

# chapterone

I walked up to the brothel and rang the bell, smoothed my hair and looked around. The South Melbourne industrial area was all converted cottages and boxy factories. A high machinery whine stabbed my ears and my nose twitched with the scent of freshly sawn pine and chemical solvents.

The building was a double fronted, single storey terrace painted livid maroon and a sign in foot high letters told me I was standing outside the Good Times Club. As the mesh door opened I recalled the seventies TV show of the same name and half expected JJ to greet me with a buck toothed ‘Dyn-o-mite!’

‘Help you?’

The autumn morning was cool and bright and it took a while for my eyes to adjust to the gloom within. The voice had come from a middle aged woman with frizzy red hair and thin eyebrows.

## leighredhead

‘I was wondering if you had any work available?’ I asked.

‘Come on in.’

I stepped inside and she locked the screen behind me, crossed to a melamine reception desk and spoke into an intercom.

‘Boss won’t be long.’

The vinyl couch squeaked as I sat down. Penthouse Black Label magazines fanned out on a side table and the walls and carpet were the same purple-red as the exterior. A large photograph of a blonde draped over a Ferrari hung behind the desk. Classy stuff. I heard the swish of polyester slacks and turned to see a man enter the room. His beer gut forced his red polo shirt to pouch out and his mousy hair stood up in thinning tufts. As he got closer I saw his nose was bulbous and pockmarked, and guessed he was in his fifties. I stood up and shook his hand. The palm was sweaty.

‘Neville,’ he said. ‘I own the joint.’

‘Vivien.’ It was my old stripping name and I answered to it more readily than Simone.

‘What sort of work you after, darl?’

‘Dunno, what have you got?’

‘Full service or massage. What you done before?’

‘Neither.’

Neville and the woman exchanged a glance. He took a pack of Horizons from his pants pocket and shook one out. ‘Take her around, Marla, show her the rooms, tell her what’s involved.’

I followed Marla down a dim hallway and realised her enormous tracksuit-panted rump was out of proportion to her tiny upper body, then felt bad for noticing. A door with a number three painted on it was ajar and she led me inside.

Marla said, ‘Rule number one. If the door’s closed, don’t open it.’

I could understand the logic behind that.

There was a double bed on one side of the room and a foldout massage table on the other. The bed was covered with a fitted sheet

## rubdown

and two pink towels, pleated like napkins at a Chinese restaurant. A bedside table held home brand oil, baby powder, tissues and air freshener. A white shower unit had been moulded into the corner. I smelled damp carpet and that powdery stuff you sprinkle on the floor in the hope the room will smell like a 'Country Garden'. Mirrors were stuck to the walls, along with framed black and white prints of big-boobed eighties gym bunnies in sweat bands and g-string leotards bearing the legends *Sweat* and *Pumped up Down Under*.

Marla was looking at me expectantly so I said, 'Nice.'

She nodded. 'Yes, Neville's recently spent quite a bit doing the place up.' She leaned against the massage table and the joists squeaked in protest. 'How come you're here if you've never worked before?'

'Curious, I s'pose. I've never been inside a place like this.'

'You a student?'

'How did you guess?' I was wearing a miniskirt with black tights, knee high boots and a face full of makeup. So much for thinking I looked like a hooker.

'We get lots of students, need money to study. What course you doing?'

'Um, arts.' I sat on the sagging mattress, careful not to disturb the origami towels. 'So, uh, what do the girls have to do?'

'Massage is full nude, bodyslide and hand relief. Up to you if you let them touch. Most ladies allow the boobs, outside the pussy. It's sixty for the half hour, fifty-fifty split. Full service pays better, naturally.'

'That's sex, right?'

'Uh-huh. Massage, French, then sex. Client pays one-eighty for the hour, a hundred for the half and we have a ten minute special for sixty.'

Thirty bucks a fuck. It wasn't exactly *Pretty Woman*.

## leighredhead

Marla went on: 'Fantasies like schoolgirl and light B and D are an extra twenty and Greek's fifty. It's up to you if you do Greek.'

'And Greek is?'

'Anal.'

'Ouch.'

Back at reception Neville was smoking and drinking instant coffee out of a Garfield mug.

'How'd you go?' He forced a smile and crinkled his eyes up.

'I don't know, I've never done anything like—'

'Piece of piss. You've had a fuck before, haven't you?'

'Well, yeah.'

'And I bet you've rooted jerks for nothing. Why not have sex with some nice gentlemen and get paid for what you were giving away for free?'

Gee, now you put it that way ... 'I'm just not sure I could go through with it.'

Neville slurped his coffee and smacked his lips. 'What about massage then? Money's not quite as good but all you got to do is a bit of a rub, bit of a tug. Hand shandy. Like shaking a Coke can up and down.'

I stared at the blonde on the wall getting jiggy with the sports car and chewed on a fingernail. 'Can I talk to some of the other girls first?'

Neville frowned, sighed. 'Yeah, okay. But don't let them put you off. Like a bit of a whinge.'

Marla led me down a corridor on the other side of the building to the girls' room. Six workers, aged from early twenties to late forties, lounged around on brown velour couches and shabby mismatched chairs. Mugs left wet rings on the smoked glass coffee table and Bert Newton delivered double entendres from an ancient, wooden framed TV.

## **rubdown**

A blonde girl with a wide mouth and freckled, tip-tilted nose sat cross-legged on the floor in front of an age speckled mirror. She wore a white lace bra and pants set with a pink scarf knotted at the hip, and had her lips open, applying mascara. I casually shifted my handbag so the hidden video camera would get a better shot of her.

Her name was Tamara Wade. I had found my target.