

CHAPTER TWO

I found Muriel Parkinson sitting with her coat on in the main lounge of the Riverfront Seniors' Residence. That morning, she looked every one of her eighty-one years. Politics takes its toll, and Muriel had given herself completely to the Liberal Party, running in five consecutive elections in a riding that had never, ever gone red. That is until three months ago.

The curved wall of windows overlooked the frozen reaches of the Ottawa River where a windless day lent the scene the stillness of a photograph. Her eyes were glued to the TV in the corner where the top CBC news anchor and the parliamentary bureau chief were killing time before cutting live to the Governor General's residence.

Muriel sensed me behind her and held up a trembling index finger to preempt me, her eyes still fixed on the screen. I reached for her hand, and we both focused on the talking heads.

"Well, Peter, the negotiations went irrevocably south a few days ago. The two leaders emerged awash in a sea of bitterness and recrimination. Our backroom sources quote the Liberal Leader describing the NDP Leader as a 'washed-up Marxist with forty-year-old ideas' before he stomped to his waiting car," the bureau chief commented.

"And what did the NDP Leader have to say for himself?"

"Well, he was much more succinct, Peter, declaring the Liberal Leader to be 'an imbecile.'"

I sighed at the deep and insightful analysis of live, unscripted

television. But wait! There was more compelling news to break.

“Peter, while we have a minute or two to fill, there was a related story on the wire this morning. Apparently, the Sado Masochism Association of Canada, known as SMAC, has just issued a news release naming the Honourable Eric Cameron, the disgraced former Finance Minister, as their Naughty Boy of the Year, bestowed annually on a Canadian who brings honour and glory to what they call the ‘S&M cause.’”

Muriel just rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Beside her, an old man, wearing a full suit and cravat, in a wheelchair took great delight in the Cameron story.

“And long may he spank!” he cackled, his shoulders pumping up and down like pistons.

I was struck that the Cameron story was still news after so many weeks and so much political drama. But I suppose I shouldn’t have been. The volatile combination of extreme sex and high-profile politicians always made for good ink.

There was a brief but awkward silence before the news anchor finally found a way of filling the dead air.

“Well, um, er, our congratulations to Eric Cameron, wherever he may be, on yet another, um, noteworthy distinction.” He then furrowed his brow and nodded his head in sage acknowledgement. Eventually, he looked down, giving us a good view of his growing bald spot and placed his index finger on his earpiece. A moment passed. Composed again, he lifted his eyes once more to the camera. “Well, let’s now go live to Rideau Hall where the Governor General is expected to announce the dissolution of Parliament, sending Canadians back to the polls for the second time in four months.”

Muriel squeezed my hand as a sombre GG read a very brief statement, lamenting that the House of Commons could not come together to sustain a government and calling an election for Monday, January 27. I did a quick count in my head, arriving at a thirty-one-day campaign, shorter than the standard affair. The GG had invoked a rarely used provision in the Elections Act

that gives her the latitude in extraordinary circumstances to abbreviate the campaign period. Obviously, she considered asking Canadians to endure a second full campaign, so soon after the last one, to be cruel and unusual punishment.

Shortly thereafter, CBC cut back to regularly scheduled programming.

“And so it is done,” Muriel intoned as if presiding over a funeral, although a hint of a smile circled, as if seeking clearance to land. “And it certainly adds some drama to our imminent lunch.”

She reached for my arm to begin the sometimes difficult ascent from her chair to a position somewhere between stooping and standing. It is a cruel coincidence that Muriel Parkinson lives with a disease whose name she shares. Muriel clutched my arm as she performed what she called the Parkinson’s shuffle out to my battered, aging Ford Taurus. The slow but steady progression of her disease meant growing bouts of tremors and shakes, and restricted her to assisted walking only.

“Just what exactly do you mean, that the election call adds drama to our lunch?” I asked as I eased her into the front seat.

“I mean I don’t think Angus is inviting us over just to showcase his culinary prowess.”

“Muriel, stop. There is no way Angus is going to run again. It’s not happening. Being the accidental MP for a few months was a pleasant little distraction but I think his fifteen minutes are up. He as much as told me so last night. And that means I can finally say goodbye to Parliament Hill and good riddance to partisan politics.”

Muriel just smiled and watched the river as we drove out of Cumberland to the McClintock house. In her lap, her index finger rubbed back and forth against the pad of her thumb, unbidden.

“Come on, Muriel, you’re supposed to say ‘Yes, of course you’re right, Daniel. Angus has served Cumberland-Prescott well but it’s time he headed back to the engineering faculty.’”

“Daniel, if I believed that I’d say it. But I don’t, and because I want to arrive safely for lunch, I’m keeping quiet about it.” She

turned her gaze to the trees lining the road. "I think I just saw a cardinal."

We drove in silence for a time before she piped up again, ever cheerful.

"I understand my granddaughter and you are now living together in sin in the McLintock boathouse." She was still gazing casually out the window.

I still wasn't used to her directness. News travels fast in small towns.

"I was going to tell you. We were going to tell you," I stammered. "We had such an amazing time in Quebec City. And, well, one thing led to another, which led to her moving her stuff in when we got back. I hope you're okay with that. You are okay with that, aren't you?"

She reached over and patted my arm.

"I couldn't be happier."

I unclenched.

Not another word was exchanged for the rest of the drive, giving me plenty of quiet time to wonder why I thought I might finally be free of politics. I reviewed the evidence again and again, and convinced myself that Angus could not and would not seek re-election and the world would return to equilibrium. I really didn't think I had the stomach to return to politics yet again. And I was eager to resume my delayed re-entry to the academic world. When Angus won the seat, the University of Ottawa had agreed to hold open my teaching position in the English department so I could accompany the new Cumberland-Prescott MP to Parliament Hill. Working with Angus had been fun, fresh, and even exciting. But like skydiving, I wasn't sure I could do it every day for the next four years, even if Angus could somehow win this seat again without the gift of his new Tory opponent self-immolating just before the vote. It felt like I was done.

When we arrived at Chateau McLintock, Angus was waiting to open the car door for Muriel and arm her into the warmth of the living room. My last act before getting out of the car was to

set my BlackBerry to *Vibrate* so we wouldn't be disturbed during lunch. Angus seemed happy. His hair, a cross between Albert Einstein and Bob Marley, was in full frazzle. His beard? Well, it looked not unlike Niagara Falls, just not quite as orderly. Safely ensconced on the couch with a glass of Dubonnet, Muriel looked utterly content as Angus bustled about. I flopped down next to her. Out the window, I could see the boathouse through the trees. Lindsay had gone over to her mother's to help her assemble a bird feeder she'd received for Christmas from a distant and sadistic relative. The kit had more parts than a V8 engine and instructions written only in French, Spanish, Italian, and what Lindsay thought might be Japanese. I'd offered to help, but knowing of my stunted mechanical gifts, Lindsay had wisely declined. For me, it's a very short trip from "do it yourself" to "blew it yourself."

"Angus, I had such a wonderful time here on Christmas afternoon," Muriel gushed in a voice designed to reach Angus all the way in the kitchen. "It was a wonderful celebration."

"Aye, that was a splendid time," Angus replied as he returned with a serving tray of Swedish meatballs. There was also some kind of a sauce and a tiny pewter cylinder of toothpicks. Despite her tremor, Muriel was quite adept at stabbing the meatballs, dipping them, and then getting them to her mouth. I was into my fourth or fifth meatball when Angus headed for the door to the deck.

"Okay, I'm runnin'," Angus said over his shoulder, his Scottish lilt draped over every word, but more like a tarpaulin than a shawl.

"What do you mean? We just got here," I said perplexed. Muriel was smiling in mid-meatball.

His hand on the doorknob, Angus turned to me.

"You're not hearin' me. Or perhaps you don't want to. I said, I'm runnin' . . . for re-election." With that, he disappeared out onto the deck where a bottle of white wine chilled in the snow.

I knew from childhood birthday parties that in moments of

shock, or even hilarity, milk can actually pass from one's mouth up through the sinuses and project out the nostrils. I'd seen it myself and even experienced it once or twice. But I confess I had no idea that a chunk of Swedish meatball could make that same perilous journey. By the time my coughing and gagging subsided, Angus had returned from the deck, wine in hand, his face creased with concern. Muriel just patted my back, smiling and nodding her head vigorously in affirmation. There was a very distinct "I told you so" gleam in her eye. By then, Angus was smiling and shaking his head, happy that the Heimlich manoeuvre was not on the menu.

"What was all that talk yesterday about 'putting an end to it all?'" I sputtered, when I'd finally regained the ability to vocalize.

"The *speculation*, man! I meant let's put an end to all the speculation swirling in the damn papers. I thought you knew where I was," Angus replied.

I thought I knew too.

"Yeah, but you said you thought the university would be fine if we were to 'return.'" I used my fingers to mime quotation marks in the air. "It seemed quite clear to me that you meant 'return' to the university."

"You were listenin' for what you wanted to hear, laddie. I'm sorry. I meant 'return' to the House of Commons. Go back to Parliament Hill. Was I not clear?" he asked.

Silence descended and I tried to figure out my next move. But Angus wasn't finished.

"But there's an iron-clad condition to my decision. I cannae do it without you both. I won't do it without you both," Angus prompted. "That's my immutable caveat."

Muriel leapt in first.

"Of course I'm here for you, Angus," she fairly shouted. "I'm tickled you're up for the fight and I'll gladly carry your sword and shield."

"I thank you, Muriel. I knew you'd be there. Well, that's one down. What say you, Professor Addison?"

Shit. Two sets of imploring eyes turned my way as I sank deeper into the couch, rehearsing in my mind the lines that my head had devised when my heart wasn't looking, in case of just such an emergency.

Angus, Angus, Angus. You no longer need me. You've achieved a great deal and really blazed your own trail. I've actually done very little and I have no doubt you'll be re-elected. But I think my time in politics and on Parliament Hill has finally come to end. I'm excited about my new academic career and the future it holds and I want to get started on it. Of course I'll help you find a good campaign manager and executive assistant, and I'll always follow your exploits with pride, but I think I'm going to sit this one out.

Still, imploring eyes. Then, somewhere between my brain and my mouth, my thoughtful and carefully crafted message took a wrong turn or pulled up lame, possibly both. All I could manage was:

"Angus. I just can't do it again. I'm tapped out."

He stood up, his face clouding over. Muriel gaped at me as if I'd just drowned a Labrador puppy, slowly.

"I'm sorry. It's been a ride and a half but it's time for me to move on," I pleaded. "You don't need me any more. There are plenty of EAs out there. Finding one you like and trust will be easy."

"I've no interest in anyone else. I'm a creature of habit and I like the team we've got," Angus replied. "Dinnae give me your answer right now. Think on it. Talk to Lindsay. Sleep on it. I'll not announce my decision until tomorrow morning but I cannae run if you're not there. I'll not."

How do I get myself into these messes? It was an awkward hour thereafter, even after we moved to the table. Very awkward. I felt terrible. I'd let them down as surely as if I'd crossed the floor to join the Tories. But I'd spent five years of my life on the Hill and it had almost done me in. It was time I started a new chapter. I thought I'd earned that right.

I was relieved when Angus insisted on driving Muriel home

after lunch. I'd dreaded the return trip to the Riverfront Seniors' Residence after disappointing Muriel. They left in a melancholy fog and I slunk back to the apartment. I couldn't just walk out on Angus, so I agreed to organize the news conference for the next morning, even though it wasn't yet clear what Angus was announcing. I sat at the kitchen table and emailed a quick media advisory to the regional media and to the Parliamentary Press Gallery inviting them to the Cumberland Motor Inn for 10 a.m. Asking journalists to attend a Saturday morning newser was quite possibly unprecedented, but the election had already been called. If Angus were not the candidate, another Liberal would have to step up, so there was no time to waste. While I worked on the advisory, I heard Lindsay's cellphone ring. She took it out on the porch, making me think it was either Muriel or Angus.

I'd just hung up from my call to the Cumberland Motor Inn to confirm the small function room when Lindsay came back inside, with a face that said pensive.

"You finished?" she asked. "Let's go for a walk up the river."

Even though I figured I was about to be hit with a full-court press, I still liked the idea of walking on the ice in the sunshine with Lindsay next to me. Besides, that evening she was headed off to Montreal with her mother for a long-planned, post-Christmas shopping weekend, so we only had what was left of the afternoon together.

"One more quick call, then we'll go," I promised.

I called Angus and told him about the arrangements for the morning news conference. I also told him I'd give him my final answer in the morning, though I was pretty sure my position would remain the same. Angus reported that he'd be picking Muriel up early and he'd see me in the news conference room well before the ten o'clock start.

"I just need to know which announcement I'm making," Angus said.

The ice was hard but a thin layer of snow near the shore made it like walking on a snow-covered street. Not a cloud in the sky

and the wind had fallen as the sun started its descent. We'd walked in silence for ten minutes before she spoke.

"Why did you go to Parliament Hill in the first place?"

No preliminaries. Right into it.

"It sounds so naïve and corny in hindsight, but I truly believed that I had an obligation to serve. That the government should make the right choices, even if they weren't always the popular choices," I replied, not looking at her. "I remember telling my father that I actually thought of public service as a noble calling. Can you believe that?"

"And why did you want to escape to Cumberland last summer?"

"After five years, I felt as if I'd almost crossed completely over to the other side. I'd become one of them. Image became supreme. Sound bites replaced meaningful discourse. Opinion polls no longer informed policy development, they dictated it. Long-term planning, looking into Canada's future, meant four years at the most. Our vision horizon was forty-eight months. If the government were in year three of the mandate, looking ahead meant twelve months. It finally dawned on me one day that I really was thinking like them. It was time to get out."

Lindsay just walked, nodded, and kept up her questions.

"Was it different working with Angus?"

"Completely different. He's unlike any politician I've ever known. He has more common sense than any politician I've ever known. He doesn't care what people think. He seems congenitally programmed to do what's right even if it costs him support. And he's as honest as they come. He refused to play the political game. Instead, he changed the rules. And he made it work. One man against a powerful political system more than a century in the making. There are time-honoured forces at play on the Hill that Angus simply defied. One man."

"Two, actually," countered Lindsay. "And how did it feel when you shut down that environmental travesty of an aggregate mill or when you helped Sanderson Shoes reinvent itself?"

"I'm not sure I've ever thought about it in those terms but

now that you mentioned it, I guess it felt good. It felt like we actually achieved something in the public interest. It felt, for once, like we'd done what we'd been elected to do."

"How often did you feel that rush when you were writing speeches for the Liberal Leader?"

"Not often enough. Okay, never. Wow, you are good."

Lindsay smiled and held my hand.

"So why is it suddenly okay for you and Angus McLintock to leave the game now that you've started to change the rules? Seems to me we'll be back to 'politics as usual' before the ballots are even counted."

We walked and talked like this for as long as we could. I was not conscious of the passage of time. I told her I was tired. I told her I'd done my part. I told her I was ready for a change. Even though it wasn't directly related to my Angus dilemma, I told her I'd never been happier than since I'd met her. I slipped on the ice, landed hard on my back, and told her it didn't hurt and that I'd meant to do that. She held my hand throughout, apart from the fall. She never overtly passed judgment on my decision, yet her questions deftly focused my thinking in a way that undermined my own position. Finally, Lindsay's mother called her cell-phone to remind her of the Montreal departure time. She wanted to get at least some of the drive done in daylight. After I'd driven Lindsay to her mother's, her most pointed comment was delivered just before she got out of the car. She faced me in the front seat and took my hands in hers.

"The university will always be there. Politicians like Angus McLintock won't be," she started. "I'll be with you whatever you decide, because we've got something going on here that I'm really enjoying and that I've really needed. But I don't want you, Professor Addison, to wake up beside me in six months, complain about the state of politics in this country, and idly wonder what Angus and you might have accomplished had you both gone back into the game. Don't you dare do that."

She kissed me and got out. I drove away.

Shit. When we'd started the river walk together, I was committed to my escape plan. A few hours later, as I pulled in the driveway alone, I was waffling so much I could almost smell maple syrup. Gripping the railing, I clumped up the outside staircase and into the apartment. A voice mail from U of O's Vice President, Administration, was waiting for me.

"Daniel, it's Brenda LaChance. I heard on the street that you might be returning to the campus fold sooner than many of us were expecting or, more accurately, hoping. Don't get me wrong. We're looking forward to having you back on the team here. But it was sure nice having two of the university's own ensconced on Parliament Hill. We're all hoping Angus runs again. It would be good for the country and good for U of O. You're welcome back here whenever you're ready, but returning in the middle of the year does complicate matters somewhat. We'll make it work, but are you sure you don't want to take another ride on the McLintock roller coaster? Let me know of your plans."

Another country heard from.

I was still awake at 3:30 in the morning weighing the pros and cons, weighing the options, weighing my future. I even weighed myself on the bathroom scale to alleviate the tedium of just lying in bed weighing things in my head. By the time I fell asleep, around 4:30, as near as I can estimate, I was once again committed to my position. It just wasn't the same position I'd arrived at in the afternoon. I considered calling Angus to let him know, but he was a bear when awakened. I hated sleeping without Lindsay beside me, but I was so tired by the time my mind was free enough for sleep that I'm not sure her absence made much difference that night. I just managed to set my alarm before my coma came a-calling.

When I awoke, the sun was streaming into my bedroom. I heard no music from my clock radio, so I had no idea why I was conscious. I turned my head and saw the dreaded flashing 12:00 on my bedside table – a power outage in the night. That's not good,

I thought. I cursed Captain Murphy and his stupid law and grabbed my BlackBerry. My BB told me it was 9:45! That was really not good. Angus was due to face the cameras in fifteen minutes, and I was not going to make it. He'd be freaking out. I also noticed that my BB was still set to *Vibrate* and I'd missed six calls in the last two hours. Three from Muriel, two from Peter, and one from Lindsay. No time to shower, so I threw on khakis, a white shirt, and my academic-issue tweed sports jacket, no leather elbow patches, though. I couldn't find my dressy trench coat so I went without. I burst through the front door onto the landing at warp speed ready to vault down the stairs two, perhaps three, at a time, to my trusty, rusty Ford Taurus waiting below. But this time, I'd already released my grip on the door-knob when the words "porch ice" skidded into my mind.

My tailbone hit the icy deck and I slid on my back towards the railing faster than a bobsledder on the Cresta run. The origin of the term "breakneck speed" dawned on me.

The Building Code was amended in 1985 to require crosspieces in outdoor railing design to prevent the hapless from sliding underneath and injuring themselves. A sensible change, to be sure. But as I hurtled underneath the railing into space, I remembered Angus telling me he'd built the boathouse in 1983. On instinct, my final act before leaving the landing altogether was to snag the rolled-up *Cumberland Crier* on my way past in case I had time for in-flight reading. I noticed the spare key for the boathouse apartment hanging from a small brass hook on the underside of the railing as I slid by. Good to know.

Mercifully, the relentless and heavy snowfall of the past two weeks meant a feet-first, featherbed fall into a massive drift of wet packing snow some ten feet below. A perfect dismount – and I really stuck the landing. And I do mean stuck. When the dust . . . er, snow, settled, only my neck and head protruded above the surface of the snowbank. It held me tight. I could feel the pressure from the snow on my chest as my breathing approached hyperventilation. My right arm was free, still holding the

newspaper high and clear of the snow. Always protect the newspaper.

Had I not been so unaccountably late for Angus's newser, my little mishap would probably have been exciting, even fun. I might well have repeated the stunt recreationally. But entombed neck-deep in snow, with only a copy of the *Cumberland Crier* to save me, I was a little miffed, completely unable to move, wet, and heading fast from chilled to frozen. Boots, mitts, a hat, and a proper winter coat might have been a good idea given the weather, but I hadn't planned on impromptu arctic survival training. On the bright side, I was very much awake. Full immersion in packing snow had elevated me to a higher plane of consciousness than even the Hare Krishnas promised. At one point early in my incarceration, I felt my BlackBerry vibrating in my pocket but I was powerless to reach it.

I'd never felt claustrophobic in small elevators or even when I managed to lock myself in the trunk of the family car when I was just a child. Okay, I was sixteen at the time, researching a project on Houdini; I really thought I'd be able to escape. Even when I'd gone spelunking with a friend at university, I'd been quite comfortable in that dark, dank, and cramped subterranean world. But being held fast and frozen up to my neck in the snowbank's viselike grip, with only my head and arms in daylight, really seemed to push my panic button. The novelty of my predicament wore off quickly. I not only needed to get out fast, I desperately wanted to.

"Stay calm," I said aloud to myself. Actually, it may have been more like "STAY CALM!" as every bird singing in every tree within a hundred-metre radius burst into flight in unison. It was quite a striking sight.

DIARY

Friday, December 27

My Love,

You must find it amusing to see me scuttling about the

galley wearing your apron. I've not yet washed it and may never. You see, there is still your faint scent upon it. It somehow finds its way to me now and then, buffeted by the other aromas of the kitchen. It is a comfort still.

Poor Daniel. All this time I thought we were seated together. But I discovered today we're on different buses going in different directions. Muriel says he'll come around, but time is short and I'll not go without him. Damnation. Just when I'd finally decided to seek that which I already had, but never wanted, Daniel throws in a spanner. I need him. And I need you. What a strange journey it is.

AM