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FROMAGE



FREMANTLE PRESS

CHAPTER ONE

Before it all began, I'd taken myself off for a holiday in Croatia. In the scorching hot July of 1993, I was savouring the last days of a summer holiday that had started in London and was ending on the pebble beaches of the Dalmatian coast. I had sunned myself during the day and drunk myself to a happy tipsy in the evenings before staggering over cobblestone streets to my B&B where my hostess would shake her head and pour me a bedtime rakia.

Being a freelance journalist meant money was too tight for Italy or France, so I'd opted for Croatia where Turkish coffee cost fifty cents and fabulous antipasto platters filled my stomach for about four dollars. I'd eaten at so many restaurants and bistros that I'd be able to write enough food reviews, with the summer on my tongue, to get me through a bleak southern hemisphere winter. Food and sun were my definition of heaven.

I had laid myself out every day of my holiday, daydreaming and people-watching, fascinated by the Russians who flocked to the coast in vast numbers, wearing tiny bikinis or racing bathers stretched taut over fat pale thighs, with bellies resembling verandas flopping over elastic waistbands threatening to snap. With hairy bikini-lines reaching almost as far as their knees, the women paraded back and forth, slapping recalcitrant children, pouring lavender oil on their skins and lying on their lounges, turning frequently like chickens on a rotisserie.

Daydreaming is the dominant feature of 'me-on-holiday'. This state of mind includes a complete inability to use any part of my brain other than the brain stem, enough for showering, feeding and ambulation. I develop a satisfyingly high tolerance of alcohol and a need to eat six meals a day

to supply barely enough energy to stumble between my B&B, the beach and the restaurants. I become an unashamed pleasure-seeker, mostly in a soporific haze, emitting the occasional purr of contentment.

But it was not without its downside. Men, many so young they were barely out of school, sat quietly on beach chairs, sunrays touching the broken bodies ravaged by years of a war with Serbia that was rooted in centuries of cultural and religious resentments. There were men whose limbs had been blown off or amputated. Others had bodies pockmarked with bullets possibly still embedded in the soft tissue of their backs and arms and wasted legs.

These men were a jarring sight, disrupting the usual patterns of holiday nonchalance. Screams of joy once emanating from the floating water slide anchored off the beach had been silenced, the plastic edifice dismantled in deference to the suffering bodies basking in the sun. The adults on the beach were respectful. Some approached the men, shook their hands and thanked them for defending Hrvaska. Others offered cigarettes or fresh fruit. Children were more furtive, glancing fearfully at the hurt men and the scars or the stumps where legs and arms used to be.

I was like the children. Coming from Perth at the bottom of the world, I didn't understand how humans could kill and maim each other for cultural and territorial advantage. It was particularly bewildering because for me, the outsider, there was no difference between Belgrade and Zagreb.

These musings were flashes of consciousness as I lay on my sun lounge like an oily lizard. I'd coated myself in the lavender concoction sold from wicker baskets by women as they wandered among the bodies spread out on the beach. It was probably just olive oil they dressed up with the purple scent. Who cared? My skin was walnut brown – a colour that would elicit envious responses from my winter-pale friends when I returned to the southern hemisphere.

But, as the saying goes, 'the end was nigh' and I had to ready myself for the inevitable return to reality. I was flying back to resume a life dominated by writing restaurant reviews, suburban features and the occasional obituary for a prominent local who had appeared so often in the society pages they were considered a celebrity. Sometimes though, banal reality can explode holiday lassitude to smithereens.

I was enjoying a last sizzle in the sun when one such reality check blasted my holiday haze.

Having a thing for voices, no matter how long it's been since hearing it, I can immediately recognise a speaker. This talent kicked in when Marie Puharich screamed at me across the pebbles.

'Yoo-hoo, Alex! Yoo-hoo!'

In hindsight, I should've kept still, pretending to be asleep. Or maybe, when she stumbled to my sunbed, I could have squinted up at her, put on a roughly Slavic accent and exclaimed about the strangeness of an Australian woman who looked exactly like me. But these methods of escape only came to me later.

'Yoo-hoo! Yoo-hoo!'

I tried to ignore the sound of stamping feet coming in my direction, noisily scattering stones.

We had gone to school together – one of those all-girl institutions that gave us a 'ladies academy' kind of education. Marie was different because she was Croatian – a 'wog' who stood out in a school of WASPs. Marie was unfazed by her difference and the snobbery of the other girls because she had an unshakeable belief in her cultural ascendancy. Sometimes she expressed sympathy for me – as an Australian I didn't have the benefit of a long socio-cultural history symbolised by centuries of castles and cathedrals and yodelling folk dancers. Marie was arrogant: tall, olive-skinned, with a stream of thick black hair that she arranged in elaborate scrolls, or let hang loose, to the chagrin of the school principal. Mrs Smith tut-tutted over the suggestiveness of free-flowing locks, but Marie shrugged her shoulders. The rest of us pony-tailed young ladies loved or hated this audacity. Mostly I felt bossed around, something not native to my temperament.

Now she was coming towards me on a beach in Croatia.

'Alex. Alex Grant,' she bellowed. 'This is unbelievable.'

I had to bend my head right back, tucking it between my shoulder blades, as she bent over me.

'Marie. Well, hello.' I sat up, swung my feet around and got up, forcing her to step back. Our noses were almost touching, yet she didn't back away. Personal space had never been her forte. 'Fancy running into you this far from home.'

'This is totally, totally unbelievable!' She went to give me a hug.

I broadened my smile and held my hands out to ward her off. 'You'd better not touch me. I'm covered in that lavender-scented oil.'

She laughed and lightly touched my arm with a finger. ‘You’ll burn to a crisp with that stuff. Let’s get out of the sun and have a catch-up.’

Various excuses to stay on the beach came to mind: a lack of vitamin D threatened rickets, severe nervous exhaustion, or I’d eaten the equivalent of a small herd of swine in prosciutto and was no longer able to walk. There was no arguing with Marie. She gestured towards a beach café, whose tables spilled out over the pebbles. Grabbing my wrist, she started to pull me into a trot before I could squeak a response.

‘It’s terrific to see you. Just the person I’d want to meet ... under the circumstances.’ She steered me through the crowd clogging the boardwalk that split the plaza into two neat halves. Marie plonked me at a table and called over a waiter before I had time to draw breath.

‘This is such a difficult time for my family. Seeing you is the best thing to happen for me.’

‘It’s great to see you too.’

My natural affinity for lying surfaced immediately: it is a primal survival instinct. I was brought up to understand there are no such things as white lies – a porky is a porky. With Marie, however, the only way to suppress my flight instinct was to lie through clenched teeth that hopefully resembled a smile.

She grasped my hand across the table. ‘It’s been too long since we’ve seen each other. Caitlin’s christening was the last time?’

I nodded, remembering a fat, dark-haired child in a ridiculous silk and lace gown, screaming her head off as the priest tried not to drown her in holy water.

‘Yeah, it’s been a while. How old is she now?’

‘The precious thing, such a sweetie-pie mummy’s girl. I’ve got photos here somewhere. She’ll be six in August and is the cleverest little poppet. You wouldn’t believe what she gets up to.’

And nor did I care. But I murmured a suitable response as the waiter came to take our order – thick sweet Turkish coffee for me and a herbal infusion stinking like compost for Marie. I let her coerce me into a plate of *krostule* and *fritule* – totally delicious ribbons of light buttery pastry and round balls of fruity cake that looked like the holes from doughnuts. Becoming addicted to both, my derriere had a new plumpness.

‘So, how are all your family?’ My strategy was to get Marie talking about her favourite subject; she could blather on and I’d nod and daydream and sip my coffee.

No such luck. Her family was big news and its current situation piqued my interest.

‘Oh, Alex, I’m here for a funeral.’ She didn’t try to hide the excitement in her voice.

‘What’s happened?’ She had a vast network of relatives. Thousands could have died.

‘It’s a terrible, terrible tragedy. My grandfather lives in the hills behind Split and he’s been cared for, over the last thirty years, by a lovely couple called Zorka and Jure. They were too wonderful for words and they’ve been totally loyal and kind to him.’ She paused and reached for the pendant around her neck featuring a tortured Jesus in his underwear. ‘And now they’re dead.’

For a second, I thought she was going to cross herself. But even for Marie that was taking Catholic theatricality a little too far.

‘That’s awful. How did they die?’

Marie said nothing. I watched her constructing the narrative in her mind, selecting the best bits, editing for effect.

From over my shoulder a hand deposited a coffee cup and a plate of sweets in front of me. The waiter gave my cleavage a brief look of interest and sauntered off. Leering was a common pastime among Croatian men and it was flattering and obnoxious in equal measure. After all, I had engaged in my own fair share of ‘appreciative looking’ while watching the local men play water polo in teeny-weeny swimmers.

Marie took a long slurp of her tea and jammed a *fritule* into her mouth. ‘It’s so hard to talk about. The whole thing’s such a scandal. Dida, my grandfather, is incredibly upset, as you can imagine.’

Well, no. Trying to imagine without a hint was beyond even my overly dramatic mindset.

She paused to sip her grass clippings and for dramatic effect. ‘It was a murder–suicide.’

As a journalist I like to think I’m calm and objective, not easily surprised by the proclivities of humankind. This little titbit made me do a double take and I sensed those at other tables had pricked up their ears when they heard the word ‘murder’.

‘You’re kidding?’

‘No, no. It has actually happened. And to *our* family.’ Her tone was one of dismay. This was less about the murder of her grandfather’s retainers, and more about a threat to the status of her family.

‘It seems like the typical story. Jure killed Zorka and then turned the gun on himself. Blood and brains everywhere.’ Marie watched me, assessing the impact of her words. ‘Dida said he had no idea they weren’t happy. They always seemed to have a completely normal marriage to him.’

Having never been there myself, marriage was a mystery. My family ‘did’ marriage; my father had made a habit of it. But the words ‘marriage’ and ‘normal’ hadn’t ever coalesced in my circle of relatives and friends.

‘Why did he think it was about the state of their marriage?’

‘What else could it be? Jure Simich was Dida’s groundsman and Zorka was his housekeeper. They all lived on the same property, my grandfather in the big house and they had the cottage my great-grandparents built when they got married. If anyone was going to see that they were unhappy or that Jure was unstable, it’d be my grandfather. There was nothing. No indication at all.’

We were both silent. My previous job as a court reporter had convinced me that there were as many motives for murder as there were ways of doing it. All sorts of other possibilities came to mind: maybe Jure was having an affair and couldn’t bear the guilt. Or maybe he’d found out that Zorka was having an affair and killed her in a blind rage, then, realising he’d go to prison, he shot himself. Or maybe one of them had been terminally ill and they decided to die together rather than be parted. I was probably escalating the drama, but my holiday was nearly over, and here was an event that aroused my journalist instinct. A crime of passion may be a satisfying denouement to my European escape. A suitably creative segue into a return to my real life.

‘What a dreadful shock for your grandfather. What will he do now?’

‘I don’t know. He seems so stunned by it all. I don’t think he’s capable of making a decision.’ She gave a melodramatic sigh. ‘The poor man is a shadow of himself. He seems to have aged twenty years overnight and he’s not a young man.’

My scepticism went up a notch. I had met her grandfather in the early 1980s. He had been visiting his sons in Australia and checking on his business interests. I remembered a man who dominated the spaces around him. Tall, speaking in an emphatic, heavily accented voice, he had commanded attention and took for granted the fear and respect of his sons and their families. Disdainful of an *Engleski* girl, he treated me with mild scorn barely hidden by an exaggerated politeness. He was steely and

cold, a hard man whom I could not imagine diminished even under the most horrendous circumstances.

‘My father’s worried this might kill Dida.’

I was doubtful. ‘I’m sure he has a lot of support. What about his children, your parents and aunts and uncles?’

‘They’re all over here, so he’ll be looked after. My grandfather is highly respected and he’s helped an enormous amount of people by employing them in the business. They really love him.’

A nice euphemism for ‘scared out of their wits’.

‘The rellies are scattered everywhere, looking after branches of the family company. We’ve all gathered to help him get through.’

Marie tucked into the pastries with gusto, even though the topic of conversation was dead bodies. She munched through the pile of *krostule*, small flakes of the delicate pastry sprinkling her bosom. I bit into a *fritule* and nearly wept. The taste of the small round balls of dough, deep-fried to a light crispness, was something else. Plump sultanas, dried locally on racks spread out in the sun, mixed with the flavours of brandy, lemon and vanilla.

I spoke around the taste sensation in my mouth. ‘It’s great you’ve travelled all this way to be with him. He must be so pleased to see you here.’

‘It’s the Croatian way. We believe in family above all other things. Your lot have the old saying about blood being thicker than water and mostly you just say it. We believe it and live it. There was no question that Branko and I would come over.’

At the mention of that name, my stomach did a major U-turn. My face must have registered some of my ‘emotion’.

‘Do you remember my brother Branko? You know: Brian?’ She dipped her head and looked at me slyly from under her plucked-to-death eyebrows.

How could I forget? The years from fifteen to eighteen are very dicey for a girl and the last thing she needs is an unwelcome suitor with a surfeit of testosterone and self-belief. Brian was two years older than Marie. He’d gone to one of the prestige boys schools that spit out their young men with a judicious amount of polite misogyny. Studying law, he became infatuated with me when he found out I was the daughter of Charles Grant, AO, SC, judge and, therefore, an influential man in a curly wig.

Marie adored her brother and assumed I shared her feelings. Brian had

asked me to accompany him to the law ball in his first year at university. I spent ages trying to get my mother to ring him and say I was sick with a highly contagious disease. Luckily for me, I broke my leg jumping from the roof of the garage a week before the grand event and was having metal pins inserted in my shin bone while Brian was tripping the light fantastic with the daughter of some other prominent man. It's amazing how after all the years that had passed, I still felt a chill of anxiety at the mention of his name. And to think he was in the vicinity! There needed to be an international law under the Geneva Convention limiting the movement of people with brains the size of amoebas and egos the size of a small moon.

I took a long slug of coffee.

'Yes, I remember Brian. How is he?'

'Absolutely terrific. He was always going to do great things. He's now an associate partner.' She gave a wistful shrug. 'Of course, the long hours mean he hasn't managed to find the right woman. Mum would love him to have a son. Sometime soon.'

'It's great he's been so successful.' Ping! I was racking up the little white lies.

'It's a shame you two didn't get together.'

Hopefully my grimace passed as a smile. I pushed my chair back and stood. 'I really have to go. I'm sorry about the deaths and the terrible time your grandfather is having. I hope all goes well. Say hi to Brian for me.'

She looked past my shoulder and started to wave. 'You can say hello yourself.'

CHAPTER TWO

It was one of those slow-motion dreamlike sequences when you can see the danger, but you can't escape. Brian Puharich was striding towards our table, a clown grin stretched across his face. Everyone in the café turned to watch as he lunged towards me, lips extended in a toilet-plunger pucker. He kissed each side of my head; it felt like the moist, scratchy lick of a lizard.

'Alex Grant!' He held onto my shoulders. 'It's been so long. You're looking really well. Very well indeed.' His mouth-freshener breath puffed across my face.

He took my hand and moved me back to my seat.

'What an amazing coincidence. We can renew our friendship.' He cocked his eyebrow in a 'winning' way.

'I was just leaving, Brian. There are many, many things to do. Huge amounts.'

'Come on, Alex. You're on holiday. Stay for a while. The drinks are on me.'

'No, really. I must be going.'

'I won't take no for an answer. We've a lot of catching up to do.' He gave me a little wink and clicked his tongue. I thought I was going to heave.

He pulled my chair out and tapped me on the shoulder to sit. He waved a finger at the waiter and ordered a bottle of local wine. I felt like asking the waiter to bring a straw and another bottle only for me.

'How's Judge Grant? I read that he's been working on the Fordham Brothers collapse.'

'He was fine the last time I saw him, and I don't really follow the cases he's overseeing.'

‘Shame. Has Marie told you about our news?’ Brian looked between the two of us with an attempt at gravitas.

‘Yeah. I’m really sorry for your grandfather. These people obviously meant a lot to him.’

‘That’s not the least of it.’ His self-importance was noxious.

Although Brian was tall, about six foot five, his frame had remained at a pre-adolescent, skin-and-bone stage. The biggest part of him was his nose, which extended out from his face like a giant shark fin – he’d scare the pants off anyone who saw him floating on his back in the sea. He had the same lustrous black hair as his sister, cut into a trendy style that emphasised the squareness of his head. I’d never been able to tell the colour of his eyes because they were shadowed by his nose and the jutting extension of his monobrow.

To give him credit, he always dressed tastefully and with an innate sense of what good leather and cashmere could do for a man. Sitting across the table from him, I surreptitiously peered at the beautiful soft leather of his deck shoes and the exquisite weave of the sweater draped over his bony shoulders.

‘Branko, Alex doesn’t want to hear all the gory details.’ Marie looked at him indulgently.

Gory details were better than trying to make polite small talk. ‘It’s perfectly okay, Marie. I’m sure Brian can’t tell me anything worse than what’s on the police rounds.’

He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. ‘I arrived here before anyone knew something was amiss with Jure and Zorka. I come over every summer to look over my grandfather’s legals and catch a few rays to tan up the bod.’

He looked appreciatively at his long skinny arms, while I tried not to imagine his string-bean body in Speedos, slick with lavender oil.

‘The first thing wrong was that Jure didn’t pick me up from Split airport. No one was there and I had to take a taxi to the creamery. Second thing wrong, no one came to the door when I rang the bell at the big house. I started to get a bit worried. My grandfather is in a wheelchair after a fall, so he’s dependent on Zorka and Jure. I went around the back and broke the kitchen window. The alarm sounded and scared me half to death. So that was the other weird thing. No one seemed to be at home, yet they all knew my date and time of arrival.’

Maybe everyone had deliberately made themselves scarce.

‘I went up to Dida’s room and there he was. Still in his pyjamas. He’d been alone since Jure had left the night before and he hadn’t come back in the morning to get my grandfather ready for the day. As you can imagine, he was on the verge of panic.’

This was not a word I’d associate with Grandfather Puharich, who was overbearing and defiant. I didn’t see him falling into the degrading state of panic.

‘He hadn’t been able to get down the stairs or get Jure on the intercom. My grandfather doesn’t like to have a phone in his bedroom. He says the ring makes his tinnitus worse.’ Brian shrugged and rolled his eyes – such are the peculiar habits of the old.

‘What did you do?’

‘I made him comfortable, got him fresh water and some bread and cheese. Then I tried to find Jure. He wasn’t around the house or in his shed. I called out but didn’t expect an answer because Jure and Zorka are as deaf as posts. So, I went to the cottage. Long story short, I found the bodies.’

He was clearly thrilled he’d been the first on the scene. I looked at him in horrified fascination. He began to run his fingers through his dark hair and looked at me from under his veranda eyebrow. He gave me another wink and the pink tip of his tongue appeared briefly between his lips.

‘What a dreadful thing to find.’ I finished my wine in one gulp and refilled my glass, being careful not to catch his eye.

‘He was so brave to go and look for them on his own.’ Marie liked the idea of her brother as hero almost as much as he did.

‘I had to do something. Dida couldn’t take any more upsets.’

‘Where did you find them?’ Curiosity was starting to usurp my aversion. There was definitely a feature story in that cottage: ‘Killing, Croatian Style’ would be a catchy headline.

‘They were sitting in the kitchen. At the table, like at a normal dinner. Except Zorka was slumped back in her chair with a hole right in the middle of her forehead. Not much blood on her, because it was mostly spattered on the wall behind. It was a different story with Jure. He’d fallen forward on the table and there was blood over his plate and down his fingers and all over the floor. The gun was next to him. It’s something I’ll never forget.’ Brian’s voice dropped away. The memory of the bloody scene was enough to subdue even his exuberance.

'I'm glad Dida wasn't able to go and find them,' said Marie. 'It's enough for him to know that they've died, without actually finding the bodies.'

'Did you have to identify them?' I asked Brian.

He nodded. 'I called the police as soon as possible. It was hard to understand what had happened. Let me tell you, Alex, it took a while to sink in. It looked like madness in there.'

I couldn't imagine the scene Brian had discovered, or the smells that must have hit him when he entered the room. 'Who said it was a murder-suicide?'

'That was pretty obvious. Zorka had been shot at close range with an old hunting pistol, one from the war. Jure must have kept it from when he was fighting the communists. Zorka's eyes were open, and she was just staring at me.' He sipped some wine. 'Jure was a real mess. His first shot hadn't done the job, so he managed to pull the trigger a second time. That one had blown his face off.'

I began to wonder. Instead of a love triangle or an expression of tender release, Brian had raised another possibility. If Jure fought against the communists, there was every chance he was in the party of Nazi sympathisers, the Ustaše, who committed crimes only possible under the extreme inhumanity of war. Despite the passing of decades, was it possible that someone sought revenge?

Marie was shaken by Brian's visceral telling. 'It's too much to think about. I'd have nightmares for the rest of my life if it had been me. Lucky for Dida, Branko isn't so squeamish.'

I looked at the siblings. What did I know about these people? I'd spent five years at what was, in essence, an Anglican convent with the sister. I knew the brother primarily through her unreliable narratives describing his wide-ranging virtues. In the years since leaving school, I had learned how little you know about the people with whom you went to school. It is a small, protected world. A glass dome under which girls experiment with various 'selves' that shift alarmingly. Friendships are made, unmade and remade. Groups coalesce and then fragment. Where you belong is contingent upon complex interstices based on unstable relationships which rarely survive the lifting of the dome. In the case of Marie, this 'unknowability' was overlaid with cultural difference.

My first conclusion was that this sort of horrendous bloodletting didn't happen in normal families. That common decencies and ingrained ethical

understandings stopped extreme transgressions from shattering familial ties. There had to be something about the Puharich clan that attracted such violence. Marie had always postulated the uniqueness of her family. And this wasn't arbitrary – there was something about them. I didn't care how special the siblings thought their family were, it was very possible Jure and Zorka had been killed by someone within the insular circle who was protecting their grandfather. It beggared belief that Jure had the capability to pull the trigger twice. There had to have been a third person in that room. One who'd given the old people a brutal send-off.

Brian's voice interrupted my thoughts. 'I avoided going back to tell my grandfather until the ambulance and police arrived. They were quick because my family are very important in this area. Cheese is big business.'

'Cheese? Aren't your family into property development?'

'That's a sideline now. Cheese is where the money is. My grandfather started small, taking over from his father after the war, and now we're the biggest manufacturer and exporter of cheese in the Eastern Bloc, including to Australia. We have a facility at Margaret River, which we use as an export hub to the whole of Southeast Asia.'

Brian instantly became more bearable. Cheese was one of my passions. Up there with shoes and wine. I swear I can remember hints of a triple-cream camembert in my mother's milk.

'Once all the emergency services arrived, I left them to it and returned to the big house. Jesus,' he shook his head, 'that was the worst thing I've ever had to do. Walk up the hill to tell my grandfather.'

Marie leaned over and took her brother's hand, tears balanced on her lower eyelids.

'It's okay. I'm okay.' He looked towards me. 'When I told him, he didn't say much. The shock was huge.'

I tried to imagine the old man and his grandson and the words that must have sucked the air out of the room.

'Has there been a post-mortem and a ruling on the circumstances?'

'Yep. They were done the same day I found them, and the bodies were released for burial the next day, when the coroner had written his report.'

Wow, things happened quickly in Croatia! I thought about the months it sometimes took for the coroner to deliver the findings at home. Was it really possible, under the archaic Croatian bureaucratic system I'd witnessed just trying to post a letter, to manage dead bodies so efficiently?

To me, the speed showed a lack of due process and a desire for a hasty conclusion. My journalist's nose twitched and I smelt vermin.

'The coroner found Jure had killed Zorka and then turned the gun on himself. There's little point in a complicated investigation when it's going to reach the same conclusion.' Brian's tone was guarded. 'He respects my grandfather and didn't want to cause him more distress.'

'I see.' Not really. A swift response in a country which prided itself on public service somnambulism seemed far-fetched. 'Have they had the funeral?'

'No, that's tomorrow.' Marie kept her eyes on her brother.

Brian turned to me. 'Hey, why don't you come?'

I was horrified. 'No. No. I didn't know these people and I don't know your grandfather.'

'That's not an excuse. You've known us for such a long time. Marie would appreciate a bit of moral support.'

Marie nodded and smiled. 'It'll be nice to have a friend from home.'

'I'm sorry. It's not really appropriate. I'd feel funny.'

'Oh, please, Alex. Croatian funerals are so intense. The two of us will make you feel more than welcome.'

I looked at Brian, who was now putting on a hangdog face, presumably to tug at my heartstrings.

'I'd like to take you to our family funeral.' He made it sound like we were going on a picnic date.

I was overwhelmed by the strangeness of the invitation. I wanted to laugh: shrill, like a tortured banshee. I managed a pallid grin, which they both took as an affirmative.

'This is so good of you. Now you're coming, I feel much better.' Marie reached across the table and patted my hand.

I would have liked to feel the same. Coming from a family who looked suspiciously upon 'gushing', I was ill-equipped to cope with the emotional effusiveness of a Croatian funeral.

'If you tell me where you're staying, I can come by tomorrow morning and pick you up.' Brian gave me a lopsided smile, sexy in that *Pretty Woman*-pimp kind of way.

'That's okay. There's a taxi stand outside the B&B. Tell me the location and time and I'll be right.'

'Absolutely not. I insist on coming to pick you up.'

‘No, please, that’s okay. There’s no need.’

And, so it continued – he got more insistent and I got more frustrated as we escalated a ridiculous to-and-fro.

Marie cut across our bickering. ‘Alex, you must let Brian pick you up. It’s the right thing to do. Tell us where you’re staying, and he’ll be there at ten.’

Brian looked at me with childish triumph. I had to suppress a scowl.

‘I’m at the Bijela Kuća on the main road.’

‘I know it, up from the plaza.’ Brian put his hand on my arm. ‘Don’t worry, it’s no trouble picking you up. You’re an old friend.’

I felt like slapping myself. Loathing passivity in women, I was angry for bending to the will of the Puhariches. I needed to grow some balls. Looking across the table at Brian, I didn’t think I’d find them in his trousers.

I stood. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow. The old “people to see, places to be.”’

Brian quickly pushed his chair back and raced around to pull out mine.

‘Thanks. You always were a bit of a smoothy.’ I’d need to rely on the useful skill of charming artifice to get me through the next twenty-four hours.

He lowered his voice, trying for suave, delivering squawk. ‘I’m pleased you haven’t forgotten me.’

‘How could I?’

Marie watched us indulgently, like an old woman overseeing a successful matchmaking. ‘We’ll see you tomorrow then. It’s so great I ran into you. Unbelievable luck.’

‘Yeah, unbelievable for me, too.’ I felt a tiny pang of guilt at my churlishness. ‘It’s great to see you looking so well, even under the circumstances. Remember some of the fun times we had back at school?’

At least in this last bit I wasn’t lying. There had been some great, girly moments – singing into hairbrushes to ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ and ‘Devil Woman’. Typical teenage musical eclecticism reflecting our shared devotion to *Countdown*.

Marie nodded. ‘It’ll be good to see you tomorrow.’

I walked away as quickly as politeness allowed. I felt them watching me and wondered again at their reasons for asking me to the funeral. Once out of sight, I changed direction, reluctant to go back to the B&B where the owner fussed, asking questions about my day and telling me I looked too skinny as she brought large chunks of bread, cheese and smoked ham to fatten me up.

Strolling to the little port area of town, one thought occupied me: was I expected to view the body? I hoped they'd managed to sew Jure's face back on and putty up the bullet hole in Zorka's forehead.

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There's a deep ghoulish streak in my personality. Like all good daughters of divorced parents, I blame my father. With his background in criminal law, I can remember him coming home and talking about his cases with anthropological detachment, forgetting there were two children with eyes the size of saucers listening. A reason for my popularity in primary school was my business in the retelling of these stories for a modest fee. My father didn't seem to connect his work life with my continual detentions received for scaring the shit out of my audience. He attributed them to my mother's increasing devotion to crystals and batik sarongs.

My interest in violent crime has never abated. Writing court reports for the *West Australian* provided an opportunity to apply this knowledge. Perth was never going to be like America where you might be gunned down just for changing your garbage man. Yet it had enough of its own bloodiness to maintain my interest, even if it was white-collar criminals getting paper cuts. It had been one such Zegna-clad, Canary Island banker who had spelt the end of my mainstream journalism career. Back in those days, I'd worn suits with vast shoulder pads and had my hair scorched by a poodle perm every month. Then I'd poked my nose into the golden trough where I found a high-profile investor, a paper bag full of one hundred-dollar bills and the Minister for Land Development. I was booted into freelancing quicker than you could say 'pollie on the take'.

Wandering through the crowds of exhausted holiday-makers, I considered the scene Brian had discovered in the kitchen. The biggest puzzle was: why? Of the three of us, I appeared to be the only one pondering the possibilities. Brian and Marie seemed uninterested in cause, only effect. There was an odd absence of curiosity about motivation. Reasons were superfluous. It had become a simple matter of cleaning up the mess and putting them in the ground.

I turned into a cobblestone street and headed for the restaurant where I'd eaten most of my dinners. Sitting down, a waiter approached and I pointed to a number on the menu. Each meal was like going down a

culinary rabbit hole. So far, I'd consumed freshly caught fish in lemon gin sauce, lusciously braised lamb and huge piles of homemade pasta dripping in garlic and cheese. Cheese! It had been lavishly stirred through every meal and a great pot was always on the table for that little bit extra. Inevitably I had finished this off by licking my finger and swishing it around to collect the very last morsels, giving thanks lactose intolerance was foreign to my constitution. Now I wondered if the cheese had come from the Puharich creamery.

I gazed across the road to the wide promenade on the other side where flowerbeds and a line of huge palms bordered the little bay that formed the arc of the marina. Bulbs flourished in multicoloured masses, merging purples, pinks and reds. During the day, with the dazzle of the blue water, it was almost too much for eyes to bear. The froth and bubble of the flowers was matched by the up-and-down tones of the old men who sat on the marina walls smoking and talking from the time the fishing boats went out at dawn, until they came back at dusk. Their wobbly old men's voices changed pitch to match changes in topic.

Now the masts of the boats jutted up into the twilight. They had strings of small fairy lights attached at the tops, dropping to trail along the decks. I heard the voices of the fishermen as they sat cleaning up after a day at sea. Their cigarettes, dangling loosely from their lips, flared intermittently as they exchanged news. The next day, and the day after that, they would hold the same conversation with all the ebullience of new acquaintances.

On the menu, I had pointed at *Tripice na Dalmatinski*, which turned out to be a tripe and tomato stew. My first impulse was to send it back. The lining of an animal's internal organs was not high on my list of must-have experiences. But, after a tentative sniff of the plate and poke with my knife, I decided to ignore its peculiar bubbly texture. Maybe I could write a review about my conversion from being a believer that stomach linings are best left in the beast, to a tripe aficionado who was quite happy to unite my innards with those of a cow. As I ate, the power of association soon had my mind off the white flesh in red sauce on my plate and back to the blood and guts sprayed around Zorka's kitchen.

What was most interesting was the rarity of the murder-suicide scenario Brian and Marie were so keen to accept. The way Brian described the scene suggested deranged violence, maybe something induced by vast amounts of alcohol. It was impossible to imagine that the old couple,

eating their evening meal, would allow someone so addled to enter their home. And there was the Croatian constitution to consider. I'd watched the locals gulp down more beer and spirits than were consumed at a B&S ball, yet they seemed unaltered – no swaying walk, no sliding off chairs, no sleeping on the footpath in their own vomit. Maybe it had been a random druggie, dosed up to a killing mania. Although this seemed even more unlikely. It was difficult to believe there was a frenzied drug culture in a country where urgency was limited to getting home by noon for an enormous lunch and siesta.

Thinking about Jure and Zorka increased my sense of unease about the funeral. After slurping up the last of the tomato sauce, I headed back to my B&B. The only lights to brighten the twilight sky were coming from the windows of the apartments rising up on both sides of the narrow street. I saw TV screens illuminating rooms where families yelled and gesticulated over the astonishingly popular Russian game shows. I wondered what it would be like to be in one of these large, gregarious households where all emotions were expressed with dramatic fervour.

When I got back to my room, my hostess had been in and tidied up, leaving a large plate of cheese and bread on the bedside table. Not wanting to be rude, I sat on the bed and munched through the cheese, rolling each creamy bite around in my mouth as though it was the last piece I'd ever taste. Not for the first time I thought of the wonderfulness of being dipped in a giant cheese fondue. With my stomach bloated by animal products, I changed into a t-shirt and tracksuit pants, turned on the TV and fell asleep to the smooth tones of Tajči warbling about sun and running water.