

VERTIGO

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CHAPTER ONE

‘No-one ever made a movie about the murder of a bureaucrat.’ Eric dumped his laptop bag and backpack onto his desk. Sweat dampened the blond hair at his temples. ‘Why is it so hot out there? Spring’s only just started.’

Belinda, James and I turned away from our screens to look at him. Eric was short and movie-star handsome and, if you knew to listen for it, spoke with a small clip that I once assumed came from European parents. He opened the backpack and pulled out a wad of manila folders. They were stamped with the state government crest and fat blue serial numbers ran along their spines.

‘Why don’t you use a wheelie case for those?’ said James. ‘You’d make it a lot easier for yourself. Less sweaty.’ James shaves his head and has the muscled forearms and broad hands of a farmer, which is what he is, really. His family runs a market garden north of the city. I suspect that he’s only an accountant to get some respite from the dust. James wouldn’t be seen dead with a wheelie case.

‘Wheelie cases are for sissies,’ said Eric, shunting the folders to the corner of his desk. He reconnected his laptop and reached for the power cable that was threaded through the round hole in the desktop. It slid away from him and vanished under the surface. I watched as he got down on his hands and knees to feed it back up. As well as being handsome, Eric also rode his bike to work every day. Even Belinda risked a quick glance.

The end of the cable poked above the desk and James grabbed for it as Eric climbed back out. ‘You can use a bulldog clip to hold those in place, you know.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Eric. ‘Full of good advice today, aren’t you?’

‘*Silkwood*,’ James replied. ‘Movie about the murder of a bureaucrat. Meryl Streep.’

‘She was a nuclear whistleblower; that’s different.’

‘Why?’

‘Because she threatened the entire nuclear industry by calling out non-compliance with safety regulations.’ Eric’s laptop made its start-up noise. Satisfied, he dropped into his chair and swung around to mirror James. They both put their feet up on the table that occupied the space in the middle of our pod.

‘*You* call out non-compliance,’ James pointed out, tilting his beer at him. In Eric’s absence, James had announced beer o’clock fifteen minutes ago and returned from the staff kitchen with three Coronas. Mine was halfway down and Belinda’s sat sweating on her desk, still full.

‘Non-compliance with Health Department policy about patient discharge planning. It’s not exactly big-picture stuff. It’s not in my job description to lobby for changes to government regulations.’

‘I don’t think it was in Karen Silkwood’s job description to testify to the Atomic Energy Commission, but she did it anyway.’ James pointed at his beer and Eric shook his head and indicated a carton of iced coffee on his desk. James shrugged. ‘Tell us again why you’re complaining about not being murdered.’

‘Well, I mean, it’s not like we do anything earth-shattering, is it? No-one cares if we find out that twenty per cent of public health patients don’t get follow-up appointments after they leave hospital.’

‘The patients probably care when they end up in emergency again. And why are you working on that inquiry anyway? Health’s not your portfolio.’

‘CorpEx has brought the tabling date forward and the team needs help tying up some loose ends.’

James and I lifted our beers in unison and drank silently. Eric’s own inquiry, after being touted as a potential toppler of

governments, had been scaled back and he'd been shifted sideways.

He shrugged. 'It's okay, turns out there was nothing to see on the police inquiry. Not that there's anything in the health inquiry either. It'll be on page five of *The West*, the Leader of the Opposition will ask questions in parliament, the minister will wring his hands and complain about the Commonwealth–State funding agreement, and everyone will forget about it by the game on the weekend.'

'Yeah, sorry about that, mate,' said James. 'I know you had high hopes for the police inquiry. And we're all here to keep the bastards honest. I just don't think I want to upset anyone enough to incite them to murder. I'd rather be the main character in a movie where the bureaucrat exposes the corruption and lives happily ever after.'

'That's a fairytale, James. Only little kids believe in fairytales.'

'Doesn't mean it can't happen though. How about *public investigator exposes billion-dollar hole in public health services, retires, becomes pro-surfer*. That's interesting. You could make a movie about that. Put yourself in the starring role.'

'I can't surf,' Eric pointed out.

'You could learn.'

'Yeah, yeah. And get eaten by a shark before I even stand up. Anyway, the movies I want to make don't involve people.'

The overhead lights flicked off, sending the open-plan office into darkness except for the twilight through the windows. We all looked at our phones.

'Is that the time?' Eric lifted his feet off the table with a grunt and planted them on the floor. 'Where did everyone else go?' he asked, as he walked to the timer switch that would give us another hour of artificial light.

'Scarpered. There's some concert on in Kings Park.' James nodded at the trees across the road, a dark shadow in the middle of the city. I could see the glow of the floodlights around the stage beginning to emerge from its centre.

'Nice evening for it. They got lucky at this time of the year. What

are you doing tonight?’

‘Nothing, going home. Surfing tomorrow though. D’you want to come?’ James grinned. ‘I’ve got an extra board.’

‘Nah, mate. We’re having a barbeque for Granny’s birthday. She’s ninety.’

‘Can I come?’ We all turned to Belinda, whose workstation faced the corner window. It sounds like the best position, which technically Eric should have occupied as our team leader, but it was the worst. You had your back to whoever walked toward us, which meant everyone could see what was on your screen, and the afternoon sun in summer made you sweat. Belinda wore sunscreen on the backs of her hands while she was at her desk. The Hello Kitty plush toys that she’d lined up on the windowsill were faded and shedding brittle fur.

‘To Granny’s barbeque?’

‘No, surfing.’ She clicked her mouse and swung her chair around to face the rest of us. Her feet hung above the carpet, and she picked up her beer.

‘I didn’t know you could surf.’ James leaned back in his chair.

‘I can’t, but you said Eric could learn. You can teach me.’ She leaned back in her own chair and rocked her feet backwards and forwards.

James regarded her. I could see his tongue moving against the side of his cheek. ‘Yeah, okay. Why not? We’re going early though, and don’t forget it’s an hour to my place from where you live.’

‘Cool.’ Belinda swung back to her screen, her little finger tapping on the bottle.

‘Do you have a wetsuit?’ James said to her back. ‘The water’s still cold at this time of the year.’

‘Yep.’ She didn’t turn around, but I could hear the smile in her voice. James dipped his head in salute.

Eric winked at me. ‘What about you, Frances? Keen to tangle with some Noahs tomorrow morning?’

‘I’ll give it a miss.’

‘Wise choice.’ He turned back to his workstation and I took it as a cue to turn back to mine.

Eric was right, what we do doesn’t change the world, but James was right too, we might change the world for one person. I hang onto that while I’m picking through purchase orders for office consumables, tallying up the invoices, and comparing the totals to supply contract variations and the delegated authorities for approving them. Eric wanted the big one, the inquiry that would expose corruption on a scale big enough to bring down a government. He had a deep suspicion of big business, big banks, and global media even before conspiracy theories became mainstream. I couldn’t see it myself. The big, audacious rip-offs might be out there, but I doubt there are as many of them as Eric thought there were. It’s the routine, casual rorting that I chase. The procurement manager who slips his children’s annual schoolbook purchases into a million-dollar stationery contract. The chief of staff who hires backpackers to vacuum the floors of ministerial offices for cash at twenty per cent under the minimum wage. There’s something deeply satisfying about ping-ponging a self-important bureaucrat for ripping off the state while he’s enforcing the rules for everyone else.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m committed to public service. I think most of our public servants are saints. You’d have to be to work in a job where your boss changes every four years, and then overturns everything you’ve been doing because the *previous administration* made a mess of things. A new government comes in, goalposts shift, departments restructure, stationery is rebranded, and just when they start to get going again, there’s another election. I wonder sometimes whether democracy is the right basis for running a country after all.

I’m lucky because my boss reports directly to the parliament, so technically he’s independent. Neil does what he does year in and year out and only the law can change that. Government still

controls his purse strings though. After a particularly damning inquiry by our office, the premier will mutter dark words about the high cost of watchdogs, taxpayer value for money and the possibility of budgetary constraints. We watch him on telly, laugh and tell him *good luck with that*. Still, it's a shame the police inquiry was shutdown. It was the most exciting one any of us had worked on.

A laptop lid slapped shut behind me and I turned my head to see Eric raise his arms and stretch. 'That's it for me. Go home everyone and have a good weekend.'

The rest of us sighed and clicked save. We didn't have to stay until Eric left – he wouldn't care if I left at lunchtime as long as I met my deadlines – but somehow, it had become a thing.

'Give Granny my best birthday wishes.' James closed his own computer and reached under the desk for his bag.

'Will do. And you look after our Belinda in the water. I need her here next week for work that she won't be able to do from inside a great white.' Eric shouldered his backpack and walked back down the corridor.

That was the last time any of us saw him.

CHAPTER TWO – ONE YEAR LATER

The front corner of the room begins to slide upwards. It is tentative, testing. I look hard at the point of the brown-and-gold carpet where it meets the ridged skirting board. I don't turn my head, just my eyes, because it is easier that way and for a moment I get a mental image of myself giving the corner a mean side-eye. I figure I must look either crazy or bored. The speaker is engrossed in her PowerPoint and the participants are scribbling notes. No-one is watching me to notice. I breathe in and out. The corner recedes, reluctantly, it seems. Has anyone else in the world anthropomorphised the corner of a seminar room? I have to keep an eye on it because I know where it wants to go. I reach up and tuck my hair behind my right ear. That's the bad one, the one that makes me dizzy. I let my fingers linger there, rubbing the base of my skull.

The speaker is explaining the government's plans to solve the homelessness problem. They want to decentralise, open up subsidised rental to the private sector. She's working hard to sell the idea even though the seminar was billed as a *consultation* forum. The room is packed with charities and social welfare advocates. The Tenants Advisory Group has already asked some pointed questions about accountability. The speaker reassures us that landlords will need to register with the government, meet a set of criteria, and let themselves be audited once a year. But the room is sceptical, the programme will give the private sector a guaranteed supply of tenants – the thirty thousand people on the public housing waiting list – and access to a government subsidy if they keep them in a home for more than twelve months. The TAG isn't buying it.

‘What margin does the private sector need to make this worth its while?’ A woman the shape of a pencil and dressed in black has been scribbling and pursing her lips on the other side of the room. ‘Five percent? Ten percent? Twenty percent? Social housing providers run on a margin of three. Where’s the incentive?’

The speaker smiles with her teeth and folds her hands over the remote control. ‘We have received enormous interest from the private property sector locally, nationally and internationally,’ she tells the TAG woman. ‘The sector is very keen to expand its social responsibility platform. They are acutely aware of the tsunami of older people retiring and still in the rental market, a market they won’t be able to afford when they are only receiving an aged pension. Most of those people are single women.’

She clicks the remote, the crowd murmurs and I risk a look at the screen. It shows the front page of yesterday’s paper. *Froze To Death*. The headline is superimposed on a bush setting. A white shelter, the type you buy in camping stores, has been erected between prickly melaleuca bushes and a once-red station wagon. All of the car’s doors, including the tailgate, are open and I can see the end of a mattress hanging out the back. It will, I know, smell of damp, mould and sweat. The grey sand in the foreground is littered with bottles and cans. Another mattress on the ground beside the car’s rear wheel arch is partly screened by the bushes and covered with a sheet that outlines the shape of a body.

‘Stacey Miles died while sleeping rough at a bush camp south of the city last weekend,’ says the speaker. ‘She had been homeless since leaving an abusive relationship two years ago. She was on the public housing waiting list and the Department of Housing understands she had been couch surfing with various relatives across the metropolitan area. We don’t know why she returned to the bush camp at this time of year. Overnight temperatures on the weekend dropped to less than two degrees. We need more low-cost housing to prevent this from happening.’

She presses the remote again to bring up an image of a construction site. Front and centre are Simon Tallent, the Minister for Housing, and the developer: suited, smiling and clutching takeaway coffees from a popular inner-city café. The site signage board is still shiny and, above pictures of safety equipment and a stern prohibition against onsite alcohol, announces *Lignum Partners* as the developer. I recognise the name. Lignum is a tiny settlement – thirty households at a stretch – on Yamatji country inland from my home town. I squint at the screen to see if the developer is anyone I know, but at that moment Belinda raises her hand. It is her left hand, next to my right ear, and I feel a rush of motion and jerk my head away. I eyeball the corner. It has seized the day and is bolting to the ceiling. The carpet follows, rising up like it's being pulled on a string. I grip the table and close my eyes. It doesn't help and I feel sweat, both hot and cold, on my forehead. Belinda is asking about the registration criteria for landlords. People will be looking at her. I compose my face in what I hope looks like profound, closed-eyed contemplation of my colleague's query. I squeeze my fingertips into the underside of the composite wooden surface, breathe and wait for morning tea to be announced.

I'm here because our office is investigating the government's previous homelessness programme, which opened up public housing to not-for-profit landlords. It was a half-step to privatisation. *Social housing*, not *public housing*, the Minister for Housing had called it last year, as if there was a difference between having a charity or the government as your landlord when your only other option was the back seat of a car. I suspect the tenants themselves don't care as long as they have a roof over their heads. The social housing programme has made a considerable dent in the waiting list, which is a great success story for the government, but accounts are coming through about building faults – walls cracking, high power bills, that sort of thing. My boss wants to know whether it is stopping the government from putting people into homes. My

guess is that the rush to get the new homes built has stretched the already overheated housing market, and the department is turning a blind eye to shoddy work in order to meet ministerial demands.

Across the room, the Assistant Director for Homelessness Strategies meets my eye and winds his way through the crowd. I say 'winds', but in reality, Dr Duncan Wolf walks directly toward me, cup in one hand, a plate in the other, and elbows out. Seniority, determination, and bulk clear his path. He reaches me, exhales, and sips his tea. He has dirty fingernails, and despite his size, his black suit hangs in folds like he's recently lost weight.

'Good to see you and your colleagues here, Frances.'

'Duncan,' I nod. 'Thank you for inviting us.'

'It's in everyone's best interests to keep the commissioner's office abreast of what we are doing. I like to have everyone on board and on the same page. Pulling together.'

'Keeping your enemies close?' I add. Oops. I'll get pulled up for that later. I wonder whether Duncan will text, email or call Neil about my snarky behaviour and whether he'll do it before or after morning tea ends. He's impassive, which means he's considering which option will do the most damage.

'How is the inquiry going?' he asks.

'On time and on budget.'

'Of course it is. With you at the helm, Frances, it wouldn't be any other way. And what about your findings? Anything useful you can tell me? No surprises and all that.'

That's a dig at our office values. *No surprises*. We tell the departments under inquiry as soon as anything comes to light. Procedural fairness, one of the tenets of administrative law. It gives the department the best opportunity to either convince us that we've got it wrong or prepare their damage control for the media.

'Nothing yet,' I reply.

'Early days, hmm?' He balances the plate on top of his cup and uses his free hand to lift a sandwich to his mouth. It looks good. I've

always preferred savoury instead of sweet at morning tea. I wonder if there will be any left to take back to the seminar room when we reconvene.

Alarmingly, Duncan steps forward. He is too close now and he blocks my view of the far wall, which I was relying on to keep steady. Without an anchor, the ceiling makes a slow dive to the right. My throat tightens and my right hand reaches for the sideboard behind me.

‘It would be very helpful, Frances, if you could wind up the fieldwork by the end of the week. My staff are stretched enough as it is trying to reduce the waiting list, and with your inquiry we are at risk of missing our own minister’s KPIs.’

I lower my head to get a view of the floor, hoping I’m looking thoughtful and not submissive. The brown and gold swirls on the carpet don’t help. I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth, count to three and breathe out.

‘Your team has been very accommodating, thank you, Duncan, but I’m expecting we will still need to go into next week.’

His face is way too close, and I see him taking in the sweat on my forehead. ‘Is that because you’re unwell?’ he asks. There’s canniness there, and no concern.

‘No, it’s because we need to review the files for the north metropolitan district.’

‘Perhaps I should speak to the commissioner.’

‘Perhaps you should.’

The bell rings and Duncan glides away. It occurs to me that he must take long, smooth steps to move like that, or lots of tiny ones, like a ballet dancer doing *bourrées*. I look at his feet. He strides. Of course he does.

I cross the room to the morning tea table. All of the scones and biscuits are gone, but the crowd has left behind a nice selection of sandwiches. I find a fat triangle of chicken breast, avocado and lettuce on soft white bread and an exciting wedge of rye embracing

beef, mustard and pickles. I put them on a plate and walk as fast as I dare through the doors just before they are closed by a smirking usher who looks like he should be preparing for his final exams instead of opening and closing doors. I pause to adjust to the lower light before rejoining my table. At the back of the room, Duncan has pushed his chair away from his own table and is leaning backwards, right ankle hooked over left knee. He is tapping on his phone like his life depends on it.