

## CHAPTER

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# 1

'I'd like to bring out your inner slut,' is what he said.

My first thought was, How crass. My second thought, Do I look that pissed?

Paul Malone QC is willing a reply. His opaque green eyes have stared down a thousand cops, criminals and innocent witnesses in cross-examination; now they're examining me over the top of his glass of pinot noir.

I smile, trying to keep my lips tight – my teeth are probably purple. I'd wanted to stay with the white, whatever it was, but he'd been insistent: pinot noir was the Holy Grail of wine-making. Yes, I'd felt like saying, I've seen that movie too. Then extolling the virtues of Central Otago, which he could fly himself down to. Wanaka, of course, where he had a place; Queenstown had been ruined. 'Fucked' was what he'd said. He probably seldom used the word – it'd be a dangerous word for a Queen's Counsel to become blasé about: it might slip out in court. Saying it to me obviously gave him a little frisson. 'My inner mother brought me here,' I say.

'That's all a done deal,' he reassures me. 'Jamie will get a start at my chambers, salary to be negotiated. Though we both know he should be paying me.'

'Thank you.' What else can I say?

'You don't have to,' he says. 'He's a bright kid. Maybe a bit of experience on the other side of the tracks will help him. It did me.'

'Which tracks were you ever on the wrong side of, Paul?' I say this gently enough, but I can see the hawk fly into his face, and I wish I hadn't challenged him. But it's a fleeting look, quickly replaced by equanimity and a smile.

'Only by association, I guess,' he replies.

'Jamie's association was a bit more hands on, but I hope you're right. I'm grateful.'

'As I said, you don't have to be.' Those eyes, regarding me again. Confident. An awkward silence.

'But you'd still like to help me find my inner slut.'

There's a flicker of a smile. He puts down his glass, then lays out his hands palms up, like a priest giving benediction.

'The two are not related, Anna,' he says. 'I simply find you very attractive.' He leans closer across the table. 'I am attracted to you. Sexually.'

As opposed to intellectually. 'I'm very flattered.'

Paul's voice is surprisingly light, with a silvery liquid quality to it. If he sang, he'd be a tenor. Lots of light and shade in it. Seductive, right now.

'I always was attracted to you. Even at law school, but you were so unavailable.'

'I was married.'

'Some kind of hippy.' The contempt is palpable.

'Socialist.'

'What a waste.'

Dear Graham, no wonder you couldn't swim with these sharks. 'He wouldn't have disagreed, at the end.'

‘Sorry.’

He isn’t. Is there a word for it, I wonder? Wanting to fuck someone now, who you couldn’t fuck back when you should have? Internet sites have made a mint out of that latent desire for some sort of retrospective completion. Why else would he bother with me, when there must be so many ready, willing and able to lay down their svelte bodies for mercenary advantage or career advancement?

Paul is easy to admire, these days. He has that magnetic barristerial presence, cultivated assiduously no doubt, and he’s successful, rich and powerful. It’s hard to reconcile this legal lion with the insipid law student, whose attempt to chat me up at the old Gluepot one Friday night had been so diffident that I laughed with sheer surprise when I realised that’s what he was trying to do. Then his head seemed too large for his stick-thin body, all right angles and awkwardness. Now he’s become, well, impressive. His mane has thinned slightly in the middle, and silvered at the edges. But he is, as of this afternoon past, my son’s boss. It would get too messy and I might become paranoid about his motives in giving Jamie ‘a start’. I decide to tell Paul this, put it back on him. He nods the big high-browed head as if considering a fine legal point.

‘I’ll concede, on the face of it, that could be a concern,’ he says. ‘As long as you’ll concede,’ he continues, ‘that you’re attracted to me.’

Got you. Vanity and ego. I’m comfortable with that. ‘Conceded,’ I say.

‘Say it,’ he smiles.

I feel suddenly angry. I’ve misread him. It isn’t just vanity and ego, it’s power. ‘I find you’, I begin, finding my smile, switching it on, engaging the unsmiling eyes, ‘very attractive, Paul.’ I should have stopped there. ‘As QCs go.’

Heading down High Street, towards Shortland Street and a chance to hail a cab, I'm pleased that dusk has brought a drop in temperature, a cool salve.

When I reach the corner of Shortland Street, I venture a look back, but he's gone, swallowed into the suits and high heels now leaving the various wine bars, almost as if a siren has sounded for the end of the working week, calling them back to homes in the suburbs, abandoning this oldest city precinct to the weekend shoppers and tourists.

Paul Malone knows the power of words. Saying it had almost made it so, even as he ushered me from the bar, his palm in the small of my back. A touch on my shoulder as he pulled me towards him. I only just managed to turn my cheek against the force field. I could easily have gone with him. Would he have resisted the temptation to drive me, after half a bottle of red? More probably walked me straight up the hill, to the discreet back entrance of his ivy-encrusted club. A quick pash as he ushered me through the door, and dripping clothes by the time he pushed me into one of those downstairs rooms for members who might need a port in an overnight storm, or an hour or two of discreet pleasure, day or night.

I might have enjoyed it, it might have unblocked me, got the sexual wheels spinning again. But I've got too much imagination for my own good. I look too far ahead, can see how it would end. How I'd feel later, into my hangover, fuelled as much by remorse as stale alcohol, sloping out that same back door at the midnight hour, not too late for him to get back to his wife and his life for the weekend.

Paul Malone QC, as much as he wants to fuck me, is not a man to be fucked with.

Sitting in the taxi, directing the driver – Ahmed, says his nameplate – whose knowledge of Auckland is only marginally inferior to his

command of English, up Franklin Road. We're caught in a slow line of traffic gawking at the bones of the old houses daubed with Christmas fairy lights. I can remember when this street was known as Snake Alley, a slide down the hill from louche, bohemian Ponsonby to the slums of Freemans Bay.

I should feel savvy at least, if not triumphant, for extricating myself from a pointless grope with my son's new boss. Instead I'm close to lamenting my vulnerabilities: a woman of a certain age – a bit beyond it, if I'm honest – and uncertain income, alone, with a grown up son who is still semi-dependent. I have to make a deliberate effort to maintain my equilibrium, keep melancholia at bay, as I tell Ahmed to turn left onto Ponsonby Road and we cruise along the golden axis between Prego and SPQR, the two solid pillars between which more recent and mortal bars and restaurants are strung, among designer clothes boutiques, take-aways, real estate agents, a bank, coffee bars, the fire station and furniture shops selling twee recreations of olde wood.

I ask Ahmed to pull over, see from his face in the mirror that he's worried that I'm bailing early because of his navigational shortcomings. I find myself reassuring him that I've changed my mind, that I want to buy some ingredients for dinner and I'll walk home from here. I tip Ahmed too much and am immediately pissed off at myself, not so much for the couple of dollars I've wasted, but for feeling so obliged, on behalf of the whole country, to make a new immigrant feel welcome. As Sarah would say – Puh-lease!

I give myself a break, go into the fish and chip shop, say hello to Kam-lin and her beautiful, willowy daughter, Emily, and order a couple of fresh gurnard fillets from the front. They're a sweet little fish, orange-coloured with prominent sail-like fins, underrated and underpriced compared with snapper. While my gurnard and chips are being cooked, I buy a *Listener* from the magazine shop two along, then settle at one of the little chrome tables outside. I'm still nicely light-headed from the wine and sit there pretending

to read the magazine, leaving my glasses in my bag, and instead fix my gaze upon the outdoor tables running along the front of SPQR, right across the street.

It used to be a repair shop for Russian motorcycles, a niche market at best, even before the flood of Yamahas, Kawasakis and Suzukis. The fact that it was Russian was endorsement enough for Graham and he took his old BSA there religiously. But the place was doomed, another of Graham's lost causes, like BSA. A famous cinematographer converted the concrete bunker into a restaurant and bar and although it's been there less than twenty years, it's now a venerable and enduring landmark in an area where businesses come and go with bloody Darwinian rigour.

Sitting there half pissed and overdressed, make-up tiring rapidly, an observer of life just across the street but light years from the centre of the action, I'm suddenly struck by a feeling of happiness. Ineffable joy, unlike anything I can remember feeling for a long time. Deep concentric circles of contentment radiating out from my core. I don't want to kill the feeling by analysing it, but I know what it has to do with. Being out of the race. I like being the observer. I love having space around me. Being adrift in the world at large no longer frightens me. The world seems a friendlier place these days.

It's warm enough for the outdoor tables across the street to be full. Hard to say how long some of those occupants have been there, until they try to stand up. Mostly stocky guys with shaven heads in loose, open-necked shirts, all in variations of vertical stripes, the prison look, and women in highly contoured shirts and blouses, mid- to late twenties, straight from work, hooking into alcohol and each other, but still keeping a wary eye out, because this is a celebrity lair and you never can tell who you'll see, preferably off their famous faces. My view is temporarily blocked by a black Porsche executing a clumsy parallel park right outside.

I would never have the guts to attempt a parallel park outside SPQR, but this woman has no fear. When she blows it, getting the

back wheel jammed against the kerb while the shark nose is still out sniffing the passing traffic, she simply switches off and gets out of the car. I guess it makes sense, rather than pulling out into the traffic again and repeating the manoeuvre, drawing attention to her failure. The driver, early thirties, blonde, is sort of familiar – I'm sure I've seen her face – but the woman alighting from the passenger side of the Porsche is immediately recognisable to me and everyone at those outside tables. Though I've never before seen her in the flesh, I happen to know more about Mikky St Clair's recent past than anyone sitting at SPQR, much more even than her girlfriend, however intimate, now ushering her protectively past the gawking outside tables, young guys stalled over their glasses, drinking every last drop of her instead. I've seen hundreds of shots of her in what used to be called the society pages. I'd always flick through them on the way to other destinations, but Mikky's face was so ubiquitous that it still registered, above her cavernous cleavage, in its two or three public expressions – pouting, smiling and, very occasionally, bewildered.

It's hard to reconcile those expressions with the horror she must have felt three weeks ago when her twenty-year-old lover, Alex Solona, rugby superstar in the making, was shot dead in her apartment. In the days immediately following the incident, while the police were saying nothing, completing forensics and trawling for witnesses, the papers were full of eulogies for Alex, a 'rising star cut off in his prime', with inevitable comparisons with another powerful young giant who had burst from the mean streets of South Auckland. Jonah himself was quoted, saying comparisons were 'invidious' – really, he said that? – but that Alex Solona was certainly 'a great loss to rugby'. There were photos of his tearful fiancée, Suanita Laga'aia, at his funeral, where Mikky's absence was noted.

Somehow, despite the police silence, word filtered into the zeitgeist that Mikky was in flagrante delicto with Alex at the time of his death. It wasn't a huge jump from the zeitgeist to the *Sunday Inquirer*,

and the inevitable headline – ‘Alex’s Last Ride’. By Monday, dear old Auntie *Herald* was gleefully reporting that Mikky was ‘considering her options’ in respect of legal action against the *Inquirer*. And, sure enough, by Thursday, ‘I’m Suing!’ said Mikky in the women’s mag that won the cheque book auction for ‘Mikky’s Exclusive!’, where she proclaimed her innocence and declared herself ‘horrified and deeply traumatised’ by what had happened, though she couldn’t say anything else because ‘it’s sub judice’.

For a woman who lived her life in the media, I suppose it seemed like an obvious move: take advantage of the revenue stream while explaining your position. But it opened the floodgates, as she must have known it would. By her own admission she’d put herself at her apartment at the time of the crime, giving the police no option but to admit that ‘Ms St Clair is helping us with our enquiries’. That gave the opposition, who had missed out on the exclusive, an opportunity to show its pique, by publishing the speculation of ‘a source within police HQ’, who said that Mikky was suspected of being an accomplice to the murder.

And on it went, with Mikky becoming the ball in a game of media ping pong: increasingly fevered speculation about what Alex and Mikky were doing, whether Alex had died of kinky sex, like Michael Hutchence . . .

As the first couple of weeks passed, and no arrest was made, the angle began to change, with the newspapers making much of her inability to finger the murderer, implying that if Mikky herself was not the murderer, she must have seen who did it. But I believe that Mikky St Clair is probably telling the truth and I’m better informed than most.

Her statement to the police admitted that Alex was making love to her at the time, in the missionary position (confirmed by analysis of samples of blood and tissue taken from Mikky’s face and hair). Which explained, she said, why she saw nothing of his assailant, her view obscured by Alex. Forensics confirmed that Alex was shot once in the back of his head, the bullet entering

just above the nape of the neck. The photographs from the crime scene in the police summary show him face down on the otherwise empty bed, his head resting on a partially absorbed pool of blood and tissue fragments. Three large bullet fragments retrieved from what was left of Alex's brain confirmed the weapon that fired them was a .38 revolver, fairly ubiquitous apparently. The percussive force of the hollow point copper jacket entering his cranium blew both eyes out.

Mikky wasn't in any of the photos, but where the police statement quoted her as saying 'I saw nothing', she was surely speaking only about the perpetrator. What she saw, heard, felt, as that boy died in her arms, between her legs, as his eye-balls popped on her and his blood, bone fragments and brain tissue sprayed her face, must be beyond description. That was all dryly reported, rather than described, in the pathologist's report and by the doctor who attended her at the scene. Even if her view hadn't been completely obscured, the shock might have blocked her ability to register anything else.

After her rapid promotion from the gossip pages to the front page, Mikky finally went to ground, and in the absence of any new photos, the print media used the old ones, and there was her aging little girl's face, still pouting and smiling, but now, in this entirely different context, somehow malevolent or knowing.

This appearance at such a prominent celebrity lair may represent her first steps towards reclaiming her old life. The timing seems about right: earlier in the week, Kamal Fifita was arrested and charged with the murder of Alex Solona.

I collect my fish and chips and cross to Brown Street and cut through the dinky miniature park, then tear a hole in the top of the newspaper parcel and start eating chips as I walk down the sensual curves of Richmond Road, running from Ponsonby Road down towards what used to be the wilds of Grey Lynn.

Memories of the police photos of Alex Solona haven't done much for my ineffable joy. But I feel safe. This is my patch, I know its history. Even though the area has changed in recent years, I could still knock on quite a few of the doors I pass and recognise at least the face who answered, even if I couldn't put a name to it. I have, finally, a sense of belonging.

I cross the road and pass a corner site which used to be a small foundry, then went through various incarnations, from a cabling factory to a distribution centre for pornographic magazines. I had a friend on the DPB, who moonlighted there a couple of afternoons a week wrapping the mags in brown paper and affixing address stickers. She reckoned she knew the address of every dirty old sod in greater Auckland. When the internet swamped the dirty mag trade, the building continued its journey from producing iron and steel to ephemera: it metamorphosed into the offices of a trendy advertising agency, and then, its current guise, to a television production company which currently employs my daughter.

The road curves north, past the crumbling Gothic pile now used by a Tongan church for sales of tapa cloth on Wednesdays, to Pippa's Antiques. When at times I've imagined other people's lives I'd like to live, Pippa's is the one I most favour – trawling the back yards of Europe for three months of the northern summer, then returning home to a shop that looks like a sitting room, surrounded by beautiful old furniture, waiting for appreciative people to fall in love with it . . . and pay you money.

Probably, I desire Pippa's imagined life because I know so little about it, whereas the woman on the cusp of forty – the other side of the cusp if I'm honest – I see reflected in Pippa's window, face partially obscured by a dark fall of hair, wearing a dressy brocade top and gypsy skirt over bare legs, balancing on one foot to give the other one a rest from the pinch of seldom-worn high heels, plucking hot chips from the top of a newspaper parcel: this woman I know far too much about.

Just down the hill is Peaches, a rare combination of deli delicacies and old-fashioned cooking, comfort food located far too close to me for comfort. I like knowing that this foodie nexus was created from nothing by my best friend Maeve, and I like sharing the secret with her that it was named after me. But the lights are on dim, the gleaming glass food displays are empty and the black-board advertising tonight's ready-to-heat-and-eat feasts for weary workers on their way home has been put away until tomorrow.

I turn left into a street that works back around the western contour of the hill, to my empty house which I love, to count my blessings not my curses.

'Built like a brick shithouse', said Graham when he found it. It's a state house made of weatherboards, with a tiled roof, big gable and eaves, tongue-in-groove kauri on the floors, two bedrooms, one bathroom, the separate kitchen and dining room now open plan leading to a large west-facing deck, the only real structural change to the original Ministry of Works design. These houses were pepper-potted through here in the fifties, and this one is Graham's legacy. It was the kind of house a good socialist could buy with a clear conscience and not feel guilty about the capital gain.

Inside, it's clean and spare – the golden glow from the polished kauri floors reflected in walls tinted a delicate ochre, which took me a long time to get right because it wasn't on any of the colour charts. Most of the things I have in my house – photos, books, the odd ceramic or engraving and lots of seashells and small pieces of driftwood – are precious only to me. There are only two objects of more than sentimental value: in the centre of a bookcase that fills one wall is a cast glass vase of opalescent bluey green, which seems in colour and shape to have captured the hue and kinetic energy of deep, clean ocean. It was a gift from Ann Robinson, when her only claim to fame was being the daughter of Robbie, the iconic former Mayor of Auckland. Back then, she seemed like just another rumpled local artistic dilettante. It was hard to know the difference, until I saw this vase and knew.

Directly across from the vase hangs a painting of a square-shouldered, massive-legged Polynesian Atlas, carrying the world in the person of a child on his shoulders. 'That's you, mate,' Tony Fomison had told Graham when he gave it to him. He was pissed at the time – so was Graham, unusually. Tony was a dangerous neighbour. If he considered you a friend, his house, a tiny basement flat further along the street, was your house; so too his money, food, grog and drugs, and vice versa, except that he had bugger all of anything at that stage. Mostly it was his drinking that forced us to distance ourselves: we had two young children to look after. He stopped coming around, but never held it against us, never asked for his painting back, even when, just before his death, the value of his work soared. We still saw him from time to time. The last time, he arrived at our door almost comatose, and Graham and I carried him back to his flat. There was nothing left of him by then, just a wiry little man, with a wizened lugubrious face and, I discovered when Graham and I put him to bed, an incongruously large cock, which flopped out when we pulled his dirty jeans off. He died shortly after that, in 1990, a few years before the final nails were hammered into the socialist coffin and Graham began turning his face to the wall.

Only the gurnard fillets are left by the time I open the packet. I debate whether to have another glass of wine, and to assist my deliberations, I search through my bag and find my mobile, dormant since I entered the wine bar three hours ago to wait for Paul Malone to make his calculated late entrance.

My mobile reconnects with its network and chirrups with a message, while I'm dialling. The met-phone weather forecast for tomorrow morning confirms that I should forgo the wine: Auckland maritime is fine and clear with light westerlies, rising to 15 knots by mid-to-late morning.

I dial voice-mail: maybe somebody loves me. 'Hey Mum,' says Jamie. 'Malone confirmed me for the job. Said he was meeting you for a drink. For Christ's sake don't fuck it up.' The electronic

factotum's voice lists the options and I press #5 for delete. Love is where you find it.

The second message is from my boss, Rory Sanderson: 'Ester remembers you and is happy to talk to you. She seems to work all the hours of the day and night during the week, so the weekends are all she can offer us. Tomorrow arvo would be great. No pressure.'

Another reason for not reopening that bottle of wine: Ester is Ester Fifita, the mother of Kamal, who's been arrested for the murder of Alex Solona. Kamal Fifita is our client.