

Now don't get me wrong, I love women; adore everything about them. Have done ever since, at a tender age, I met my Mrs Robinson and discovered the wondrous difference between the genders.

Turned it into an art form for a while back then; back when I thought of myself as a ladies' man, and naively believed I knew everything there was to know about women.

These days I know with absolute certainty that I know sweet bugger all about the subject and, like most men, probably never will.

But, here's two things I do know: firstly, four aspirins, two espressos, a cold shower, mouthwash and eye-drops weren't putting a dint in my horrendous hangover; and secondly, I dead-set knew how my new client, Mrs Alice Rush, felt. And in my own alcohol-induced sentimentality, I sympathised with her predicament. After all, I'd once been married to Greedy-Greedy-Cheryl.

'I swear to you, Mister Cousins, if you can uncover absolute, irrefutable evidence that Anthony is having an affair with some other woman, some tart he finds more desirable than he does me, then damn him to hell. I'll take everything from him: his children, his wealth and his reputation within this community. I will destroy that philandering bastard's life and send him to purgatory – never to return.'

As she spoke, I watched her eyes narrow and vaguely recalled the words of a long-departed author – something about love turned to hate, and the hell and fury of a woman scorned. From where I sat, it was evident that Alice Rush felt scorned in a big way.

I tried to look professionally interested, sympathetic even. The aspirins and caffeine had begun to kick in, and I was almost able to focus on Alice Rush's dilemma rather than the throbbing pain in my head and the waves of nausea rippling through my gut. I sat forward in my chair, placed my elbows on the desk, clasped both of my hands together and gave her the seriously interested look, the unwavering eye contact. The one clients pay for and expect.

'I have to know the truth, Mister Cousins. My suspicions are driving me towards a nervous breakdown. They are devouring me from the inside and crushing my heart. I cannot go on like this, not knowing. It's too cruel. And so bloody unfair on the children and me.'

Yet again, the not knowing. It seems that every bloody client who walks through the front door of my office has the same problem; they want to know some secret about someone which, if uncovered, they believe will lead them to the truth at the heart of their predicament. And guess what – it never works out that way.

I started taking notes, replacing the seriously interested look with one of competent professionalism. In my trade, fake that and you've got a client.

On the surface the Rushes had it all. They were the picture-perfect family. Anthony Rush was a Minister in the Tasmanian state government and was a highly successful, respected politician whose salary allowed his wife, Alice, to be a stay-at-home mum. They owned a modern two-storey house in his blue-ribbon seat, their children attended private school, and they belonged to private tennis and golf clubs. His job had perks: a chauffeur-driven Government limo for Tony, and annual family

holidays overseas as he went on various fact-finding missions for the good people of Tasmania.

Yes indeed, Anthony Rush MP had good reason to believe that he had it all, the whole box and dice.

His wife clearly wasn't so sure. I've lost count of the number of times I've seen it. Shit, I've even lost count of the times it was me in the exact same frame being caught out.

In my professional, and personal experience, the biggest downfall of a serial philanderer is complacency: overlooking the clues, forgetting to address the very nature of the cheating game.

You'd be amazed by the dumb details that are forgotten or ignored by cheating partners. The devil may well exist in the detail, but so too do the seeds of a liar's downfall, and apparently Anthony James Rush MP had slipped up once or twice too often. He forgot that it was his wife who washed his shirts and underwear, forgot that some stains really do require heavy duty detergent to remove stubborn discolourations, forgot the mascara smudges. There were also the mobile phone messages not deleted and the lingering smell of stale perfume. Most telling were the overlooked battle scars: scratches on the back; the overexcited bite on the shoulder, or elsewhere on the body; perhaps even the odd welt of the overenthusiastic dominatrix.

I speak from experience. I'm letting you in on a professional secret: complacency will undo you. Dead-set, become complacent, forget the rules of the cheating game, and you're royally fucked.

Do that and, invariably, that's the point where I come in.

I'm the sort of a bloke that's hired to clean up after the shit-tsunami has just hit some poor bastard's life, so that someone else can walk away like Teflon Tammy – with nothing sticking to them. And me, if I'm lucky, I walk away only slightly night-soiled, but with a cheque I always pray isn't bouncy-bouncy.

I'm a private detective. That's what I do for a quid. Frank Cousins – that's me. Ex-Queensland copper, owner and sole employee of the Tasmanian Private Investigation Agency.

Don't believe for one minute the bullshit they feed you on the idiot box about it being an exciting, adrenalin-filled romantic lifestyle. It's not. Basically it's crap. In fact most of my time is spent fixing up, uncovering or covering up other people's fuck-ups.

The work is sometimes interesting, but mostly a bit iffy; the hours are long, usually dull; and the money is sometimes good, more often average.

The one constant, right from the get-go, is the certainty that when you've been handed a job, you take it shitty end first. Welcome to my life.

The previous day Alice Rush had made an early-morning appointment. She now sat on the opposite side of my office desk from my throbbing head and rolling nausea. She was in her mid-late 30s, short and a bit on the amply built side. Not a heavyweight, simply ample. More a bantamweight gone to seed. Mind you, she was heavily pregnant.

What can I say? I'm a trained observer. I'm trained to notice these tell-tale things.

And, as with such women in that state of reproduction, nature was kind. She possessed an oval, angelic face of clear, alabaster-smooth skin. Pregnancy adored her.

Her makeup was subtle but perfect. Her auburn hair was professionally styled; a layered bob, highlighted with blonde streaks.

A quick appraisal told me Alice Rush didn't shop for her clobber at Saint Vinnies in South Hobart. It was all Melbourne-chic, and definitely designer; a tailored, coffee-coloured woollen jacket matched the skirt that modestly covered her knees, and a white silk blouse completed the conservative image. Her handbag was expensive, leather, Italian, and matched her shoes which probably cost more than my entire wardrobe.

Around her neck she wore a string of pearls and, of course, matching earrings. She was obviously a woman of substance and breeding, and the best and worst you would say of Alice

was that she was a nice, classy lady. That's it – simply nice and middle-classy.

Alice Rush was the sort of a client we, in the profession, pray for. A client who doesn't bother asking fees, daily rates or projected expenses. She was obviously from that declining class of people who believed that if you had to ask the price, you couldn't afford it in the first place. The calibre of my clientele was definitely on the up. As a result, so was my well-being; and my hangover had vanished. I felt great. What can I say? Easy money does that for me.

Alice Rush sat across the desk from me, legs welded primly together, the way she would have been taught at an expensive finishing school; her hands, one on the other, resting in her lap and holding a balled-up handkerchief.

We sat in silence for too long, until she raised her eyes to mine. When she finally resumed speaking, I had to strain to catch her words.

She had a quiet, pleasant voice; resigned perhaps to harmonise, to linger in the background and be ignored. She had started our interview in anger, then moved to a vitriolic need for revenge, but had now regained composure. The pained and heartbroken ones always seem to start the initial interview that way.

'Over the last few months, Mister Cousins, I have arrived at the conclusion that Anthony is having an affair. Sometimes I find lipstick traces and mascara smudges on his shirts. Sometimes there's a faint smell of expensive perfume on him. He says they're from political meet-and-greets. But I find I can no longer believe him.'

'You know, Mrs Rush, he could be telling you the truth.'

Alice looked at me as though I was speaking Esperanto.

'Yes, well... then there is the other matter. I am embarrassed to discuss this aspect of our life, but I feel I must be completely frank with you, so that you may fully understand my concerns. Over the last six months or so, Anthony's libido has – well, he almost seems to have lost interest. He claims he is exhausted

from work, pressure, the long hours. As you say, yes, each of these incidents taken separately could have quite valid explanations. Whether his excuses are legitimate or not, I have arrived at the point of believing that Anthony is a philanderer and is cheating on me. I truly hope that your investigation will prove these suspicions wrong but, one way or the other, I need to know.'

Alice touched the tip of her nose with her handkerchief, took a deep breath, steeled herself, sat back in the chair and continued.

'Anthony and I have been happily married for almost 12 years and throughout our entire marriage I have been a faithful and attentive wife. I have stood by him and have been nothing but supportive throughout the good times and the bad.

'Daddy and I have assisted him in every way possible with his career. I have involved myself in all kinds of charity work and have always been available when the Liberal advisors needed me to be seen or photographed by his side. I never once believed any of it to be a charade.

'When he decided to run for his first campaign, I fully supported his bid and celebrated with him when he was elected as a Member of Parliament, and again last year when he was elevated to the Front Bench and appointed Minister for Tourism, the Arts and Industrial Relations. I have accepted without complaint his extended absences, and have consequently made a comfortable home for him, raised two boys virtually on my own, while waiting on him hand and foot. But after 12 years of committed marriage, Mister Cousins, I am not celebrating now. As I have said, lipstick, mascara, and little to no relations between...' Alice's voice trailed off. It took her a few moments to regain her composure.

'I have accepted, without question, the late nights of Parliament, his long odd hours of work, the weekend Party fundraisers, opening this, closing that, being seen, having a high personal visibility. But no longer, not if he is being unfaithful.

'I haven't told Daddy any of my fears yet. He'd kill Anthony

if he found out, and have him ostracised from The Lodge. No, I have confided in only two people: you, Mr Cousins, and the Melbourne QC I have retained to represent me in this matter. He is reputed to be the best divorce lawyer in Australia, a Mister Osborne Cox. Actually it was he who recommended I contact you.'

Ha! Bloody Ossie Cox; the crafty old bastard. Over the years I'd worked for him a few times. I was now certain of my suspicions that Alice had been born to money, because Osborne Cox charged like a wounded bull, and the old bastard was the best in his field, a friggin' rabid attack Rottweiler when it came to winning. He was known to do anything, legal or otherwise to win a case.

If Anthony Rush *was* dipping his wick anywhere other than home, and had any brass of his own, he wouldn't once crafty Coxie got through with him. The merciless old bastard was so good at stripping assets from the opposition, it was said he could squeeze blood from a stone.

Alice dabbed at her eyes again then turned her head to look out through the large front window of my office. We both noticed the litter being chased down Molle Street by a westerly wind.

I had a pretty good idea how disappointed, hurt and angry Alice Rush felt. In a previous life I'd been married to Greedy-Greedy-Cheryl. Our marriage, in which familiarity bred only cheating and thoughtlessness in me, bred contempt and vindictiveness in Cheryl. It looked like Alice Rush was heading down that same forlorn route.

So Alice wanted her husband tailed, and she wanted evidence. Concrete, photographic evidence to enable Coxie and her to drag Tony-boy by his wayward willie before a court, to enable them both to publicly and monetarily castrate the poor stupid bastard.

She supplied me with two recent photographs of Anthony Rush and diary extracts of his official commitments for the rest of the month. Without reading it, she signed a contract.

As I said, top client.

BARRY WESTON

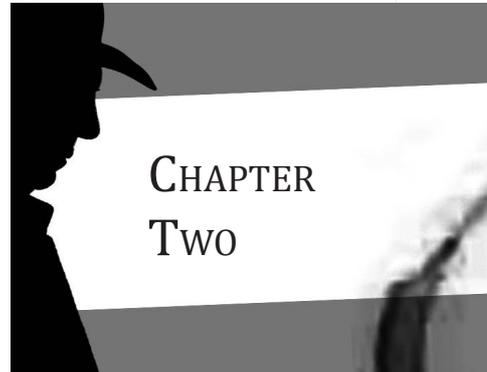
I told her the Agency would commence surveillance of her husband that afternoon, and I would either contact her as soon as I had any evidence, or in seven days time to report my findings.

She thanked me and at a little after 1.30pm left my office via the rear door that led into the car park.

I leaned back in my swivel chair, looked out the front window, watched the wind playing tiggy with paper litter and thought about women.

I took my time and waded knee-deep through a quagmire of painful memories.

I had a pretty good idea how Alice Rush felt. And in my own way I suppose I stupidly felt sorry for her. I knew all about loss, deceit and retribution. Like I said, I'd once been married to Greedy-Greedy-Cheryl.



Poor old Greedy-bloody-Cheryl. I hadn't thought of her for years. Now, suddenly, I was wondering how the thieving bitch was going; and hoping that Kenny-the-grub – the bloke she'd left me for – had developed full-blown penile dysfunction.

Cheryl and I were married up in Brisbane in the mid-70s. We were both 20-years-old, Cheryl was a nurse, and I'd just graduated from the Queensland Police Academy.

From the get-out Cheryl looked the real deal, plus we had so much in common. She was everything I thought I wanted in a wife, and she was a knock-out: tall and blonde, with a great athletic body. She possessed a cynical sense of humour and was what we'd now call sexually adventurous. Back then I called her a nymphomaniac. As far as sex went, there was little Cheryl hadn't tried; and even less she wouldn't.

We both preferred the better things in life and, just like me, she loved a cold beer on a hot day – if it wasn't hot, we'd put overcoats on. But it was a relationship based primarily on the moment and the physical aspects of each other, rather than anything that could be called intimate, loving or nurturing.

Fortunately for the Queensland Juvenile Legal System, neither of us wanted children. That would've been a complete disaster. No, as luck would have it, we were both far too self-centred and hedonistic to share our lives with anything that involved responsibility. Including, in the end, each other.

One big problem was Cheryl wanted money – heaps of it. She believed that money could buy her everything. And it did. Everything except good taste that is.

Let's face it, Greedy Cheryl's taste was in her shapely arse. She thought aesthetics were something you were given prior to a medical procedure.

And she was like a bloody bower bird; loved to collect shiny and expensive things. The more shiny and expensive, the more she loved them. She always believed that the price of an item was far more important than anything else: beauty and functionality included.

As soon as I whacked down the deposit on a house, Cheryl appointed herself our interior decorator. Consequently we lived in a joint that screamed gaudy-gaudy gypsy caravan. It was carpeted in white shag-pile with a fake leopard-skin three-piece lounge suite. In the centre of the bedroom stood a circular clear-plastic waterbed, and every time I slept on it, all I could think of was the dozen coloured-plastic fish floating around in it beneath me.

We had a kitchen full of Kenwood electric appliances that neither of us could work and that seemingly had no functional reason to be invented in the first place. But Greedy-Cheryl believed they were chic. They had to be, they were expensive.

Trouble was, expensive was not an adjective that matched a uniformed Queensland copper's weekly pay packet.

Nevertheless, we had almost 11 years of reasonably happy marriage – until around the end of 1986 when it all started to head to Toilet Town.

By then I'd been given the nod and had clawed my way up the greasy pole of ambition. I'd been fast-tracked from uniform to the plain-clothes Homicide division, then Vice, and was well and truly a part of the 'The Joke' by then. And that rort just kept the money rolling in.

In the beginning, I'd bullshit myself; pretend the reason I went on the take in the first place was to keep Cheryl in the manner she'd rapidly become accustomed to. But I knew deep

down that really wasn't the reason. I actually revelled in the adrenalin rush of being on the take; of getting something for nothing.

Plus, in Queensland back then, every bastard and their dog was in on The Joke, so why not me? I was just as corruptible as the next copper. But, as my dear old mum used to say: 'Rationale can be a very dangerous thing'.

All in all, 1987 wasn't a great year for me. Professionally things were getting very hot – in more ways than one – and extremely edgy, with everyone in the Force walking around on eggshells.

You see, Old Joh Bjelke-Petersen – the then Premier of Queensland – was overseas when the heat from the media over a stupid bloody ABC TV programme forced some stupid bastard to authorise a Royal Commission to investigate corruption within the Queensland Police Force. By the time Old Joh got home and took back the reins, it was all too late to shut the Commission down. By then it had a life of its own, and everyone was running around like blue-arse flies trying desperately to cover their own arse. Too late, she cried.

Suddenly, dogs were lining up like virgins at a debutantes ball to give evidence against mates, acquaintances, and even Jesus H Christ if he'd been around. There was so much blood and shit in the water, you couldn't clearly see what was happening around you. It was a dead-set feeding frenzy, like a school of piranhas that had turned on themselves.

If that wasn't bad enough, and to top off a really shithouse year, late one afternoon I returned to our expensive, tastelessly decorated joint in the inner suburb of Milton to discover that Cheryl had pulled the plug and left me.

Now, I will admit that I hadn't always been entirely truthful, nor especially faithful to Cheryl during our, well, for pretty much the entire time we were married. Let's face it, I was in the Vice Squad and having a ball. I was like a kid in a lolly shop, and everything I wanted was free. But I would've thought that after almost 11 years of co-habitation, I at least deserved a

Dear Frank letter. Or at the very least a fare-thee-well note on the kitchen table. Except, I suppose, for the fact there was no longer a kitchen table to leave a note on.

In all the time we played house together, no one could ever have accused Cheryl of being house proud. Laundry, washing up and cleaning were an anathema to her. But on that specific October day, she had excelled herself. The house was spotless. She'd cleaned the joint of everything: furnishings, drapery, cutlery, white shag-pile carpets, fake leopard skin-covered lounge suite. You name it, Cheryl had taken it all. Even the nailed down stuff.

Well strictly speaking, to be fair, not everything. She'd left me the phone, which sat on the bare wooden floor; and in the shower – minus the plastic curtain with large pink flamingos on it – was a half-used cake of Palmolive with a couple of her pubic hairs embedded in it. I assumed she meant that as an aide-memoire of our time together.

Oh, and my suits. At least she'd left my clothes intact and undamaged.

Psychologists would have us believe that one of the means of self-expression used by women on cheating males is to take a carving knife or scissors to the legs of their suit pants. Apparently it's a form of symbolic castration.

But I'll give you the big tip: if Cheryl had set her mind on castration, there would have been nothing symbolic about it. There was absolutely nothing Freudian about Greedy-Cheryl.

I headed over to our next-door-neighbour to find out what had happened. Nothing moved on or in our street without old Mrs Nosey Jacobs knowing about it.

Nosey spent most of her sedentary bloody life peering through the curtains of her front windows, nose glued to the glass, perving on the comings and goings in the street. She lived her miserable life through us.

Of course she saw me coming. Before I could knock on her door, it opened. The old bag was so excited she couldn't contain

herself. Before I could even get out a word, she was gushing. According to her, just after I'd left for work that day, a large white van – State Wide Removals, rego number NKA 759 – had backed up to the front door, and two blokes in white overalls had emptied the entire contents of our home in under four hours. As they drove off, they were closely followed by Cheryl in the green MG Midget I'd given her for her 25th birthday.

Old Nosey had really missed her calling in life, and ASIO had missed out on a top observation agent. I cut short the old girl's questions into the rest of my private life and got her to repeat the details of the removalist company.

I thanked her, before telling her that everyone in the street hated her and that in the future to mind her own fucking business and not mine.

I returned home, sat cross-legged on the bare floorboards of the lounge room and phoned State Wide Removals. I told them it was an urgent official police line of enquiry, and got the destination address at Broad Beach on the Gold Coast.

After a few more phone calls to Cheryl's friends and some hesitant, reluctant answers, the picture was complete.

Greedy-bloody-Cheryl had left me for a friggin Gold Coast real estate salesman named Kenny. Cheryl's best friend, Ruthless Raelene, gleefully added that my wife had been having a torrid relationship with him for some considerable time; and it was all my fault.

I mean, come on – a friggin real estate salesman!

It was simply too bloody humiliating.

What was a man do? I took the easy option. I drove down to the pub, grabbed a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label and a carton of ciggies, returned home, and sat on the side of our above-ground pool in the back yard. Feet dangling in the water, I watched the sun set over the dead leaves stagnating on the surface of the chlorinated waters. I knew just how they felt. I thanked Christ that the pool was too big to fit in the removalist van and proceeded to get progressively blotto.

Naturally, I also got progressively angry. Very, very *very* angry.

I finished the bottle of scotch somewhere around midnight, and in a completely pissed and aggro state I decided to front Cheryl and Kenny-the-Grub at The Canals, their love-nest on the Gold Coast. The Canals! – I kid you bloody not – where else would some smooth-talking, back-dooring, grub-bastard real estate bloke live?

Way more than half-cut and only semi-dressed, I staggered out into my unmarked police car, leaned out and slapped the magnetised blue pulse-light on the roof, hit the siren and headed off to The Canals. Driving in pursuit-mode always raised my adrenalin levels and made me feel excited – and empowered; but mainly excited, like a kid early on Christmas morning.

This particular hour-long trip was no different. It consisted of me evading oncoming cars while creating different scenarios in my head, of the various means with which I would inflict excruciating pain upon Kenny-the-Grub's body; commencing with his block and tackle, prior to dumping them and him in The Canals. Separately.

Fortunately for the overworked nursing staff of the emergency ward of the Brisbane Royal Hospital, there was little traffic on the South Coast Highway that late at night.

I managed to find Kenny-the-Grub's flop and arrived in his driveway primed, pumped and ready to rock and roll. I screeched to a halt and bolted out of the car, leaving the blue strobe light flashing, siren-wail dying, motor running, headlights still on and the driver's door open, to discover that I'd lost one thong. I still had my jocks and a T-shirt on, though Christ only knows where I got the sky-blue cotton shaving coat. I must have grabbed it, thinking it was a shirt.

I limped up the cement walkway on my remaining thong and smashed my fist several times into the mock-Tudor, plastic oak door in an authoritative manner. You learnt that stuff at the Police Academy in 'Announcing Your Arrival: 101'.

The black interior of the house immediately lit up like a Christmas tree.

I knew what to expect even before I laid eyes on Kenny-the-Grub, and the mental image was not disappointed by the vision splendid.

He opened the front door and stood there, illuminated by the porch light, one hand holding the door half ajar. He was resplendent in a knee-length, white terry-towel dressing gown open at the neck, around which he wore more chunky gold chains than Mr T.

Kenny was about 10cm shorter than me and as thin as a whippet. His attempt at a Dennis Lillee mo just made him look like a ponce. His hairy chest competed with an artificial suntan. And, though it may well have been wishful thinking on my part, I was positive his head was glued to a heavily hair-sprayed toupee that looked like a sucked mango. Elegant as he was, The Grub looked worried.

Both of us knew why I was there, so there seemed little point in explaining my late-night visit in a civilised manner.

‘Hello ya little prick. It’s me – your worst friggin nightmare. You’ve been screwing my wife so I’m gonna break your fuckin jaw, you slimy piece of shit. Then I’m gonna tear you a new arsehole. Now get out here on the front lawn, or I’m coming in.’

Okay, not exactly a Shakespearian soliloquy, but he got the message.

Then out of nowhere Cheryl appeared, and I must say I was initially taken aback by her appearance.

Over the space of 20-something hours her appearance had changed from the Cheryl I’d known forever, and said goodbye to yesterday, into a whole different kind of Cheryl.

This one was a Russian pornographer’s wet dream: make-up smudged, dyed blonde hair in a rakishly rumped just-out-of-bed look, a pair of pink fluffy slippers and a short black negligee with pink frilly edging. The whole image exemplified her taste in both clothing and men. She positioned herself in

front of Kenny-the-Grub, crossed her arms across her ample bosom and, never one to beat around the bush, hissed at me.

‘Fuck off, Frank. You’re pissed!’

You can say what you like about Cheryl, but she always did have a way with words.

‘Good to see you too, Cheryl, you greedy two-timing bitch.’

Pathetic I know, but the best comeback I could think of on the spur of the inebriated moment. She placed both hands on my chest and aggressively pushed me backwards from the entrance and out of arm’s reach of The Grub.

‘Just look at yourself. You can’t even dress yourself properly. You’re pathetic, Frank! You’re no longer a police officer, you’re a friggin disgrace.’

‘That’s all you know, Cheryl. It’s a men’s shaving-coat. And don’t judge a cop by his cover, sweetheart.’

I was hoping to break the ice with a light touch of humour and witty repartee. A short drunken giggle escaped from my gut. Maybe it was wind.

Now here’s a good tip for beginners: never laugh at your own jokes. The whole routine went right over her head, then crashed and burned at my feet like the Hindenburg.

Cheryl had that just-sucked-on-a-lemon look on her face; although it could’ve been the backlighting, or maybe the alcohol. In any event it was the first time I’d really noticed that Cheryl was actually turning into a sour-faced old bitch – with a really bad attitude.

‘Frank, I’m going to tell you this just once. It’s over. We both know it’s been over for some time now, and I’m moving on with my life. Just like you should do, love. Now get this straight. My solicitor tells me that legally, the furniture, all of the goods and other shit I’ve taken are mine. I bought them all. You wouldn’t have a clue what you sat on, ate off, slept in nor walked on in that house if it weren’t for me.’

‘I resent that slur, Cheryl. I’m a trained observer. Eye of the eagle, me.’

Our meeting of minds was definitely not going the way I’d

planned. In fact, it was all going to the shit house. Worst of all, the three of us standing there knew it. Greedy-Cheryl was definitely not helping.

‘The house is in your name anyway, Frank. Pay off the bank and you’ll get a few quid.’

I decided to keep my mouth shut, at least until I could get a clean shot at Kenny-the-Grub’s mouth. He just stood there silently, standing well out of reach behind her, fingering his mo and looking extremely nervous.

‘Now look Cheryl–’

My slightly slurred retort was cut short.

‘No! You shut the fuck up and listen, Frank. Over the years I’ve put up with you coming home at all hours of the night smelling like a brewery and a whore-house pimp. And I’ve said nothing. I’ve put up with your drunken copper mates coming over for the weekend barbies and piss-ups. I’ve even copped it sweet when more than a few of them tried to have a quick feel-up in my own kitchen while you were outside, pissed and burning the snags. But no more, okay! That’s the good news.

‘Now for the bad. Well, bad for you anyway, love. As you obviously haven’t had time to check our joint bank account, I’ll break the news to you as gently as I can: I’ve taken the lot. And I emptied your secret safety deposit box at the bank; the one you didn’t think I knew about. I earned that friggin money, Frank – every bloody last cent of it putting up with you and your deadshit mates over the last 10 years.’

‘Almost 11 glorious years, Cheryl.’

‘Shut the fuck up, Frank, and listen; I’m serious. All the money’s gone and you can’t touch it. I know very well that you can get a shit-load more of it. I know all about The Joke. I’ve known about it for years. Jesus Christ, dickhead, every bastard and their dog in Queensland knows about it. So here’s the bottom line. Fuck off and leave Kenny and me alone, or I swear to God I’ll send my diary to the Fitzgerald Inquiry. And you know I’ll do it, Frank. You know what a spiteful bitch I can be when I’m pissed off, love.’

Never a truer word had she said.

‘My solicitor has a copy. It’s got dates, names, amounts of money paid in, paid out. The names of top brass, politicians and prominent businessmen, everything I ever overheard between you and your mates. Or what you’ve bragged to me about when you’ve come home half-tanked or too pissed to remember.

‘I know it’s only a very small piece of the corruption puzzle, love, but it’d be extremely helpful in pointing the way for the Commission of Inquiry. It’s like you always said, Frank, once you’ve got the bastards by the balls, they’ll follow you anywhere.’

She was barely drawing breath. ‘Well love, Ken and me have got you by the short-and-curlies and we want you to follow that friggin white line in the middle of the road all the way home, and away from us forever. So get back in your car, turn around and fuck off, Frank.

‘Oh, and if anything should ever happen to Kenny or me,’ she smiled, ‘well, you know how it all works love. After all, it was you who taught me. And truly-ruley, you’ll always hold a special spot in my heart. That’s why I’m telling you, get out now, Frank. Get off the job, before you end up dog’s meat inside Boggo Road with all the rest of your bloody mob. Because you know how long ex-coppers last in jail, love.

‘So get out now. It’s what the people of Queensland want. Everyone’s sick and tired of it. The Joke’s simply no longer funny, Frank. Never was. Well sure, for your mob it was, but not for the rest of us. Now fuck off, and I’m warning you for the last time, leave Ken and me alone. And for Christ’s sake, clean up your act. Get off the piss and get a bit of self respect back. You’re a friggin’ disgrace, love.’

With those pearls of wisdom cast before swine, Cheryl stepped back, slammed the door in my face and turned off the porch light; leaving me standing there as forlorn as my crumpled cotton shaving-coat, white T-shirt and undies. And one rubber thong.

Bloody Cheryl was right. She'd always said that men's egos were fun to crush. Wasted, wounded and chastised, I turned and slowly walked back to the car. The inevitable hangover was already beginning to kick in.

It was then that I remembered one of the two reasons I'd driven all the way down here in the first place, and I was determined not to fail twice in the one night.

I turned back towards the now darkened house, ripped my wedding ring from my finger and, at the top of my slurred voice, shouted, 'Well fuck you too, Cheryl. And the horse you rode into town on!'

I aimed my thick gold band at the front door and let fly. I missed it completely, hitting instead the floor to ceiling front window with an audible tink. Fuck it!

I hopped on one foot, managed to remove my solitary rubber thong and tried again. I leaned back, drunkenly corrected my centre of balance and, like David giving it to Goliath, I released my projectile. Illuminated by both the street lighting and their neighbour's exterior lights, the rubber thong spun through the night air in a graceful upward, then a tumbling downward arc, missing the house completely and crash-landing somewhere in their neighbour's side garden. I'll give you the big tip: aerodynamically, thongs are useless.

But, feeling better for having had the last word, I got back in the car and took Cheryl's advice. I followed the white line in the middle of the road all the way home. Just past Beenleigh I remembered the two pieces of advice my old man gave me when I left home: never ride a hard-mouthed horse and never shack up with a sheila who keeps a diary.

I drove slowly, no longer angry, but shattered; shattered, sober and single.

The next day I rang in sick. And I was. I spent all day recovering from a hangover, planning how I would stay out of jail, and contemplating my future as a single man.

I rang my bank. My account held a grand total of \$7.81. A

drive down to the bank to have a peek-a-boo into my not-so-secret safety deposit box showed it to be as clean as a whistle. Greedy-Greedy-Cheryl had dudded me of everything. A clean sweep. The best part of \$159,000 of black money and a small, black velvet bag of high-end jewellery was gone. I'd taught her too well.

'Accept the inevitable,' my dear old mum would have said. And I did.

I snatched my job, sold the house, paid off the mortgage, and with what was left, together with what I'd scraped together from every scam going, I moved to Hobart, Tasmania. And told absolutely no one.

In the five weeks prior to leaving Brisbane I created a new identity for myself. A lot of us were doing it around that time. Cheryl was right, The Joke was no longer funny, and none of us were laughing any more – in fact we were beginning to seriously shit ourselves.

My intention was to start a new life and, of course, escape being hauled up to give sworn evidence before the Royal Commission. Cheryl was right about the latter too; I would've been charged, convicted and sentenced to five to seven years in Boggo Road jail. Corrupt coppers knew full well what to expect from the boys inside.

Through a friend of a friend, at the cost of a few grand, I obtained a series of bodgie identifications: driver's licence, bank account, birth certificate, the works. I changed my birthdate and tweaked my age by two years. I retained my Christian name but took the surname Cousins. Jerry Cousins was a New South Wales copper I'd met while on a month's secondment down in Sydney. Top bloke him, killed in a high-speed motorbike pursuit accident a few years prior.

My main problem was, I'd been a career cop for my entire working life; policing was all I knew. I possessed what was known as a restricted skill-set. So I figured that if I could no longer be a legit copper, then I'd do the next best thing with my

life skills. Of the few options open to me in that capacity, I knew that a security guard would not be one of them. So, before I left Brisbane I applied for and was granted a legit New South Wales Private Investigators Licence in my new name: Francis James Cousins.

Once settled in Hobart it was simply a matter of transferring one state licence to another and I was legal here in my new home state. So with the flourish of a pen, I had begun my new life. I set up the Tasmanian Private Investigation Agency, and was actually happy – and have been most of the time ever since.

But I could still remember what humiliation, abandonment and anger felt like.

It was exactly how Alice Rush felt now.