

It wasn't entirely by chance that I met Rigby. Things have a way of falling apart, just as you think you have them sorted.

I'd taken the plunge by resigning from my teaching position at the university down south to recharge my batteries — or at least that was the excuse I'd given. Really, I was looking for a change. If I'd rented a shack on the beach and started on a script for the ABC, you could have called it a sea-change, but I have this thing about getting sand between my toes, so I went for a change of city instead. I had written a few novels over the years, and they'd been commercially viable enough for my agent to continue sending me cards at Christmas and on my birthday, and I had this notion that I wanted to write again, that I still *could* write, and the only thing holding me back was my job, with its sticky webs of tenure that kept me away from radical shifts in temperature.

My colleagues in the department couldn't believe that I'd really done it, taken a payout that wouldn't have lasted most of them more than a year on their extravagant lifestyles. It was almost like dealing with a death in the family of a close friend — they didn't know which way to look when saying good-bye, or how to escape the clichés. But my actions really had nothing to do with stupidity or courage. After all, I had no family to think about, no bank manager tapping me on the shoulder, no niggling sense of loyalty to my students who were, after all, only passing through on their way to a *real* job.

I had the sense that all those years of teaching had leached away my creativity, and it was time to rediscover it before it reclaimed by the sand.

So I decided to move North. Not *too* far north. I had a fear of crocodiles, stingers in the tide, nagging humidity and honeymooning Asians that led me to reject any thoughts of Cairns or Port Douglas. I decided on Brisbane — the biggest country town in the Southern Hemisphere. It billed itself as AUSTRALIA'S MOST

LIVEABLE CITY, and I was happy to take their Chamber of Commerce at its word.

I moved into a share house at Hill End overlooking the river, but the guy downstairs had the habit of playing Enya at 3 a.m. until the borer-ridden floorboards shook, and then the university scullers were out on the river before first light training for the Olympics.

I decided I needed to have a stake in my new locale, something that would make it harder to give up if things didn't go my way as a fulltime writer. Houses were still a bargain in Brisbane by southern standards, so I decided to buy one. I found a reliable agent and went trophy hunting. You had to be in it to win it, my Dad always used to say.

The agent found a post-war house in the inner-west suburb of Ashgrove that seemed to fit the bill. The suburb had a good name, the agent told me, although this particular street could hardly be regarded as a "dress circle". With a fresh coat of paint and a new roof, it could pass as suburban, but at the moment the best you could say was that the house was living in hope. The elderly couple who owned it were looking for something smaller to retire to, and the market was flat enough to put the advantage in my court, so I did negotiate a good deal.

Aware of my immediate cash flow problem, I thought I might rent out one of the bedrooms. The question was how to find someone suitable. I worried about placing an ad in the paper. *Anyone* might see it. What you did was less important than your freedom to choose to do otherwise. But I had to do *something*. You could go on sharing indefinitely in New York, since outsiders expected writers to live like Seinfeld until they got their first five-figure advance. Then it was time to think about settling down in a Tuscany villa. Far from the maddening autograph sharks. Or on some island in the stream. Where you could spin a line for swordfish, if the story wasn't biting.

So, a few weeks after moving in, I closed my eyes, picked up the phone, and dialled the number of the *West Side News* with all the joy of an anaemic person donating blood.

'Do you want the three week special?' Classified asked.

'Does it usually take that long?' I asked.

'Depends on how realistic your price is,' Classified replied. 'If you know your market—'

'I'll go for one week,' I said. Who was she to question someone who would soon have a villa in Tuscany about his research skills?

'It's three weeks for the price of two,' she countered, doing her best to sound friendly but still coming across like a call centre.

'One week,' I said. 'I might have to go to...New York next week.'

'Suit yerself, mate,' she said, not wasting any more polish on me.

The call woke me up at 6 a.m. on the following Saturday.

The voice was bright, and irritatingly energetic for that time of the morning. 'Is your room still available?'

'Yes,' I said, thrashing out at the alarm clock.

'I'll be there in ten minutes,' he said. 'If that suits you.'

Hanging up, I knew I wouldn't have time for a shower. He'd have to take me as he saw me. At that time of the morning, he'd probably be yawningly casual, too.

He was at the door nine minutes, 53 seconds later — if I'd been awake enough to count. As for dress, he wouldn't have looked out of place at a piano bar.

He extended a firm hand. 'Name's Rigby. Charles Rigby. The Second.'

I shook the hand. 'Pleasure to meet you, Charles.'

'Call me Rigby,' he said.

'You're a Windsor, then?'

'Oh,' he said, after a pause. 'Very droll!'

'Don't care for Charles?' I asked.

'The man who would have been king?' he smiled. 'I'd prefer not to be kin to a royal joke.'

At least he's got a sense of humour, I thought, before ushering him in.

Charles Rigby II was balding, and fairly lanky for his age, which I guessed to be pushing sixty. At one angle, he reminded me vaguely of John Gielgud — before he'd been put out to video. A depth of grey-blue eyes suggested private burdens. But maybe I was being too critical: as he stepped past, I could see a shiny red Pulsar at the kerb. Maybe he was trying for "young at heart".

He was as detailed in his inspection of the room as an ASIO operative. Produced a tape measure and a notepad and took lengths and widths. Dropped to his hands and knees to rub his knuckles in slow circles along the carpet – trolling for dust mites? Was enthralled that the windows had flyscreens. But he had absolutely no interest in the kitchen and bustled through there like a tourist on his way to the Sistine Chapel.

‘Have microwave, will thrive,’ he said. ‘Though a barbie would be seventh heaven.’

‘Welcome to the Pearly Gates,’ I nodded toward the verandah.

A pause. ‘If it’s not being too...personal,’ he remarked, ‘could I just have a look?’

‘It’s very basic,’ I apologised. ‘I got it at a garage sale.’

‘Nothing wrong with thrift,’ he said, nearly treading on my heels in his haste to follow. ‘You never know when the wheel of fortune is going to send you flying.’

He went straight for the griddle.

‘Haven’t barbecued lately, I see,’ he said, diplomatically, pointing at the black muck in the corners. ‘I’m a bit protective when it comes to cast iron. Compulsive, my wife used to say.’

‘Is Mrs Rigby...’

‘Very much alive,’ he said, with a bit of a sneer that caught itself and thought better of it. ‘We’ve been divorced.’ A pause to check the breeze. ‘For over a year now.’

‘And you’re...OK about that?’ I asked, quickly. The last thing I wanted was long nights of spilt beer over lost love.

Rigby looked down at his well-polished shoes. ‘It took me a while, but I can now see my failings. Though disloyalty wasn’t one of them.’

I suppose it’s possible for a woman over 50 to be a sex kitten, but it’s hardly bestseller stuff. ‘These things usually work out for the best,’ I offered, as if I had any idea.

‘Enough of that!’ he said, as if his golf ball had landed in a bunker. He surveyed the yard before fixing his gaze on the above-ground pool. ‘You didn’t mention the pool!’

It was an eyesore, partially shaded by an old macadamia tree. ‘You’re a swimmer?’ I hazarded.

'I was on the Board of the Southport Surf Club, but now I just like to look after pools.'

In the short time I'd lived there, the pool had already become scummy mess. I brightened up. 'You understand chemical imbalance?' I asked. 'The soft underbelly of an algal bloom?'

'Unlike some wives,' he remarked, with thin lips, 'a test kit never lies. I would be delighted to look after your pool, if you find me suitable for the rest.'

'Oh, no,' I said. 'I wouldn't want to take advantage of a tenant.'

'Well, then think of me as something else,' he offered. 'A... collaborator, who pays his own way.'

'That *would* be easier.'

'Keeping a pool clear is one of the best parts of suburban life,' he went on. 'There's no better way to unwind after a hard day. With the possible exception of my daily fix of murder mystery.'

'Agatha?'

He shook his head. 'Once upon a time, but not lately. You see, at night, books, no matter how thrilling, put me to sleep. So I prefer to get my kicks from TV – the ABC, of course. Nothing worse than a daisy chain of ads to kill dramatic tension.'

'Jonathan Creek and Nero Wolfe?'

His eyes lit up. 'Ah, you watched them, too?'

I smiled. 'Anything from the BBC – *Foyle's War*, and the like.'

He could scarcely contain himself. 'Then we'll *certainly* get on.'

Over to me. The morning was still young, and the phone was bound to ring off the hook, but a prospect in hand...

'So, you think the room is...OK?' I asked.

Rigby's lower lip trembled ever so slightly. 'Let me be perfectly frank,' he said, 'It's just what I'm looking for. A quiet street, with plenty of space between the houses. You have no idea how depressing it can be looking for accommodation these days – especially after you're used to five bedrooms, three baths, plus a study, etc. The conditions some people tolerate just astound me.' He hesitated, then took out an envelope and thrust toward me. 'I'm sure you'll find my references *very* supportive.'

The list, on crisp paper, contained four names – insurance brokers, bankers and the like. Two of them had an Order of Australia.

He was standing there, looking expectant. It was only just on seven o'clock, but I doubted that it would get any better than Rigby.

Then the phone rang. Worry surged into his eyes. Fear of being tripped at the wire.

'If you'll excuse me,' I said.

It was a woman. With a stereo blaring in the background.

I held the phone away from my ear. 'I'm sorry,' I shouted. 'I can't heard you!'

'What's that?' she cried.

'The room's been let,' I said, smiling at Rigby.

'Have a dull day, then,' she snapped, before slamming the phone down.

The wrinkles had vanished from Rigby's face. He had the air of a man who could click his heels for joy.

It took Rigby's Pulsar several trips to move in all of his stuff. There was a stack of business suits, I noted happily, for I'd had neglected to ask what he did for a living.

His only luxury was a home theatre system — big screen with Bose speakers.

'It'll fit fine,' Rigby reassured me, as I gave him a hand with it. 'Don't worry — I can wear headphones. And I usually hit the sack by nine anyway.'

I thought of my own set, bought second-hand from the *Buy & Sell*. But who was I to deprive a man of his pride-and-joy? It was probably the only thing his ex- had let him keep.

By the time I got out of the shower the next morning Rigby had gone. The door to his room was shut, but in the kitchen a trace of steam still curled above the kettle and I could smell slightly burnt toast. Not a stray crumb could be seen. A plate, bowl, cup, knife and spoon were neatly arranged in the drying rack.

'Tidiness is next to godliness,' I said.

I was midway through breakfast when I heard the Pulsar idle up the driveway. Rigby came in, puffing slightly. He was wearing a bright blue tracksuit with racing stripes.

There's life in the old boy yet, I thought.

After his shower, Rigby reappeared in a suit and put an envelope on the table, perpendicular to the edge. 'For my share of the groceries,' he said. 'As agreed.'

And then he was gone.

There were two crisp twenty-dollar notes inside. Also a list of "preferred items" — pasta sauce with mushrooms and onion (no garlic, and certainly no grated cheese, please); a *large* box of Nutri-Grain; low-fat cheese slices; skim milk; peaches or nectarines, whichever had the fewer bruises; thick sliced multi-grain bread; whole wheat pizza bases, etc, etc. A small note at the end: *I will buy my own meat if it's all the same to you. The choice of meat is such a personal thing.*

I went shopping with a renewed sense of purpose. It was important for career authors to get out there and meet the world. You can tell a lot about human nature from what a person puts into her trolley, the way she handles the peaches, if she splurges on snow peas in mid-summer...

I was noticing women again. Just like that. When you teach long enough at a university it dulls the taste buds. All that angst about sexual harassment and political correctness — instil, empower, but don't touch.

But now I was back in the real world. Lingering in the pasta sauce aisle with my notepad might lead to Tuscany.

I smiled at an attractive woman on the way, but she quickly shifted her attention to the upmarket tins of fruit cocktail. The prospects were even worse over by the meats: a few elderly women ferreting through the single portions.

At the checkout I tried to strike up a conversation about olive oil with a woman of Mediterranean complexion. She looked up only briefly from the *New Idea* she was skimming. Any man shopping at Woolies at 11 a.m. had to be a loser.

I scrutinised my writing clothes. The outfit certainly doth unmake the man who wants to make the woman.

'How's your day been so far?' the clerk mumbled as I unloaded the trolley.

She was rather cute, so I gave her looping script the benefit of the doubt. 'I've got writer's block,' I said, loud enough for Tuscany Woman to hear. 'But shopping gets me back on track.'

'I want to write a Mills & Boon,' she giggled, running Rigby's Nutri-Grain tantalisingly back and forth over the scanner, 'but my boyfriend says I need more...experience first. Is he just thinking with his you-know-what, or does he have a point?'

Here was a clerk brave enough to venture away from the McDonald's façade. 'Go with your instincts,' I said, like the pro I expected to be soon. This had nothing to do with her cleavage. 'Some men will try to take advantage when an artist is at her most vulnerable.'

I began to worry that she might double-scan my credit card details and arrive on my doorstep in the wee hours with a billowy manuscript. But then that was the risk you take when you stray from your writing desk. One minute you're carefree; the next you're saving a sweet young thing from the ravages of a meat pie junkie.

Never mind, a voice told me. You can't win a marathon in one go – even with synopsis enhancing drugs.

I bought a bottle of wine on the way home. The cask of Chateau Yesterday could have a break for one night. After all, a few glasses of Shiraz might loosen Rigby's tongue.

He'd said he would be home by 5:30, and I heard his car pull into the drive at 5:28. What more could a Gold Coast house frau have wanted? I kept on slicing shallots, thinly.

'Good evening!' Rigby boomed, obviously pleased to see dinner in train. He was twirling his tie.

'Hard day?' I asked.

'Not that I'm complaining,' he replied, slipping off to his room.

I opened the wine before starting the pasta. Rigby would surely expect a decent red to be allowed to catch its breath.

He returned in a silk robe, looking much more relaxed. A scent of after-shave wafted in.

'Anything I can do?' Rigby asked.

'You can set the table in a while,' I said, mincing herbs for a sauce. 'If you don't mind.'

'No worries!' said Rigby. 'I used to be a maître d'hôtel.'

'Really?'

'Umm,' he said. 'At the Marriot.'

'But you don't like cooking.'

Rigby smiled. 'There's nothing wrong with taking the credit for what goes on off-stage!'

'To tell the truth, I've only just recently discovered how much I like to cook.'

'Ah, so you've been married, too?'

'It shows?'

(OK, Dear Reader, I should have come clean about that from the outset, but there's *so* much competition out there for Best Page-Turner of the Week that I wanted to put my best foot forward.)

'When you've been in business for as long as I have,' said Rigby. 'You learn to pick things up on the fly. Though you seem happy enough single.'

'I was happy enough married, too – for a while.'

'And how long did yours last?'

'Five years,' I said. 'Jenny had me thoroughly house-trained. I was only allowed into the kitchen to do the washing up – which I thoroughly hated – or to make cappuccinos.'

Rigby struck a Freudian pose. 'Was she a bit insecure in her gender identity?'

'There was friction, all right,' I conceded. 'I never made her feel welcome in my study, so she retaliated in the kitchen – and elsewhere.'

'Marion had it easy with me,' sniffed Rigby, 'because I anticipated her every want. It gets that way after a while. I *thought* that would be enough, but obviously she wanted more.'

'So what happened?'

'We'd been married for twenty-three years, had two wonderful children, and then her childhood sweetheart rolled up. They collided outside a butcher shop at Southport one day, and she never ate meat after that. I tried to keep an open mind. I even offered to buy Heart-Safe cuts of steak. But she's the type who never looks back once she's turned a corner.'

The sauce was thickening – and I felt sorry for him. 'How could she be bothered fooling around after all those years?'

Rigby noticeably paled. 'Mid-life crisis, I suppose. She began listening to popular music again, playing the mindless lyrics over

and over. She talked herself into unhappiness. She didn't try to hide it. "I don't understand it," she told me. "It's brought back feelings I haven't felt for years. Things I thought I'd forgotten."

'And you believed that rubbish?' I said. 'It's pure Mills & Boon: don't blame yourself, darling; it's *me*.'

Rigby flinched. 'She said that, too.' He was reliving it right there.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm meddling.'

Rigby shrugged. 'Men have their weaknesses, and women have the heat-seeking missiles to find them.'

I smiled. 'Let's pour the wine. If we're going to mull over women there's no point in staying sober.'

'On a Monday night?' Rigby said. Then he brightened. 'Yes, why not?'

And so it came out. Marion had done him the dirty. Slipped off to be with this Geoff character at all hours, even during *60 Minutes*. Rigby was left to make excuses to the kids. Not that they needed a guidebook.

'Don't worry, Dad,' his daughter had said, early on. 'It's those wrinkles under her eyes. Mum needs a steady hand. She'll come back to you in the end.'

But Geoff and Marion sailed off to New Caledonia, and when she returned she was still dewy as a newlywed.

'We took a few cash advances off your American Express,' she'd told him. 'But Geoff will pay you back, with interest, as soon as his next deal comes through.'

'Romeo works on commission?' Rigby asked.

'It's rock-solid,' Marion said. 'Good as money in the bank.'

Rigby turned his wine glass thoughtfully. 'I almost hoped he wouldn't have the dosh to pay it back,' he said. 'But the money was there on time. And he was so *polite*, how could I hate him?'

I poured the wine. 'Some men have murdered for far less.'

He gave me a strange look then. 'You'd have to do your homework,' he said. 'I suppose that's why most murderers get caught — no sense of detachment. They should follow Tony Hopkins' lead.'

'He was a bit extreme as Hannibal, don't you think?'

Rigby raised his glass in toast. 'Still, there's a man with a *past* that's better than fiction. He could get away with it in real life, if he wanted to. He was just so *convincing*.'

'He was a *character*, Rigby. Make believe?'

Rigby took a thoughtful sip. 'Who's to say what drives people to accept roles like that? To immerse yourself in such brutality — even in make-believe — and then to know you'll be seen by millions. There must be a kick to it!'

'I heard him interviewed once,' I said. 'He said that acting's no more than a job. You put on the monkey suit at 9 and take it off at 5, but that doesn't make you a monkey.'

'Well, he wouldn't admit to scratching his armpits, would he?' said Rigby, narrowing his eyes. 'Sounds like you've done a little shuffling on the boards yourself!'

I smiled. 'I'm a writer. Or at least trying to be one. Characters have to be expendable, which is why I can understand how Hopkins sheds his so easily.'

'By murdering words rather than sleep?'

'Yes, Shakespeare.'

He took a short bow. 'I used to love his plays. Had most of the sonnets memorised at one time. *But thence I learn, and find the lesson true, / Drugs poison him that so fell sick of you.*'

'I don't know that one.'

'Number 118. Never got a review in *The Australian*, but it keeps coming back to me since Marion left.'

'You don't mean—'

'No, I never touch drugs. But Geoff's been known to snort the white stuff. I know it's being a bad sport, but I keep hoping he might OD one day!'

'Hopkins had a problem with booze before he made his comeback.'

He smiled. 'Not that I'm anywhere in *his* league, but that does give me hope. It shouldn't matter how old you are — if you've got the drive to start over.'

I offered him some Parmesan.

'No, thanks,' he laughed. 'I'm trying to give up the hard stuff!'

'Without a fight?'

He bit his lip. 'I wasn't proud of the way I handled it. I stayed on in the house. For the kids' sake, I told myself, until I almost believed it. I thought I could just wait her out. She'd get tired of Geoff, or he'd get tired of her. She didn't seem to mind my staying on.' His fork stopped in mid-air as he thought about it. 'But the last straw was when he moved in and they started sleeping together – in our bed.'

Just saying it made him wince.

'What did you do?'

'I lost the plot that night. I would have killed him if I'd had a gun. I mean, why should I have had to move out? Every last cent in that house had come out of my hide! It would have been so easy, just waiting until they were asleep.'

My jaw dropped.

He looked away. 'We're all capable of it, pushed far enough. You really had to be there, in the thick of it, to realise how it gets a grip on you. All those TV reports on domestic violence you've scoffed at. Suddenly *60 Minutes* morphs into *This is Your Life*.'

'It must be harder when there's kids involved.'

'Oh, yes,' he sneered. 'She had no idea. When I was at home, those kids toed the line. But after I left, all hell broke loose. Everyone thinks the kids today are immoral. Not my two. Not even as teenagers. No way were they going to give Geoff their blessing!'

'Good on them!' I said.

Rigby teased some pasta with his fork. 'That was her *first* miscalculation. She thought she could just lower her voice a bit and command the same respect I'd earned. Wrong!'

'But she's still with Geoff?' I said, refilling his glass.

He paused. 'I don't mind now,' he said. 'Really, I don't. Once we settle the property, I'm sure I'll be able to move on.'

'You'd have enough money to buy your own place?'

He could see what I was getting at. 'A modest one, perhaps.' He thought about it. 'You know, I don't think I could be bothered again. Houses tie you down, even more than kids. Ever since I can remember, I've been a husband and a father. Now I'm free and loving every minute of it. And I can invest more time in my

friends.'

He was on uncertain ground now. He'd need a sign from me before he could go on.

I raised my glass. 'To friends — wherever we can find them!' 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, indeed.'

I saw my opening. 'So what is it that you do, Rigby?'

Rigby took a gulp of wine. 'I'm...in the film industry,' he said.

I thought of those wannabees who divide their time between the dole queue and the audition calls. 'You're an actor?'

Rigby shook his head. 'No, I make films happen. Raise seed money, tease out investors — that sort of thing. Without funders like me, the words never get up.'

I had never met an impresario.

'Do I know any of your flicks?' I asked.

'You must have seen *Breaker* and *A Town Called Alice*.'

'Of course,' I said, 'but what have you done lately?'

'Well, there was *Proof*, and then *Lightning Jack*, but of course that one went down the gurgler. Nothing sours your credibility with the wallets more quickly than a dud, especially when you knew it was going to be a long shot.'

'Things don't always go the way you expect,' I nodded.

'So we're both in the arts,' Rigby summed up. 'That'll give us something to discuss on rainy nights besides women. Have you always been a writer?'

'I used to teach,' I confessed. 'At a university.'

'And you gave it up?' he exclaimed. 'Put in your forty weeks a year then just sit back and watch the long service leave and superannuation mount up — nothing wrong with that!'

'Lots of lecturers burn-out long before that, Rigby.'

'Present company excepted,' said Rigby, 'it's probably because they've never had to hold down a *real* job.'

'I want to write again,' I said, 'while I still can.'

'Have you got what it takes?'

'I'm not sure. But there's only one way to find out.'

'Very courageous.'

'You mean very stupid.'

He shook his head. 'No, the world is cramped with disappointed people. People who never do anything more than moan about their circumstances. I firmly believe that good fortune comes to those who help themselves.'

'Sounds like you've taken a few risks yourself.'

'I suppose I have — in a controlled sort of way. There are ways of minimising risk, keeping your head. You lose now and then, but overall you come out on top.'

'So you do well at the casinos?'

He smiled. 'But I'm not a high roller. At worst, it's just an expensive night out.'

'You know, I've never been inside a casino.'

He shrugged. 'Nothing ventured... You don't have to risk *your* money to see what risk does to people.'

'If I make it as a writer,' I nodded, 'it'll be on my own steam, not because I made a pact with the Black Knave.'

He smiled. 'Nothing wrong with walking on the dark side occasionally. Adds spice to your work.'

'Are we doing a *Mephisto Waltz* here?'

'I'm a good Catholic,' he intoned. 'Even if I do sip scotch during the sermons!'

'Maybe that's what I need to kick-start my writing,' I laughed. 'A flask!'

'It'll come,' he said. 'What kind of writing turns you on?'

'I think I've got a few more novels in me.'

He shook his head. 'I should have heard of you by now. The money's in non-fiction — gossip made golden. Or go for scripts. Write to the market, and it'll be kind to you.'

'What if I can't get my mind around that Hollywood stuff?'

'That's where the future lies — on the screen. Big ones, little ones. Most people are looking for culture on a platter, with all the messy bits drained away for them. And don't thumb your nose at Hollywood, mate. Yanks *love* Australians. We paid our dues when we joined the Coalition of the Willing. Their women love us, too. They dream of sweaty sheep shearers who are dynamite in the sack. The type who shoot first and ask for royalties later. Write the stories that'll keep them up all night, and you'll be right!'

'You like Americans?'

He nodded. 'They're so...enthusiastic. Look how quickly they bounced back after September 11. Saddam had a good instinct for PR, but he couldn't go the distance against their righteous indignation. His biggest mistake was thinking *he* could write the history books from a bunker without a deal on syndication. That's the problem with Oz. We think the world owes us a living. Kids get the dole for dropping out of school. But when one of our scientists comes up with a bright idea, there's nobody home. So they go you-know-where!'

It's amazing what a few glasses of Shiraz will do, I thought.

Rigby did the washing up without even being asked. Humming an aria that I recognised but couldn't quite place. In tune. He's musical, too, I thought. A slightly fallen impresario with perfect pitch.