessica checked her phone and read an imaginary text.

‘Sorry Mr Darcy. You’ll have to settle for Miss Bennet.’

Animal last opened a chapter book in Year 7 — he closed it almost immediately — and today restricted his “reading” to the study of glossy publications featuring female pulchritude. Jessica’s comment became a cultured pearl cast before a bore of a boar.

Heading back to the office, her mobile rang. Her excited mater spoke.

‘Darling, I’ve just heard. You’ve been preselected for Brighton.’

Jessica shrieked and passersby stopped, thinking someone was in trouble; hardly trouble, more a triumph for the redoubtable Ms Reid. Brighton was a super safe seat, and Jessica had just scored a gold pass entry to the Victorian Parliament. Her political dream became a reality.

The state election drew closer, yet Jessica chose to continue working with criminals. This brought more concern from her folks, and frowns at Liberal HQ. But like Mrs Thatcher, this lady was not for turning.

I've got this far by sticking to my guns.

And stick to them she did.

Now there are friends, best friends, and first-best friends. Jessica met Genevieve at uni and the two clicked. Yin and yang, The Odd Couple or The Bobbsey Twins, the women became the perfect double act.

Genevieve got Jessica elected as President of the Young Libs through a mixture of bribery, blackmail and bastardry. Vote early and vote often. What fool said Labor invented branch stacking? Genevieve was living proof that behind every great woman is a great woman.

After uni, Genevieve became a high-flying banker, and Jessica a high-flying lawyer. The two women kept in touch, and when Jessica was first endorsed as a Liberal candidate, her part-time adviser cum campaign manager just had to be you know who. The main reason Jessica did so well in losing that safe Labor seat was down to Genevieve. So it was no surprise when, three years later, and Jessica won her latest preselection, her first call was to her right-hand woman.

They met after work in Jessica's office.

'Now listen, darl,' said Jessica, 'this is serious.'

'The Honourable member for Brighton,' mocked Genevieve. She pronounced *Honourable* and *Brighton* with exaggerated sarcasm.

More laughter.

'Decision time, babe. Tis time to ditch that shaky career in banking.'

'Shaky!' scoffed Genevieve. 'Let's compare take-home pay and the size of my bonuses — plural.'

Their joking couldn't hide the pending lifestyle changes both now faced. Jessica would soon become a member of parliament, but would Genevieve become the power behind the throne?

Jessica desperately wanted Genevieve on board. But the banker had built a brilliant career, and didn't want to back a loser. If Jessica remained a backbencher, especially in opposition, or at best reached junior minister level, where was the fun in that? Big drop in salary, no such thing as a bonus, and no joy in being close to the woman 26th in line to the throne. Both women loathed failure.

'You know I want you as my campaign manager and Chief of Staff.'

Genevieve roared. 'Campaign manager in an unlosable seat, and Chief of Staff to an opposition backbencher in a broom cupboard.'

'Every Premier's gotta start somewhere.'

More scoffing from Genevieve, but the laughter covered the crunch question. Will the banker switch to politics? The laughter subsided. They sipped their chardonnay and fell quiet.

'I'm serious,' said Jessica.

'Duh,' replied Genevieve.

'Think about it. Have a chat to what's-his-name ... Jason.'

They both roared as one. 'Justin!'

This was a running gag. Jessica pretended to forget the name of Genevieve's husband. For once, the gag wore thin. More silence.

Then the banker announced her switch to politics — subtly.

'I've been thinking about your next move,' said Genevieve.

Jessica sparkled. *Welcome aboard Genevieve*. This is what the would-be pollicie wanted, needed; her bestie on side, doling out pearls of wisdom.

'I'm all ears,' said Jessica. Genevieve hesitated. 'Well, come on.'

'Get married.'

Jessica was struck dumb. This she didn't anticipate. New wardrobe, new hairstyle, join the board of certain charities, even sponsor an African orphan, were all possibilities. But wedlock?

'Married?'

'It's part of the big picture; Joe Stalin's Five Year Plan. Know what you want tomorrow, create the strategies today, and then do the business.'

Getting hitched wasn't on Jessica's radar. She oozed sarcasm.

'So is this a big church wedding or a quickie in someone's backyard?'

Genevieve remained deadly serious. 'Your marital status is irrelevant to your parliamentary colleagues. If you're running for a leadership role, they'll vote according to what's in it for them.'

'Running for leader? Even the state election's not till next year.'

'But Joe Public and the missus will warm to you more if you've got the little man by your side. Their thinking is that she's not a man-hater, and she sure as hell ain't a lesbian.'

'God, you're serious.'

'Life is full of choices, sweetie, and winners take action.'

'Okay, I'll make a diary entry. Attend Court, speak at the Young Libs conference, and then find a husband.'

'You asked for my advice.'

Genevieve knew Jessica better than the lawyer knew herself. Jessica had pushed her motherly instinct aside, unlike Genevieve who had a husband and two kids. Jessica's two kids were her careers — the law and politics.

She remained stunned. 'Any other gems like that?'

'Only the name of your future husband.'

Jessica's sails went limp. 'Bloody hell, Gen, you've got to warn me about this stuff.'

'You know me, darl. Tell it like it is and the sooner the better.'

Jessica paused. 'Well go on. Who's the lucky fella?'

When Genevieve replied, Jessica's jaw dropped.

'Myles Lane! Are you kidding? Isn't he gay?'

'It's the perfect match. He's a rising star in the corporate world held back by archaic traditions. You're a rising star in the political world needing to tick all the right boxes.'

'You're talking about an arranged marriage.'

'So?'

'So? This is the twenty-first century, woman, and not some medieval union of two royal houses.'

'But that's exactly what it is. Two tremendous talents working alone may struggle. Together those two talents can become a

powerful, hugely successful partnership. This is quintessential synergy, darl. Carpe diem.'

Jessica shook her head. It's not often she was lost for words. 'Whatever happened to love?'

'A good title for your memoir. Now this will only work if both parties abide by the rules.'

'Oh, and what pray tell are they?'

'Come on, Jess, you're a big girl. No scandal, no playing away from home, and no letting the domestics discover the couple's pre-arranged sleeping arrangements.'

'Unbelievable.' Jessica puffed her cheeks and exhaled. But because her trust in Genevieve was so deep, so locked in, she couldn't reject the idea out of hand.

'So he is gay,' stated Jessica.

Genevieve held up her hands. 'There are fifty shades of sexuality, and anyway, who cares?'

'Me. I care. And I'm the one in white, remember.'

Genevieve grinned. 'Bags be matron of honour.'

Jessica clenched her hands and grimaced. Her friend had been right so many times before; never wrong in fact. Why would she propose this move if it wasn't in Jessica's best interest? There was a long pause broken finally by the lawyer.

'I think I've met him once.'

'Yes, at my dinner party.'

'You conniving bitch.'

'I was simply testing the waters.'

'You even had us sit together.'

'And?'

'And?' Jessica pondered. 'All right, he was pleasant and charming.'

'Congratulations. He said the same about you.'

Jessica pointed at her friend. 'Now you're taking the piss.'

'Come on, babe, it's cards on the table time. You want the top job. As a single woman, you'll lose points to the prejudiced men and women who judge a politician by their lifestyle. With a talented but out-of-the-picture gentleman sharing your life, you're "normal" and definitely more electable. Tick all the boxes.'

Jessica suddenly felt sick.

‘Please don’t tell me you’ve already told him about this crazy scheme?’

‘Oh God, give me *some* credit.’

The women fell silent. Genevieve worried their relationship might be irreparably damaged. Jessica worried she had to take one for the team — her team.

Again silence dominated. Finally Jessica spoke.

‘So how do I get him to ask me?’

Myles Lane had a lot going for him. He was clever, poised for a stellar career in international law, wealthy in his own right, and the sole heir to his father’s squillion dollar estate. Add to that his wit, his passion for music theatre and felines, plus his innate charm and urbane nature, and Mr Lane became a magnet for any society dame’s unmarried daughter. True, he was no oil painting, and did bat for the other side but hey, nobody’s perfect.

Jessica took advice from Genevieve, and met Myles a second time at yet another dinner party arranged by Jessica’s bestie. If Myles thought he was being set up, he said nothing and went along for the ride.

Soon after, Jessica found herself asking Myles for a huge favour. Would he, could he, please comper a fundraiser she arranged for one of the largest animal shelters in Melbourne?

Are you kidding? He’s Mr Ailurophile. Of course he could and would.

From there, the relationship between Myles and Jessica took root. No suggestion of *a* root because this was a marriage in name only, a marriage of convenience. They dined together in public. Gossip in various wealthy postcodes set off spot fires and, when the couple announced their engagement, fire engines began racing around Toorak, South Yarra and Brighton. Genevieve high-fived herself.

Jessica agreed to marry Myles, a wealthy, well-closeted gay man, and both knew the deal. They gave one another a cover story, and agreed that their lack of any issue was down to God giving Jessica (or was it Myles?) imperfect reproductive capabilities. Blame God — he never lies or blabs.

Each saw their union as a new and rewarding adventure. Pecks on the cheek became frequent, morphing to soft kisses on the lips. Their friendship grew, and both found fondness to be fulfilling. Could respect and affection ever become love?

It was an expensive wedding with every guest sucking on his or her own BYO silver spoon. The honeymoon in the Bahamas was relaxing and brief as Jessica had business back home.

In November, the good burghers of Brighton gave Jessica a resounding tick of approval, and she won her seat in a canter.

Jessica Reid MLA — she retained her maiden name — increased the Liberal vote and became an elected politician. But not all was bliss. The other mob won — again.

Jessica became a humble backbencher with Genevieve her trusted PA. Genevieve thought long and hard about throwing away the wealth and prestige of a senior post in a major bank. But hey, if her instincts were correct, her friend was destined for much, much bigger things.

As Jessica began her parliamentary career, a youthful Luca Parisi started a one-man drug empire in Melbourne's inner north; a youthful Ulsterman, Brendan Murphy, prepared to swap Belfast for Melbourne; and an equally youthful Bernie Slim was a final year science student at Melbourne Uni.

Jessica was delighted to be given a minor shadow portfolio once parliament began. It had less to do with her potential, and more to do with the Liberals having lost so many seats, almost everyone got a gig.

'Are they trying to be funny?' asked Jessica. 'The Shadow Minister for Families and Children has nil issue and never will.'

Genevieve looked at Jessica and frowned. 'Not so loud,' she mouthed.

‘I was hoping for something with a bit more bite. Surely it makes sense to allocate Police or Corrections to an experienced criminal lawyer.’

‘You have got Family Violence.’

‘God I’d love to be Attorney-General. I could give the old crime-and-punishment platform a right good seeing to.’

‘I think it’s called crawling before you walk into the top job in the state.’

Jessica went back to reading the day’s political commentaries, while Genevieve had other fish to fry. Her ideas bubbled; ideas to position her “boss” for promotion, publicity and power.

‘We need to discuss a few tactics, madam,’ said Genevieve, opening a notebook and sitting in front of Jessica’s desk.

Jessica’s heartbeat accelerated. Nothing gave her a greater thrill than learning about her friend’s schemes.

And so it began. Two intelligent women, planning their way to the leadership of the state Liberal Party, and then, to the all-powerful position of Premier.

Within the Liberal party, many people noticed Jessica Reid. Within the general public, she was Ms Anonymous. That situation continued until the day of her first big break.

It took three years for Jessica to hit the headlines, and hit them she did. *Youngest Shadow Attorney-General in State’s History* ran one headline.

Years ago, nobody imagined that mixing with crims and defending their wicked ways would earn Jessica such a prestigious reward.

Her new office was bigger, her staff numbers doubled, and the Attorney-General suddenly found himself confronting a feisty and intelligent shadow who knew about lying and bully-girl tactics. Go Jess.

Of course there was a reason Jessica won such a prize with so little experience. It was step #2 in Genevieve’s manifesto — *Dig up dirt*.

The then Shadow Attorney-General had shares in a relative's building company which collapsed leaving hardworking Victorians with half-finished homes.

Genevieve's banking contact tipped her the wink, and the former Shadow AG suddenly developed a stress-related condition. He stepped aside but with a plan to return once his condition improved — of course.

Jessica became the new Shadow Attorney-General. After not even three years in Spring Street, she had slid up the greasy pole, and if anyone could slide upwards, 'twas Ms Reid.

The next election came and went bringing mixed results. Jessica increased her majority, the Liberals increased their number of seats, but alas, not in sufficient numbers to seize government.

'Shit, bugger, bum,' vented Jessica. 'More opposition and more wandering in the bloody wilderness.'

She and Genevieve drank to drown their election-loss sorrows. It was late, and Genevieve's mind was never idle.

'I've been thinking about our next four-year plan,' she said.

'More of the same, Gen. If we lose the next one, there'll be a leadership spill and then I might, *might* be a chance for deputy.'

'Forget the wing-and-a-prayer approach.'

Jessica became tetchy. 'There won't be a spill before the election.'

'But if there is, are you ready?'

'Oh come on, Gen. I might be on some accelerated promotion gig but it's way too early to run for any leadership role.'

'I've got an idea to enhance your appeal.' Jessica finished her drink.

'Another husband perhaps? Or what about a gender switch; Jessica Reid becomes Jesse Reid?'

'Listen ma'am,' — Genevieve had taken to addressing Jessica in regal terms when she thought her friend got ahead of herself — 'you don't have to take my advice but lay off the petulant sarcasm.'

Oops. A chill settled in the office. Jessica felt bad.

'Sorry. You were saying?'

Genevieve paused then lobbed her latest grenade. ‘Adopt a child.’

Jessica held back. She was used to her friend’s out-of-the-blue suggestions but this one knocked her for six.

‘What, so now I’m a cross between Madonna and Angelina Jolie? I nip off to Africa and pinch a tribe of orphans?’

Genevieve persevered. ‘If you adopt a young child, a toddler, and bring him or her up as your own, you will earn kudos with a lot of voters. You’ll have no labour pain but cause Labor pain. Motherhood’s a winner. Make some statement about you as a couple being unable to conceive — leave it blank, don’t identify the misfiring party — and explain how you both desperately want a family.’

‘More lies.’

‘Think of your Christmas cards — family photo with the politician, the banker and their darling offspring and pets.’

Jessica shook her head. She never wanted kids. She worried sometimes that a lack of a motherly instinct meant she was somehow not a proper woman. Her drive for power swamped her drive for procreation. Her lust for power was tangible. Genevieve continued.

‘Before you reject the idea, talk it over with hubby. If he’s keen, you’ll be mad to say no.’ Jessica said nothing. ‘You know, you might actually enjoy being a mother.’ And Genevieve was right — again.

When Jessica broached the subject with Myles, he came alive. He longed to have a family but dared not raise the topic believing his ambitious wife would ridicule the suggestion. So enthusiastic was her husband’s response that Jessica agreed.

That Christmas, their greeting card included a family of five. Rufus the labradoodle and Vera the moggie were there together with toddler, Simone. She swapped the orphanage for the palace, and her plastic spoon for one of the silver variety.

Preview ends