

# chapterone

I was lying on my back in the peepshow at the Shaft Cinema, legs in the air, wearing a peekaboo nightie and no knickers.

Two of the six booths were occupied, and every time one of the guys put a coin in I heard a buzz, the glass went from opaque to clear, and a small orange light came on above the window.

It cost them two dollars for forty-five seconds, and I got a dollar of that. The booths were dark and the men's faces shadowy, unless they pressed them right up against the glass. Not a good idea.

They kept putting coins in so I writhed around on the thin mattress, got on all fours, flipped my long dark hair around in faux orgasmic throes and pretended to play with myself. A portable stereo blasted out Madonna and the small room was lit with coloured disco lights. Mirrors on the walls and ceiling reflected each other and

there were thousands of me, stretching out into eternity. You can see yourself from every angle in the peeps.

The peep's door opened and my best friend, Chloe, pulled across the tatty red curtain.

'Simone!' Her blond hair was in rollers and she popped out of a small pink bikini top.

'You're keen.' I glanced at the clock. It was three forty-five in the afternoon. 'I've still got fifteen minutes.'

'He's dead.' She was clutching the pm edition of the *Herald Sun*. 'That fat bastard's been murdered.'

'What fat bastard?' I lay on one side and lifted my leg up, Jane Fonda style.

'Strip club slaying,' Chloe read from the front page. 'The body of a man discovered floating near St Kilda beach this morning has been identified as strip club boss Francesco (Frank) Parisi, thirty-eight. Police have confirmed Mr Parisi, proprietor of Flinders Street table dancing venue the Red Room, was brutally hacked to death before being dumped in the bay.' Chloe worked at the Shaft during the day and moonlighted at the Red on Friday and Saturday nights.

I bent over in front of the windows and gave everyone a flash. 'Did you knock him off?' I joked.

Chloe wasn't laughing. She hugged the paper tightly to her chest and chewed her bottom lip. 'I think we'd better go for a drink,' she said.

We crossed Swanston Street, dodging trams and Silver-top taxis, and headed to the Black Opal. It was a pokies place with cheap drinks and the men were too busy willing their machines to pay out to bother cracking onto

a couple of off-duty strippers. Maxine was covering for us in the peeps. She should have retired back in the mid eighties but that was another story.

I bought bourbon and Coke for Chloe and champagne for myself and we sat at a high table at the back of the bar, the newspaper between us.

I sipped my drink and waited for her to fill me in. She lit a Winfield Blue and looked around the bar with big scared eyes. Drama queen. I slid the paper over and read my horoscope. It worked.

‘I never told you what happened on Saturday night,’ she blurted out. ‘I should’ve, but I was embarrassed.’

When she paused for effect I flipped through to the employment section. She lasted five seconds.

‘It was early in the shift and Frank called me into his office to do a line of coke. You know, kickstart the night.’

I knew, even though I hadn’t done any drugs for a year.

‘I’d been alone with him before and nothing ever happened. But this time, after we’ve done a couple, he gets up and comes over to where I’m sitting and unzips his pants. Gets his cock out and tells me to suck it. Mate, I just fucking laughed at him, thought it was a joke, right? Then he tries to push my head down, like, hard, and somehow I manage to wriggle out of his hands and I bolt back into the club.’

Shit like that made me really mad. If Frank wasn’t already dead I would have had to kill him myself. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ I asked.

Chloe took another slug of bourbon and rubbed her

face with her hands. 'I shouldn't have got myself into that situation. You wouldn't have.'

It was true Chloe flirted and appeared promiscuous and up for anything. But that was no excuse.

'It wasn't your fault,' I said.

She shrugged. 'So there I am at the bar and I'm like, coking off my head but I'm also in shock and a couple of the girls are asking me what's the matter when Frank comes out of his office and tells me to clean out my locker, I'm fired.'

'And I say, well that's OK 'cause I quit anyway and where's the two hundred you owe me from the night before? And he says he's not giving it to me. Fuck, mate, I just went ballistic. I earned that money. I worked fucking hard for every cent of it. I went off at him, called him every name under the sun and told him I was going to report him to the cops, charge him with sexual assault, drugs, you name it.'

I raised my eyebrows. Chloe groaned. 'I know, not the smartest thing to say to a prick like that. So he goes, you don't know who you're dealing with, bitch, you want to wind up dead? And I say, you don't fucking scare me, you better watch your back motherfucker 'cause I know people. And then Flame, she's kind of like his girlfriend, hands me the stuff from my locker and the bouncers drag me out.'

'Do you really know people?' I asked.

'No, that bit was bullshit.'

The card machines sang electronic songs and Chloe lit another Winnie off the butt of the first. I wanted one too but I'd given up a few months before.

‘Tell me what I should do,’ she said.

I’d finished my investigative services certificate in October and gained an inquiry agent’s licence soon after. Since then the girls at work considered me the last word on all matters of law and order. They asked me about custody disputes and apprehended violence orders, taxation and drug busts. No matter that I hadn’t found a job and my training covered following people and pissing into a funnel.

‘How many people heard you threaten Frank?’ I asked.

‘Bout fifty.’

‘You should go to the cop shop now and tell them about Saturday night. Makes you look innocent.’

‘I am innocent!’

I drained my champagne. It had given me a nice buzz and I was tonguing for another.

‘Come on, I’ll take you.’

We caught the number 16 tram and rattled down Swanston Street. The top end where it intersected Lonsdale was home to the Shaft and a bunch of sex shops. As we moved towards the river we passed takeaway stores, discount clothing outlets and shops with spruikers out front flogging perfume rip-offs and cheap sunglasses. The Flinders Street station end had all the druggies. Junkies in bad tracksuits hung around the fast food joints and the alcoholics congregated on benches outside St Paul’s Cathedral. Swanston was the street they never showed you in the tourist brochures. I knew it well.

We passed the Queen Victoria Gardens and the Domain and got off at the St Kilda Road Police Complex. I led Chloe straight up to the reception desk.

‘We’re here about the Parisi murder,’ I told a young cop. ‘My friend worked for him and she’d like to speak to someone.’

‘I didn’t kill him,’ Chloe exclaimed.

The uniform grinned. ‘That’s what they all say.’

Chloe smiled back. She was wearing a low-cut top with ‘Pornbabe’ written across the chest.

I was good at flirting but Chloe was better. She could flirt for Australia. They stared at each other, smiling, while he picked up the phone and spoke to someone.

‘Detective Talbot will be down in a moment,’ he said.

I sat in the corner and left them to it. Just as she asked to see his gun a door opened and a female detective with bobbed auburn hair stuck her head out a door. ‘Chloe?’

She followed the D and I settled back to wait. Crime-stopper’s posters adorned the walls and cops went in and out the automatic doors. I watched them and couldn’t help wondering what they had that I didn’t. I’d tried to join the police force a year before and hadn’t got past the application stage. They’d rejected me when I told the truth about my work history. Either I didn’t have the moral credentials to be a girl in blue or the Victoria Police had enough scandal without dropping a stripper into the mix.

It was a weird career to aspire to after growing up in a hippy community where the kids were taught to hate the ‘pigs’ and our parents lived in fear of the choppers

that buzzed the hills around harvest time. But aspire to it I did, partly from rebellion and partly because of something that happened when I was thirteen.

My mum had hooked up with a man named Russell, an ex-bikie, straggly but good looking in his own way. He'd come to our town to buy dope to sell in the city, but liked it so much he decided to stay. My younger brother Jasper and I weren't too happy when he first moved in, but he brought us round with jumbo packs of M&Ms and hand-held, battery-operated computer games. He even hooked up a small black and white TV to a car battery so we could watch 'Countdown'.

The trouble was he had a problem with alcohol, and heroin, and when he was really drunk, or couldn't score, he'd lose the plot. Anything would set him off and his arguments with my mum escalated from yelling to pushing, to slapping her in the face.

We wondered why she didn't just leave him. She'd been a women's libber in the seventies and had worked at a battered women's shelter, but Russell seemed to have her under some sort of spell. He could go from frightening to charming, and after one of his outbursts he'd be extra sorry and romantic, and promise never to do it again.

He'd been living with us for three months when Jasper and I were woken by shouting. We peered down from the attic loft where we slept. In the light of the kerosene lamps we saw Russell looming over our mum, hand raised, face twisted with rage. Jasper, who was only eight, started sniffing.

'I've called the police,' she said, but this got him angrier.

‘Are you fucked in the head, woman? I’ve got ten pounds drying in the shed. You have got to be the stupidest fucking unit I have ever met.’ He was pacing back and forth on the faded oriental rug, a bottle of bourbon in his hand. All of a sudden he dropped the bottle and punched her in the face. She staggered back, crashing into the unlit potbelly stove and knocking out the flue.

I half climbed, half slid down the ladder and ran at him as he raised his fist again, jumped up and hung off his arm. He swung it back and I flew off onto the floor.

My brother’s cry was now a high-pitched wail. Mum was cowering in the corner, Russell advancing on her, when the front door crashed in.

‘Police!’

Two uniformed officers stood there, one male and one female. Russell grabbed a poker from beside the stove and wielded it like a baseball bat. ‘Come on,’ he yelled. ‘I’ll have ya!’

The woman had her hand on the butt of her gun. The male approached Russell with his hands out, talking in low tones, calling him mate. Russell swung at him and the cop leaned back and grabbed the poker, pulling him off balance, so he fell face first to the floor. It was the coolest move I’d ever seen. The female officer leapt into action, wrenching Russell’s hands behind his back and digging her knee in as she cuffed him tight.

They made sure we were all right and took Russell away. It turned out there were a number of warrants out for his arrest, and we never saw him again. And since that day I’d wanted to be a cop. But the cops didn’t want

me. So I'd done the PI course; it had seemed like the next best thing.

When I'd graduated one of my lecturers said he might have a bit of surveillance work coming up. Tony Torcasio was an ex undercover officer who had his own agency, a good guy, but so far nothing had eventuated. There were ads in the paper for investigators from time to time but if you didn't have experience or weren't an ex-cop you didn't have a hope in hell.

I loved dancing but after three years it was time to quit. I'd turned twenty-eight two days earlier and although I could pass for twenty-three, I felt old. Maxine was a well-preserved forty-five but that didn't stop the younger guys yelling, 'Get grandma off stage.'

'All done.' Chloe stood in front of me, wiggling her hips.

'They're not going to throw your arse in jail?'

'Nuh.' She skipped off to the front counter, whispered something to the constable and handed him one of her cards. I could have sworn I heard 'bring your handcuffs'.

Ten days later, November thirteen, I was sitting on my balcony in Elwood among palms and potted herbs. My first floor unit is in a block of sixteen and although the building is ugly brown brick the one bedroom flats are renovated and the street, Broadway, is full of oak trees. Dean Martin was on the stereo and I had a glass of cask wine and half a pack of individually wrapped cheese singles in front of me. I love plastic cheese. It was Thursday evening, still light because of daylight saving, and

I felt the itch to go out. It was a toss-up between seeing a band and getting so pissed I ended up pashing some grungy rocker, or going to the Godard version of *Breathless* at the Astor. Decisions, decisions. The wine flowed through my limbs, relaxing them, and a breeze that smelled of saltwater came in off the bay.

The phone rang. It was my mum.

'You're home, I don't believe it. How's work?'

'Great, fantastic,' I lied.

'I worry about you, you know. Not so much the peepshows but the bucks' parties. What if the guys get out of hand? What if it turns violent?'

'It's really not dangerous. There's always heaps of security. And the bucks are more scared of us than we are of them. Just last weekend—'

'It irks me. It just does.' She actually said *irk*. I wondered if I'd heard anyone say it in conversation before and decided I hadn't.

'I know.' I started craving a cigarette.

'And apart from your physical safety I worry about your psyche.'

'My psyche?' I would have killed for a cigarette. And something a bit stronger than wine. I leaned back in the canvas director's chair and put my bare feet up on the balcony railing.

'It's got to affect you, pandering to men, reinforcing ridiculous stereotypes about women, buying into the whole madonna/whore thing—'

'I don't buy into—'

'I know *you* don't but by working in that industry you perpetuate the myth. And to think I named you after Simone de Beauvoir.'

My mum was an old school feminist who lectured in women's studies and I couldn't win an argument with her. I turned into a petulant fifteen-year-old every time I tried.

'It's an art form, Mum, like . . . like Josephine Baker or Gypsy Rose Lee.'

'Did Josephine Baker do "floor work" and show the world what she had for breakfast? I think not.'

I picked at an ingrown hair on my leg and didn't say anything until she changed the subject: 'I heard from Jasper.'

'What's he up to?'

'He's doing really well, said to say hi. He's in New York doing some stuff for *GQ*, then he's off to Canada for fashion week in Montreal.'

My brother had scooped the family gene pool and worked as a model. I considered asking my mother if she didn't think modelling was similar to stripping but restrained myself.

'How's Steve?' I asked instead. Steve was my mother's 'partner'. They met a few years after the Russell episode and had been together ever since, eventually moving to Sydney where my mum became an academic. Steve ran courses in mud-brick housing and solar power at the College of Adult Education.

'He's great, really busy though, organising a rally against the government's stance on greenhouse gas emissions.'

'I've got my inquiry agent's licence,' I said. 'There might be some work coming up.'

'Why don't you finish your degree? You've only got one semester to go and you could finish it in Melbourne. I've looked into it.'

'I'm a bit busy at the moment.'

'You could study part time. A qualification would get you out of the sex industry.'

'I dunno about that, heaps of strippers have arts degrees.'

There was a beep on the line. Call waiting. Hallelujah.

'Mum? I've got another call, I have to go.'

'Hello?'

'Simone,' Chloe sounded out of breath, 'you've got to come quick. Someone's trying to kill me.'