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Snuff: A Crime Novel and Exegesis

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Abstract

This PhD research consists of a crime novel called *Snuff* and an accompanying exegesis titled *Making Snuff: The Creation of a Crime Novel* that reflects upon the journey of the writer in the creation of the novel. The novel charts the journey of a young woman in her twenties who becomes an accidental amateur detective when her sister is murdered in suburban Melbourne. To solve the mystery of her sex worker sister’s murder, the protagonist must enter Melbourne’s seedy world of strip clubs, peepshows and adult films. Through the protagonist’s eyes, the novel explores the controversial topic of sex work and why young women are drawn to this burgeoning industry. Using an autoethnographic methodology, the exegesis explains how the novel was created and enters into the feminist debate about sex work. It also investigates the difficulties of writing and researching as an incarcerated student and how the student overcame unique challenges. Finally, it discusses the creative process involved in planning plot devices, enacting dialogue and characterization, and investigates how, and to what degree, scholarly research influenced the creative process that generated the artefact.
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Dedications

To my family, you have supported me through all the hard years. Your love has never faltered and you always see the best in me no matter what I do. I love you all so much.

To Jo and Shane, who inspired the novel. Jo, you were my ‘partner in crime’ and I will never forget you. May you both rest in peace.

And to all sex workers; past, present and future.
Declaration by Candidate

I certify that the thesis entitled *Snuff: A Crime Novel and Exegesis* submitted for the degree of PhD contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma; to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and is not based on joint research or publications.

Full name:........................................................................................................

Signed:........................................................................................................

Date:........................................................................................................
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This PhD consists of two interacting elements. The first is an artefact, a crime novel called *Snuff* and the second is an exegesis titled *Making Snuff: The Creation of a Crime Novel* which reflects upon the process of writing the novel. These two elements ‘speak to one another’ by engaging in a “process of cross fertilization” (Beasley 2008, p.4). As questions or difficulties arose throughout the writing of the artefact, I would explore how theories of narrative and discourse could help resolve these challenges and then reflect upon, analyse and record this process in the exegesis. The results of the research would then flow back into the artefact. The exegesis provides a link between practice and research based on an autoethnographic methodology. This enabled me to examine my process of practice-led research from a personal and subjective as well as analytical perspective.

The artefact should be read first so that the reader comes to the exegesis with some knowledge of where the sites of discussion in the exegesis arise. The artefact, *Snuff*, is set in the sinister world of strip clubs. The plot centers on an accidental, amateur sleuth named Raini Mitchell whose sister, Melody, an exotic dancer, is brutally murdered. Desperate to learn the truth, Raini goes deep under cover as a stripper, infiltrating her sister’s world and hunting for clues. Raini’s quest leads her to the adult film industry and ultimately reveals a sinister truth that she never could have imagined.

The exegesis is comprised of four sections. Utilising autoethnographic methodology, each examines different components of my creative process throughout the writing of my artefact. The exegesis stems from experience and practice. It is not embedded in academic debate as its starting point but arises from practice. I enter into and extend the scholarly conversation from reflections on my practice. The ‘voice’ in my exegesis is reflective, insightful, practical and is very personal. It records the subjective self in the process of writing, thinking about writing and participating in the scholarly conversation. This involves an autoethnographic methodology. Heewon Chang (2008) argues that autoethnography is “reader-friendly in that the personally engaging writing
style tends to appeal to readers more than conventional scholarly writing" (Chang 2008, p52). For me, autoethnographic methodology and practice-led research bridge this gap.

When I first began writing *Snuff* I didn’t think that the exegesis would have any impact on my artefact at all. In fact I was sure that researching feminist and literary theory would hinder my creative process. However, I was surprised to find that it had quite the opposite effect. I soon discovered that a process of “symbiosis between research and creative practice in which each feeds on the other” (Smith & Dean 2009, p.11) began to occur. The creative act would lead to research, the results of which would then influence and enrich the creative act even further. What eventuated was a continuous loop of creativity, research, and then creativity again. This process has also led to inspiration for further novels, and the establishment of a series character, signifying that the tools I have discovered throughout this process will continue to benefit me beyond this PhD. I hope to write two more books as a crime novelist using my series character, Raini Mitchell, in a similar fashion to other Australian writers such as Leigh Redhead and her series character Simone Kirsch, or Kerry Greenwood and her series character, Phyrne Fisher. I met and spoke with an editor from Text Publishing who has shown some interest in my work. However, I will not attempt to publish until my release from prison.

There are three major themes that arise within the exegesis that led my research. The first theme is concerned with feminism, the sex industry and raunch culture. As my novel is set in the sex industry this was a natural starting point. As a former sex worker I had strong opinions about the sex industry and I was challenged by the research I was conducting to find a discourse that best represented my experience. The binary view of the oppression/empowerment paradigms seemed limiting and did not capture my experience, or the experiences of my characters in the artefact, at all. So I embarked upon a journey to discover a middle ground.

The second thematic concern arises from my unique experience as an incarcerated PhD candidate and a convicted criminal. My research indicates that although much has been written about education and/or writing in prison (Rymhs 2009; Novek & Sanford 2004; Abou-bakr 2009; Bugg 2009; Culver
(1993; Davies 1990; Franklin 2008; McCarty 2006; Morgan 1999) there appeared to be no research on the ethical and moral responsibilities of a convicted criminal writing crime fiction. To my knowledge there is no research on other imprisoned female PhD candidates who completed their practice-led research PhDs whilst in prison. This particular theme became a key aspect of my original and significant contribution to knowledge.

The third theme focuses on character creation and how practice-led research influenced and affected characterization. By researching narrative theory, and in particular, character creation and characterization, I began to discover how characters can be employed in the artefact to represent a particular discourse. This further demonstrates “the reciprocal relationship between research and the creative process” (Smith & Dean 2009, p.11) and I was inspired by how rewarding this process can be.

The research as well as the creative act for this PhD has taken me on a personal and a writerly journey that has been both surprising and encouraging. The research led me to deep self-reflection in which I gained new knowledge and insights about myself and others and became transformed (Chang 2008, p.149). It is an experience that has enriched my writing and indeed my life.
Snuff

A Crime Novel
Prologue

She didn’t even see it coming.

Melody shielded her eyes from the too bright sun. She’d forgotten her sunglasses that morning. She tried not to squint too much knowing that squinting was to be avoided at all costs if you didn’t want wrinkles. She needed a cigarette badly. She’d realised she was out that morning when she’d dumped out the contents of her bag only to find an empty pack of Alpines. The local milk bar was only a five minute walk away so she’d quickly pulled on a pair of old jeans and when she’d left the house the sun had not been this bright. She walked briskly, enjoying the fresh air and recalling that she had a hair appointment that afternoon. Touching her hair self consciously, she considered doing something different with her it for a change. Something wild and fantastic; maybe she’d go blonde. A smile creased her lips as she imagined the surprise on everyone’s faces when she turned up for work with a crazy Mohawk or something else equally as shocking. She’d worn her hair long and dark for as long as she could remember. But since she’d broken up with her boyfriend she felt like she needed a fresh start and changing her hair seemed like a good way to make that happen.

She entered the milk bar, the bell on the door announcing her arrival to the woman reading a newspaper behind the counter. It smelted like some spicy food that she didn’t recognise. The woman smiled and Melody thought she was pretty with her olive complexion, long, straight black hair and pale pink lipstick. She asked for a pack of Alpines, made her purchase and left the small shop smiling.
The walk was doing her good, she decided. She felt slightly hung over from the night before but she’d been worse. Getting over a break up was never easy. It wasn’t like she hadn’t loved him. She just didn’t like him telling her what to do. She loved her independence and her lifestyle. Who was he to try and stop her? She stepped out onto the road checking both ways to see if there was traffic but the street was quiet save for the early morning chirping of birds and the odd sound of a truck in the distance.

She arrived at the front of her small, yellow weather board and opened her purse to look for the front door key. She rummaged through coins and scraps of paper with notes to herself until she found what she was looking for. Before she had a chance to close the purse, strong arms encircled her from behind. The purse fell from her grasp, coins spilling out onto the concrete with a loud clatter.

“Don’t move,” a gruff voice rasped into her ear.

As if she could. She was only five foot four and 55 kilos. He would have been at least twice her size. She struggled against him but he was too strong. It was over within seconds. The silencer muffled the sound of the shot so she only heard a low pop. She felt a sharp, searing pain in the right side of her neck like it was on fire. Then he released her and she hit the concrete with enough force to scrape the delicate skin on the left side of her face off. She tried to draw a single breath. Blood bubbled and spilled out of the wound in her neck like lava. The last thing she saw before she died was two balaclava clad men running away from her. And then she was gone.
I shoved the last packet of Tim Tams onto the shelf and contemplated a hysterectomy. Facial hair and absent ovaries would be a blessing compared to hatching a couple of monsters like the ones in the aisle behind me. I turned around and gritted my teeth. I’d worked at Safeway for two years and misbehaving brats still made me homicidal.

“I want it!” a chubby three-year-old screamed at her frazzled looking mother.

Perched up on her ‘throne’ in the trolley, she waved her arms around and tried to climb out, then scrunching up her freckled little face, she let out a scream that reminded me of an old Led Zeppelin album my sister used to play. At this rate, I’d be deaf by the end of my shift. Her older brother wore a red Spidey suit. He hung off the side of the trolley, gloating smugly as he pulled various items from the shelf and hurled them onto the floor. The mother flashed me a ‘don’t go there, sister’ look and I actually felt a little sorry for her. It was obvious that she had her hands full with the two little terrorists and judging by the blood shot eyes and Side Show Bob hair, she probably hadn’t slept in a week. I turned back to my biscuit shelf and sliced open a carton of Tiny Teddies. Why don’t they make these things bigger anyway?

“Raini Mitchell to the service desk, Raini Mitchell to the service desk,” the P.A chimed.

What now? If I wasn’t doing price checks or mopping up spills I might be able to get my biscuit aisle stocked properly and leave on time for once. I huffed and puffed,
cursing under my breath as I stomped all the way to the desk. I scowled at the Service
Manager with clenched fists and murder on my mind.

“Ray-neece,” she whined in her annoying, nasal voice, “You’ve got a phone call on
line three.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” I stammered guiltily.

Leah picked at a pimple and thrust the phone in my direction before returning to
her Woman’s Day and shitty attitude. I jabbed the flashing button and loosened my
annoying red bow tie.

“Hello?”

“Raini?”

“Mum?”

I heard a gurgling noise over the line.

“Mum? Is that you? Are you okay?”

“Oh Raini,” Mum choked.

“Mum? What’s wrong?”

My heart stalled as I began to panic.

“It...It’s your sister...”

“Melody? Is she okay? What’s happened?”

“Oh Raini,” she sobbed, “Melody’s dead. She’s dead.”
It was four days later that we buried Melody at the Fawkner Cemetery in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. The cloying smell of damp earth invaded my nostrils as I watched my sister’s coffin descend into the ground. God, how I wanted to jump in after her. Dad squeezed my hand. It wasn’t fair. Why Melody? Why murdered?

My face was puffy, swollen and stinging like I’d been exfoliated with sandpaper. I rubbed at my watery eyes, determined to tune out the sounds of sobbing and sniffing coming from the black sea of cousins, aunts and uncles behind me. I couldn’t stop crying. Salty tears burned my face and the sun was making it worse. Mum passed me a hankie. I swabbed at my eyes and blew my nose.

I stared at Melody’s coffin and tried to block out the memories. The way her face lit up when she laughed, the lectures she used to give me about my lack of style, the way she smelled of cinnamon and apples, the Christmas fights we had every year, without fail. I thought of all the things I loved about Melody and the fact that I’d never see her again. I was losing it, drowning in my own tears. I couldn’t breathe. I needed to get out of here.

I’d always known something bad would happen to Melody. We were so different. She was the wild one, the rebel, the free spirit. She’d left school at 16 and proudly announced to the family that she’d taken up stripping. Dad hit the roof and kicked her out but Melody didn’t care. She just moved in with a girl named ‘Peaches’ and made the best of it.
We didn’t see a lot of each other after that. She was too busy having a life and I was too busy avoiding one. When we did catch up, mostly at Christmas or when Melody had broken up with yet another boyfriend, she’d regale me with glamorous tales about her life - the wild parties, the drugs, the men. It all sounded like trouble to me and that had been confirmed last Christmas when Melody turned up for lunch with a black eye. She said it was an accident. That she’d tripped and fallen off the stage. But Melody never was a good liar. I’d decided to leave it alone though. When Melody didn’t want you to know something, no amount of talking or bribery could coax it out of her.

As kids Melody and I had dreamed about growing up and marrying two members from the ‘New Kids on the Block’, a boy band that we’d been obsessed with. Our rooms were covered in posters of these young pop stars and we knew all the words to every song they sang. We’d make up romantic stories late in to the night about how we were going to meet them, what the wedding would be like and where we were going to live happily ever after. But life rarely plays out like a fairytale, the way that you dream it will as a kid.

And now, at just 22, my beautiful sister was dead. Gone forever. It was too much. I couldn’t stay any longer. I turned to leave and felt Dad’s hand on my shoulder. I shrugged him off and kept walking.

I cut through some graves to my left, my heels sinking into the perfectly manicured lawn, and headed towards where I thought the car was parked. Unfortunately for me, my sense of direction is about as good as a blindfolded seeing-eye dog and I was lost within seconds. I swore under my breath and looked around, trying to figure out where the hell I was. I spotted an information board, hidden partially beneath creeping vines, and thanked God for small favours. I stared at the board and tried to locate the car park and how to get from the ‘You are here’ arrow but I couldn’t concentrate enough to work it out. I couldn’t get the image of how Melody had died out of my head.

A single bullet in the jugular and she’d bled out. That’s what the police told us. It had happened in the afternoon, in broad daylight, in front of her house. There were no witnesses and no suspects, so naturally, there were no leads. Or at least none that they were letting us in on. According to what the straight-forward and clearly seasoned homicide detective had told us, someone had simply walked up behind her, pulled the trigger and walked away. Just like that. He said it looked like a professional hit. How was it even possible that no one had seen anything? And more importantly, why would anyone want to kill my sister?
My head began to pound with a headache. The information board was harder to read than the Quran so if I had any hope of finding my way out of here I’d need to find Mum and Dad. I retraced my steps, following the gravel paths, but when I arrived back at Melody’s grave I was met by a pile of fresh dirt and not a soul in sight. Great. Just great. I must’ve been gone longer than I’d thought. I plonked down on a headstone across from Melody’s grave and waited for Mum or Dad to come back for me.

I spotted an unsmoked cigarette on the grass and picked it up. Dunhill Lights. If ever there was a time to take up smoking, it would definitely be now. With shaking hands I stuck it between my lips and wondered how I was going to light it when I saw a woman with dark sunglasses and blonde hair approaching.

“Scuse me,” I yelled as loudly as was politely possible in a cemetery.

The woman jumped nervously.

“Got a light?” I asked, waving my cigarette around casually, as though I smoked all the time.

“Yeah,” she stammered, reaching into her denim jacket and producing an expensive looking gold lighter.

She reached over to spark me up, cupping the flame with her hand. I took a couple of puffs to get it going and inhaled the third. The sharp smoke hit the back of my throat and sent me into a massive coughing fit. My eyes watered with effort, I felt giddy, but I was determined to pull it together enough to finish the bastard.

“You alright?”

The woman patted me on the back and took a seat next to me.

“You don’t smoke, do you?” she smiled.

I shook my head, coughed some more and shakily took another, smaller drag. The second puff was a little better and I silently congratulated myself. It was then that I noticed the woman was carrying a bunch of yellow roses.

“Visiting someone?” I asked, squinting at her in the sun.

The woman nodded and stood. She bent over and placed the roses on Melody’s grave.

“You knew Melody?” I asked, surprised.

She turned and cocked her head at me.

“Yeah, why? Did you?”

“She’s my sister,” I replied.
I took another hit of nicotine.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t think anyone would be here…”

She looked fidgety, uncomfortable.

“How come you weren’t at the funeral?”

The woman shrugged and squatted, touching her palm to the pile of earth. She sniffed, her touch lingering as she cried behind her huge Jackie O sunglasses.

“Were you a friend of Melody’s?”

She returned to the headstone I’d claimed for a stool and reached for my half smoked ciggie. She took two deep drags, one after the other, and passed it back. I studied the parts of her face that weren’t hidden behind the glasses. She had flawless, milky white skin and pouty, red painted lips. The kind guys fantasise about. With such smooth skin she was either about the same age as me or a walking advertisement for Botox. I couldn’t see her eyebrows so I wasn’t too sure. She had shoulder length, platinum blonde hair that was fashionably styled - long windswept fringe and layered ‘flicky’ bits. But it was her nails that finally clued me in. Long, diamante studded, glossy red and definitely false. Just like Melody’s.

“You worked with her, didn’t you?” I asked.

She looked away, deciding not to answer. I tried a different question.

“How long did you know her for?”

“A while,” she sighed.

She wasn’t much of a talker. I tried again.

“How well did you know my sister?”

She smiled. Or was it a smirk? I couldn’t actually tell.

“Pretty well.”

“What’s your name?” I asked, grinding my cigarette into the grass.

She gave me the silent treatment again.

“Hey, what’s your problem?”

I jumped up and faced her, my hands planted firmly on my hips. She flinched.

“What do you mean?”


“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just, I have to be careful, that’s all.”
“Careful of what? I only want to know about my sister, for fuck sake. It’s not like I’m some murderous psycho looney who runs around cemeteries looking for victims!”

I knew I was over reacting but I couldn’t help it. This whole mystery woman thing was pissing me off big time. She rose to leave.

“Hey!” I said, grabbing her sleeve.
“I have to go,” she mumbled.
“Please don’t walk away from me! I want to know about my sister, about her life.”
The woman sped up and I broke into a trot behind her, unwilling to let it go.
“Hey!” I yelled, “I’m talking to you.”
She stopped dead in her tracks and spun around to face me.
“Look, just leave me alone!” she hissed, “I don’t know anything!”
“Know anything about what?”
“About your sister, okay?”
“What do you mean? You knew her. Pretty well you said. Why won’t you talk to me?”
“I can’t. I can’t tell you anything.”
“But why? I don’t understand. I just want to know about Melody. About her world, her friends, what she was doing before she died. Please,” I begged.
My voice cracked as I began to cry.
“I can’t. They’ll kill me. I’m sorry. I have to go.”
She turned and ran.
I tumbled to the ground as my heel got stuck in the grass. By the time I stood back up and ran to the end of the row of graves, she was gone.
I’d been waiting in Detective Reyes’ office for about 15 minutes. I was beginning to get irritated and headachy thanks to the strong paint smell that permeated the room. The bone coloured walls looked freshly painted and I tapped my foot impatiently and silently cursed Reyes for keeping me waiting.

Reyes’ desk was bare apart from a computer and a brown paper bag that smelled suspiciously like egg sandwiches. Lunch no doubt. A few old steel filing cabinets stood to the left with what looked like a pot of geraniums on top of the middle one. I might’ve been wrong about the geraniums - the poor plant was half dead so I was hazarding a guess.

I stood and walked to a large window next to the desk that overlooked St Kilda Rd. I was on the ninth floor, Homicide Division at the St Kilda Rd Police Complex. Detective Reyes was the officer in charge of my sister’s case. I’d called him after the funeral and told him about the mystery woman. He’d asked me to come in today to make a statement. I checked my watch. 20 minutes. I turned back to the window and watched the traffic crawl past.

“Miss Mitchell?” a voice boomed from behind me.

I jumped and turned to face the voice that I assumed belonged to Detective Reyes. He wasn’t what I’d expected. His long hair, leather jacket and black jeans made him look more like a thug than a cop. A good looking thug nonetheless. I must’ve looked confused because he smiled as though my reaction was expected. I stuck my hand out.

“Detective Reyes?”
“Sorry to keep you waiting. Busy morning,” he apologised and shook my hand.

“That’s okay,” I lied.

He planted himself in the chair behind the desk and gestured for me to sit across from him. I caught a nose full of his overpowering aftershave, which reminded me of car freshener. And not the expensive kind.

“You said on the phone that you met someone at the funeral? A woman?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Can you take me through it again please?” he asked.

He picked up a pen and looked at me expectantly.

“Well, like I said, I was at the funeral and after everyone had left, this woman showed up at Melody’s grave.”

“Was anyone else there? Besides yourself, I mean.”

“No. Not that I saw.”

“Go on.”

“I asked her if she knew Melody and she said that she did.”

“You get a name?”

“No. She wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“Then what?”

“Well, I kept questioning her. You know? About Melody. Then she got really defensive and started to leave. I chased after her and asked her to tell me why she couldn’t talk, right? And then she just turned around and said she couldn’t tell me anything or they’d kill her.”

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“Well that’s what I wanted to know but then she took off and I lost her.”

Reyes stroked his chin thoughtfully, his green eyes narrowing to slits as he squinted.

“What did this woman look like?”

“I couldn’t really tell. She was wearing these huge sunglasses.”

“Hair colour? Height?”

“She was blonde. Her hair was about this long,” I said, indicating a spot on my shoulder, “She was about my height. Pale skin. Oh, and she had these red fake nails with diamantes on them. I remember the nails because it was what made me think she worked with Melody.”

Reyes arched an eyebrow.
“And what made you think that?”

“Because Melody was always getting her nails done like that. Well, not exactly like that, but the same kind of thing, you know?”

“You remember anything else about her?”

“Um, not really. She was slim. Maybe a size eight. Oh and I got a light off her so she must’ve been a smoker.”

“Okay. What we’ll do is get one of the sergeants to take a formal statement from you.”

“That’s it?”

“Ah, yep. If we need to ask you anything else, we’ll give you a call.”

“But I thought...I mean...what are you going to do?”

“Well, assuming that she worked with the dec...Er, your sister, we’ve most likely already interviewed her. We spoke to everyone at ‘Hollywood Girls’ the day of your sister’s death,” Reyes cleared his throat.

“And?”

“Well, to put it plainly, if anyone knows anything, they’re not talking.”

“Surely there must be someone who knows something. The woman! If I could just go to the club with you, I could pick her out, I...”

“I’m sorry, Miss Mitchell, like I said, we’ve already been down that road. If something else turns up, we’ll be in touch.”

“But you have to do something! That woman, she knows something! I know it!”

“I’m sorry but unless she comes forward there’s nothing we can do.”

“Well can’t you send someone in undercover or something?”

“The department won’t fund an undercover operation and there’s no evidence to suggest that we even need to go to that extreme. I’m sorry.”

I fought back the tears that threatened to appear at any second and tried to regain my composure. It wasn’t fair. Melody was just another statistic to them, another case that would probably never be solved made all the more insignificant by the fact that she was a stripper. I stood up and slung my handbag over my shoulder. Reyes looked at me pityingly.

“I’ll call reception and let them know I’m sending you to make a statement.”

“Why? It’s not going to help anyway. Look, just forget it!” I snapped.

“I can see you’re very upset right now,” Reyes began.
No shit, Sherlock, I thought bitterly.

“Perhaps when you’re feeling a little less stressed you can come back. How about next Friday?”

I shot him my best ‘piss off’ look before stomping to the door and slamming it on my way out. I continued to stomp all the way to the elevator.

“Excuse me, Miss,” a red haired receptionist called after me, “Detective Reyes wants me to make another appointment for you...”

I ignored her and kept stomping, no longer able to stop the flood of tears. I wiped at them with my sleeve and stepped into the lift. The doors closed and an electronic voice with an American accent announced that we were now leaving the ninth floor.

I couldn’t understand why the police weren’t making Melody’s murder their top priority. Couldn’t they see that she didn’t deserve to die? That she had family who loved her, who needed to know what happened? That our lives would never be the same again? My tears turned to sobs, which I tried unsuccessfully to choke back. Somebody had to do something. And if the police wouldn’t, then I would.

Reyes said that the department wouldn’t fund an undercover operation. But what if it didn’t cost them anything? What if someone were willing to do it on their own time and for nothing more than the satisfaction of bringing down the people who murdered Melody? I wiped my face and pulled myself together, feeling for the first time since the murder, a glimmer of hope.

What if I went undercover?

The idea sounded ludicrous and I laughed at myself. But what if...?

I stopped laughing. Maybe it wasn’t so stupid after all. I could do this. Maybe get a job at the club. Did they have bar maids at strip clubs? I could get a job behind the bar, or maybe waitressing. Then I could find the woman from the cemetery! Or better yet, what if there were others who knew the truth? Who knew what had really happened to Melody? My heart thumped against my ribs as adrenalin coursed through my body.

Yes. I was going to do it. I’d made up my mind.
Two weeks later, I finally plucked up the courage to call ‘Hollywood Girls’ and ask if they were hiring. I’d spoken with the Manager, a woman named Trish, who told me they were only hiring hostesses or dancers. I had no idea what a hostess did but I had an interview with her in about 20 minutes.

It was almost six o’clock when I stepped off the tram at Flinders Street. I shivered and pulled my jacket around me tightly. It was only autumn but it felt unusually cold. Or perhaps it was my jangling nerves making me shiver. Being a Friday night, the traffic was insane and barely moving. I hurried along the crowded pavement and took a right into King Street. Mum had always told me to stay away from this street. Too dangerous, she’d said. In fact King Street had featured heavily in the news during the late 80’s and 90’s. Nightclub bashings, late night brawls and drive by shootings had thrust the now infamous street into the spotlight.

No ordinary street, King Street was renowned for the number of nightclubs and strip clubs it housed. From Flinders Street all the way up to Lonsdale Street, there were four or five table top clubs, seven if you included the two that offered ‘Ladies Night’ on Saturdays, and at least half a dozen nightclubs. From Friday to Monday night, King Street was party central. And tonight, for the first time, I’d be in the thick of it.

By the time I reached the huge red doors of ‘Hollywood Girls’ I was nervous and my shivering had been replaced with sweating. I’d never even been to a strip club as a patron let alone a potential employee. I had no idea what to expect as I pushed on the
intercom and waited for an answer. I heard a whirring sound coming from above. I looked up and straight into the lens of a security camera.

“Yeah?” a voice on the intercom crackled.

“Ah, hi. I have an appointment to see Trish.”

“Name?”

Shit. On the phone I’d told Trish my real first name. I’d have to stick with it and just change my surname.

“Raini.”

“Who?”

“Davies. Raini Davies.”

I heard a buzz and a click as the door lock was released. I stepped over the threshold and into the foyer. The walls were painted a deep red and adorned with blown up pictures of women posing in exotic costumes. I climbed the red carpeted stairs with tiny spotlights leading the way on either side. The stairs veered off to the right as I went higher. I could hear music, an old disco tune, which became louder as I entered the club.

The lights were on, though slightly dimmed, and I couldn’t see anyone. To my left was a velvet curtained stage with three catwalks that led to podiums situated amongst many tables and chairs. To my right were two pool tables, chairs and couches, and straight ahead, a large bar. The stench of stale beer, cigarette smoke and lingering traces of perfume wafted up my nostrils. It was the kind of smell that clung to you long after you’d left its source but after a few hours, you missed it.

I tip toed to the bar, feeling like an intruder. I hadn’t exactly expected a welcoming committee but someone to greet me and tell me I was in the right place might have been nice. I slid onto a bar stool and helped myself to a bowl of rice snacks.

“Raini?” a voice called from the darkness.

I swivelled my head in the direction of the voice and saw a petite blonde with a solarium tan heading my way. I assumed it was Trish and stood to greet her. She wore a sparkly blue mini dress that revealed much cleavage and a well toned, lithe body. Her legs, though short, seemed much longer in her silver platform stilettos and I immediately wished I looked like her.

“Hi. We spoke on the phone,” she smiled, extending a hand full of perfectly manicured and French polished nails, “I’m Trish.”
The way she said her name drew my attention to her lips. Either she’d had way too much collagen or she was a trout incognito. I’d only ever seen lips like these on ‘The Bold and the Beautiful’. I didn’t think I’d ever see them for real. Still, apart from the lips, she had a beautiful face that I reckoned to be older than she actually looked. She had intelligent blue eyes and a perfect little nose, high cheekbones and great veneers. I liked her instantly.

“Nice to meet you,” I smiled back.

“Just come through to my office.”

She did an about-face and sashayed across the floor towards a black door, leaving a thick trail of Samsara perfume in her wake. I grabbed another handful of rice snacks and followed her.

Trish’s office was pretty ordinary except for a few calendars and framed pictures of women in half naked poses hanging from the walls. The musky scent of her perfume was stronger in here. On closer inspection of the pictures I realised that most of the pictures were of Trish. A much younger Trish, by the look of things.

“Miss Striptease of the year ’92,” she said dreamily, as my eyes passed over a glossy of a naked Trish bathing in a giant champagne glass.

I moved on to the next one.

“Miss Erotica ’94,” she continued, beaming from ear to ear as she mentally relived her youth.

Clearly, Trish was a woman who had been in the business for years and she didn’t muck around. Her modern, glass top desk was well organised with no clutter and a whiteboard was attached to the wall near the door with what appeared to be a roster written on it. Names like Phoenix, Nikita, Cherry, Bijou and Sunshine were listed alongside the days and hours that they worked.

Next was a group photo of about 20 women wearing red string bikinis with Trish standing in front, the ‘Hollywood Girls’ sign in clear view behind them. Probably a promotional shot, this one was recent.

“That was taken when we first opened. Our original group of ‘Hollywood Dancers’.”

I moved closer, my eyes resting finally on a woman posing to the right. Melody. My breath caught in my throat. I closed my eyes and counted to three, pushing her to a
safe place in the back of my mind. I forced a smile and had just taken a seat opposite Trish when there was a knock at the door.

“Kinda busy here!” Trish yelled.

“Sorry,” a voice mumbled behind me.

I turned around and caught sight of a balding version of Van Damme without the accent. He had a numbered security I.D clipped to his shirt pocket and a sheepish look on his face.

“What is it?” Trish snapped, rummaging through her desk drawer.

“Um, nothing. I can come back later...”

“For God sake, Abraham. Why’d you interrupt me if it’s not important,” Trish sighed and rolled her eyes.

The door closed and Trish’s smile reappeared along with a bottle of Samsara. She spritzed herself generously. I got the feeling she was addicted to perfume.

“You said on the phone you were interested in work...”

“Um, yeah,” I fidgeted nervously.

“Let me look at you properly,” she perched on the desk in front of me and brushed my hair back from my face, “A few highlights here, and bit of makeup...”

I burned red. I wasn’t used to this kind of attention.

“Stand up, Darl.”

I did as she requested, cursing myself for wearing my sensible black, knee length skirt and baby blue shirt. She walked around me, resting her hands on my hips as she sized me up, figuring out my measurements, no doubt.

“You could probably lose a bit of weight...but that will happen after a few weeks anyway...”

What? What the hell was she on about?

“Can you dance?”

I did a pretty mean Macarena but I got the distinct impression that it wasn’t what she meant. I shook my head.

“Never mind. You’ll learn. When can you start?”

“St-start?”

Did she mean stripping?

“Start work.”

I looked at her questioningly.
“As a dancer,” she finished.

“No, no, no, no. You’ve got it mixed up,” I gestured wildly.

“You’ve never danced?”

“No, well, I had a few lessons once…”

“Perfect!” Trish clapped.

“No, I mean for the Rock Eisteddfod, at high school.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. I’ll train you myself.”

“But, but…”

Trish dismissed my protests with a wave.

“You can start tomorrow night. Come in early, about four, and I’ll give you the basic run down and show you some moves,” she said, jotting down the time in an appointment book, “And don’t worry about costumes. You can hire some from us until you buy your own.”

I sagged back down in my seat. I was speechless. How the hell had a hostessing interview turned into my becoming a stripper? I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t do this. No way!

“Trish, I’m sorry but I can’t take my clothes off in front of thousands of strangers, I just can’t, it’s not me!” I panicked.

Trish smiled and cocked her head, “Course you can! Don’t you worry. I’ll make a dancer out of you yet.”

I stared up at the picture of my sister. I felt like crying. Melody seemed to be smiling at me as though telling me that this was my chance! Probably the only one I’d ever have of finding out the truth about what really happened. I had to take it and to hell with the fact that I was going to have to undress in front of half of Melbourne.

I cleared my throat, faking a bravery that I definitely didn’t feel.

“Tomorrow night it is then,” I squeaked.

“Fabulous!” Trish grinned broadly.

We shook hands and I stood to leave. I took a last look at Melody’s picture, satisfied that I was doing the right thing. All I had to do now was figure out how I was going to keep this from Mum and Dad.
Being backstage at a strip club is not a pretty sight. I'd arrived early as Trish had requested, though she hadn’t had time to ‘train’ me. Instead, I’d been palmed off to one of the dancers, a tall, olive skinned brunette named Dallas, who was supposed to show me the ropes. I sat perched on the edge of a stained chair in front of the dressing table while Dallas plucked stray pubic hairs in the chair next to me. I was trying not to look but it was a little difficult considering she had her legs spread, ankles resting on the table in full view of the mirror. I turned away and surveyed the messy dressing room. Amongst all the sequins and beads, long legs and stilettos, bright lights and beautiful women, I felt like a K-Mart on Chapel Street. I was completely out of my depth and scared shitless.

“How’s it look?” Dallas asked absently, admiring her handy work in the mirror.

“Er, fine,” I mumbled.

Dallas lit a smoke, adding extra fumes to my nostrils. The scent of heady, overpowering perfume, powder and perspiration was now fused with cigarette smoke. I coughed and waved a cloud of it away.

“Picked out a stage name yet?” Dallas arched an eyebrow in my direction.

I shook my head. The idea hadn’t even occurred to me until now.

“What about something like Mystique or Paris?”

I shook my head again.

“Ooh, I know. I’ve got a good one. How about Mercedes?”

“I think I’d prefer something a little bit simpler,” I laughed.
Despite how she’d seemed in the beginning, I was starting to like Dallas. She was striking to look at with intense brown eyes and the longest eyelashes I’d ever seen, naturally full lips and a light smattering of freckles just over her nose. She pulled a face at me in the mirror.

“Okay. What about something like Angel then?”

“Angel...yeah, I like that.”

“Then it’s settled. Hey, Mum!” she yelled over her shoulder.

Mum? What? Dallas’s Mum worked here too? An older, grey haired and petite woman looked up from her sewing. I hadn’t even noticed her until now. She had pins in her mouth and seemed to be repairing a costume from what I could tell. My jaw dropped. I mean, I knew some guys liked older women but I had no idea that older meant senior citizen!

“What?” she mumbled between pins.

“The new girl’s name is gonna be Angel.”

‘Mum’ removed the pins and flicked her eyes over me, sizing me up.

“Right-o,” she said matter of factly.

“Your Mum works here?” I asked Dallas, shock written all over my face.

“No,” Dallas laughed, “She’s one of the House Mums.”

“Oh,” I laughed, embarrassed at my naiveté.

“Everyone just calls her Mum. She looks after us. She does all the podium rosters, fixes our costumes, gets us food platters and stuff. If you have a problem, just go to Mum. She always fixes it.”

Dallas stood up and reached for a purple and silver sequined bikini. She was tall and slim with a flat stomach and firm breasts. I’d have killed for a body like hers at that moment.

“Right then, girls!” Mum clapped, suddenly standing up from her chair, “The first podium is in an hour. Jamie, you’re up first,” she nodded in the direction of a voluptuous blonde two seats down from me.

I gulped. This was moving very fast and I hadn’t even been ‘trained’ yet.

“Also,” Mum continued, “Trish has asked me to have a word to you girls about fake tan. You’re not to put it on just before work anymore ‘cause you’re getting it on the poles and when the other girls go to do their podiums it’s rubbing off on their legs and hands.”
“Tell me about it!” grumbled a gorgeous red head sporting a suspicious orange mark on her right thigh.

“It’s because someone is too cheap to go and get a spray tan,” a freckle faced brunette sneered at another girl across the room.

“Well some of us have got better things to spend our money on,” the object of the sneer retorted.

“Yeah, like taking care of that tribe of kids you’ve got!” the gorgeous red head laughed.

“Right then,” Mum finished, “That’s all. Any problems let me know and have a good night ladies.”

“Thanks,” the room chorused.

“Come on,” Dallas nudged me in the ribs, “We’ve only got an hour to get you ready and I still need to show you what to do.”

I began to sweat. I really didn’t want to undress in front of all these women with bodies to die for, or anyone else for that matter. In a room full of abs, I had ‘flabs’. This was quite possibly the most embarrassing moment of my life. I reached for the bag that Trish had supplied me with. Inside were two bikinis - one red and white sequined, the other a jaundiced looking fluoro yellow. There was also a dress that matched the sequined bikini. It was a red halter neck, tight fitting, low cut and similarly adorned with red sequins. It looked small so I wasn’t confident about being able to get into it. I unbuttoned my shirt and unzipped my jeans, holding my breath as I bared myself to everyone. To my surprise, no one seemed phased by my nakedness, despite the fact that I looked like an Albino beached whale. I picked up the bikini bottoms. What the hell?

“Ah, Dallas. I think these are broken,’ I said, swinging them in front of her.

She laughed. I was making her laugh a lot tonight.

“No, Silly! They have clips on the side. You do them up like this,” she said, demonstrating with her own costume.

I watched as she clipped them together and pulled them on.

“The clips just make it easier to take them off,’ she explained.

“Oh,” I blushed.

I felt like a total dumb arse. I followed her lead and yanked the bottoms on. They fitted like glad wrap. Really, really tight glad wrap. I nearly died when I realised it was g-string. I poked a few stray pubes back into place wishing to God I’d had a Brazilian or at
least a wax. Thankfully, the top was easier to work out, but unfortunately it only covered my nipples thanks to the fact that I was rather large breasted. Honestly, bikinis this tiny should be illegal. I sucked in my stomach and looked at myself in the mirror. I had love handles, a bit of a flabby tummy and a bumpy butt. This wasn’t funny. I felt like crying.

“Don’t worry,” Dallas reassured me, “You’ll tone up. The dancing will see to that!” I bit back my tears and smiled gratefully. She handed me the dress and watched me struggle into it before zipping me up. It was so tight I could barely breathe.

“How the hell am I supposed to get this thing off?”

“Don’t worry. You just ask one of the guys to unzip you. They think it’s really sexy!” she grinned.

“So how does this whole thing work?” I asked her.

“Okay. You’ll be rostered on for a podium once every couple of hours depending on how many girls are here. You stay up there for 20 minutes and unless a guy tips you, you don’t have to take your costume off.”

“What, I go up there in my dress?”

“No, just the bikini. The dress is for on the floor.”

“Right. And where do I put the money?”

“Oh, here,” she said, tossing me a black garter, which I pulled up onto my right thigh hoping that it wouldn’t cut off my circulation.

“So what do I do when I’m not doing podiums?”

“Well...that’s when you make the real money working the floor. You’ve gotta hustle. Walk around and talk to the guys, try and get them to have a private lap dance. If they say yes, you take them to one of the couches. It’s $10 a song and the minimum they can buy is two songs.”

I nodded dumbly. This was starting to get complicated.

“But what you really want to talk them into is having a fantasy.”

“A what?”

“A fantasy dance. There are eight private rooms and all of them are different according to the theme. It costs $50 to use one of the rooms for 15 minutes and there’s costumes and music to go with each different theme. If a guy wants a fantasy, you take him with you to see one of the hostesses and she’ll sort you out.”

“And where are the costumes?”

“They’re in some lockers backstage.”
“What kind of fantasies are they?”

“Um, let’s see...school girl, nurse, cow girl, secretary, cop, French maid, bride. You know? The usual.”

I didn’t know what the usual was but I guessed I was about to find out.

“Right, so the costumes are backstage somewhere. What about the music?”

“The tapes are with the costumes in the lockers and oh my God, wait until you hear some of the cheesy music on them. Like the secretary one - it’s Sheena Easton for chrissake. You know that ‘Morning Train’ song?” she rolled her eyes.

I laughed. That was funny. Stripping to Sheena Easton. What a crack up!

“Hey, you bring any make up with you?” Dallas asked.

I nodded and reached for my vanity case.

“Sit down,” she offered, “I’ll help you out.”

I did as I was instructed and she got to work. With the amount of foundation she was smearing onto my face I got the feeling I was either going to end up looking like a drag queen or Jeannie Little. Either way, it wasn’t looking good. I closed my eyes and let her finish the job. My head was spinning with information. Podiums, hustling, lap dances, fantasies. Who knew this was such a physically demanding job? I mean, I thought all I’d have to do was wiggle around a bit and undress. But I was beginning to understand that there was more to stripping than just taking your clothes off.

By the time Dallas spun me around in my chair and let me look at my reflection, I barely recognised myself.

“You look amazing!” she beamed.

I could hardly believe what I was seeing. Though my hair was lighter and my eyes a different colour, I looked like a chubbier faced version of my sister, Melody. My eyes clouded with tears.

“Oh, don’t cry!” Dallas whispered and passed me a tissue, “It’s not that bad, is it?”

“It’s not that. I just look so different. I can hardly believe it’s me,” I squeaked.

Dallas hugged me. The red head with the fake tan stain eyeballed me. I stared back, pretending to be tough.

“What are you looking at?” Dallas demanded, spinning in the redhead’s direction.

‘Red’ looked away but not before piercing me with one last, contemptuous look. I got the feeling she didn’t like me.
“Don’t worry about her,” Dallas snorted, “She’s just a bitch. Everybody thinks so. She’s probably just jealous.”

I nearly choked.

“Jealous? Of me?”

“She’s jealous of everyone under thirty because she’s old and past her use by date. Don’t let her bother you.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name’s Cheetah. She’s been stripping for years. Her and Trish go way back, which is why she thinks she’s sooo invincible. Nobody else gets along with her.

Geez, talk about bitchy. I could see that despite the initial appearance of camaraderie there was also a ruthless, competitiveness in this business. I’d have to watch my step. I needed to stay under the radar if I wanted to get anywhere.

“Ready?” Dallas asked.

“Just a sec,” I reached into Trish’s bag for a pair of stilettos.

These were the mother of all heels - a platform and stiletto all in one. The kind drag queens wore. Holy shit, I thought to myself. Best case scenario - broken leg. Worst case scenario - broken neck! I slid my feet in and buckled up. When I stood up it felt like I was wearing stilts. I wobbled dangerously, my knees knocking together in protest. Dallas laughed.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get used to them. Have a bit of practice walking.”

I took a timid step and almost lost my balance. Perspiration prickled my forehead. I managed another and then another and finally made it from one end of the dressing room to the other. If I wasn’t so scared, I would’ve whooped for joy.

“Excellent! Now follow me,’ Dallas ordered.

She straightened her skirt and made for the stage entrance. I shuffled inelegantly behind her. Between the tight dress and the high heels, everything was an uphill battle, including the small flight of stairs I was crab walking up. Dallas moved aside some thick, red velvet curtains and the stage loomed before me. Though only a few feet higher than the ground, it felt like I was ten stories up and with nothing to hold onto I was scared I’d fall off. I grabbed hold of Dallas and clung for dear life. Thankfully, she let me. She half dragged, half led me to one of the three podiums that ran off the stage, where she transferred me from her to the pole.
“Just climb down and sit in that chair and I’ll show you some moves,” she indicated a chair that was eye level with the podium.

I did as she asked and watched as she swung one leg around the pole and twirled gracefully around it so that she landed sitting on the podium. Easy...right?

“Okay, so say a guy’s sitting here. You wanna entice him to give you as much money as you can so the trick is to give him heaps of attention.”

She smiled at me sexily, as though I were a customer, and swung her legs up onto my shoulders. I thanked Christ she was still clothed. Supporting herself with her arms, she gyrated her hips. From there it only got worse. The next minute she had one leg up in the air with her crotch only metres from my face as she wriggled and ran a hand down her leg. I’m pretty sure I was turning red at that point because my face felt hot and uncomfortable. I was relieved when she stood up again. Resting her back against the pole, she writhed up and down it again before swinging around once more.

“Right, so I’m supposed to do all this and take my clothes off at the same time?”

“Only if he tips you. If not, keep your clothes on, no more attention.”

I groaned. This was going to be a long night.
I was slugging ‘em back at the bar an hour later trying to build my confidence when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Excuse me, are you free?”
I spun around with a mouthful of gin, lime and lemonade and almost choked on it.
The shoulder tapper was a man of about 40 with kind eyes and about as much fashion sense as Bert Newton has hair.

“Er, no. No I’m not free. It’s $10 a song,” I managed.
“No I mean do you have some free time to give me a dance,” he explained.
“Oh, right. Um, yes. Er, right now?”
“How about a drink first, eh?”
“Great idea!”
He bought me another gin and introduced himself as Maurice. We shook hands as the DJ announced a podium change.

“Gentlemen, get your tipping dollars ready! On podium one, we have the tantalizing Tameka! On podium two, say hello to the delightful Dallas! Ride ‘em cowboy!”
Dallas strutted out to the middle podium and gave me an encouraging wave. The DJ continued spruiking the next dancer and I guzzled down some gin.

“I’m Angel.”
“First night then?”
“Is it that obvious?”
He smiled and scratched a greying temple.

“So...Maurice...um, do you come here often?” I asked for lack of anything better to say.

“Funny you should ask. I come here every weekend. Can’t seem to stay away from the place.”

His eyes twinkled with memories.

“Been coming here long?”

“Few years,” he chuckled.

I wondered if he’d known my sister. I wanted to ask him but I couldn’t make it obvious. I had to be subtle.

“So Maurice, how about that dance now?” I ventured.

I drained the last of my gin, enjoying the pleasant tipsiness I was beginning to feel. They didn’t call it Dutch courage for nothing.

“I was thinking I might like a fantasy...”

Maurice reached into his jacket for his wallet and began counting out bills. Shit! I began to panic. I was having second thoughts. Come on, Raini, you can do it, I repeated over and over in my head. I accepted the money that Maurice handed me and counted it out. Jesus! It was a hundred and twenty bucks!

“Fantasies are only fifty,” I said.

“I know. The rest is for you to keep. A tip,” he smiled.

“Um, thanks,” I stammered.

Okay, maybe I could do this after all. Nobody had ever given me money for a glimpse of my chubby, naked body before, but who was I to argue? I grabbed Maurice’s hand and led him to the fantasy rooms where I handed $50 over to an ever smiling hostess.

“Which fantasy do ya want?” she asked.

I looked at Maurice.

“I’ll leave it up to you. Surprise me,” he said.

I nodded and the hostess led him to a room through a cloud of perfume that she trailed like a skunk. It smelled only slightly more pleasant. I tucked the rest of my money into my garter and tip toe ran backstage to change.

The dressing room was empty except for, lucky me, Cheetah. I still didn’t know where the fantasy lockers were and I had to ask her.

“Ah, ‘scuse me, where are the fantasy lockers?” I asked tentatively.
Cheetah looked me up and down. I stared back, determined not to be intimidated, even though I was. She was tall with lightly freckled, and I suspected years of sun damaged, golden skin. She had breast implants that looked like two grapefruits stuck to her chest and shoulder length hair with blonde foils. Now that I looked closely, I could see that she was a lot older than most of the other women here, with the exception of Mum, of course. She was probably about 40, definitely over 35 anyway, and up close her face had a pinched, haughty look about it. I could tell we weren’t likely to be best buddies any time soon.

She leaned back on the dressing table, arms folded, and pointed towards the stairs by the stage. I thanked her and kept my distance as I walked past her on my way to the lockers. I didn’t know what her problem was but I decided to stay out of her way as much as possible. I could feel her eyes burning into the back of my head as I located the ‘secretary’ locker and swung the door open. After hearing about the Sheena Easton music, I couldn’t resist, and decided to go for the secretary fantasy. As I undressed and put on my costume of shirt, suit briefcase and glasses, I kept repeating my mantra.

“You can do this, you can do this.”

I heard a snort of disgust from behind me. I glanced over my shoulder as Cheetah turned back to the mirror and I silently wished that her hair would fall out.

Cheetah’s bad attitude had completely sobered me up and was still very much on my mind when I stumbled into the fantasy room in my dodgy costume. The room was supposed to be an office but looked more like a waiting room. There was a desk and chair to one side and two more chairs opposite it. A cup full of pens and pencils sat on the desk. Pretty piss poor as far as props went and last time I checked, waiting rooms weren’t the kind of places people fantasised about. I smiled at Maurice, trying my best to be charming, and shuffled over to the stereo in the corner. I wasn’t sure exactly how I was supposed to go about this. I’d only ever gotten naked for one man before and we’d always done it with the lights off. My heart was beating like it was on speed as I loaded the cassette and pushed play. And there it was - the opening bars of ‘Morning Train’. It was hard not to laugh.

Maurice had a dreamy look in his eyes as I strutted towards him trying my best to look sexy. It was difficult. Especially considering I hadn’t been able to zip the skirt up because it was so small and I was teetering dangerously on my heels. Christ! I should’ve knocked back a few more gins. I really wanted to ask Maurice if he’d known Melody but
between the fact that I was shitting myself as well as not wanting to make it obvious, I remained mute and began my routine.

I stood in front of Maurice and gyrated my hips, hoping that I wouldn’t fall over. Shit! What was I supposed to do next? Take off your clothes, take off your clothes, a little voice in the back of my head taunted me. I took the shirt off and swung it around my head, smacking myself in the face with a button. Ouch! Next, I had to get the skirt off, which was easier said than done. I must’ve looked a right idiot as I tried unsuccessfully to tug it down a few times. I started to panic and tugged harder. I heard a ripping sound and hoped that Maurice hadn’t heard it too. But at least I got it off. I kicked it to the side and paraded around in my sequined bikini trying to maintain some dignity.

I hoisted a leg onto Maurice’s lap and tried to look like I knew what I was doing as I writhed around like a drunk cobra. I might’ve been doing a crappy job but judging by the look on his face he seemed to be enjoying it. I could see tiny bubbles of foam forming at the sides of his mouth so either the old guy was getting a bit excited or he was about to have an epileptic fit. I did a little twirl and untied my bikini just as my right leg gave way beneath me and I fell face first into Maurice’s lap. Jesus Christ! The heel of my stiletto had snapped under my weight and my ankle throbbed in protest.

“Ah!” I cried out, but not from the pain.

Something hard was poking me in the forehead and it was obviously happy to see me. I jumped up like I’d been burned and twisted my ankle some more. Fuck! I knew these stupid heels were a bad idea. Maurice gave a little grunt. His eyes had clouded over, his face an explosion of bright pink. He had the distinct look of a man who needed a post coital cigarette. Eew, gross! That is so disgusting. I felt tarnished and dirty. Violated even. I didn’t know whether to laugh, cry or chuck a fit so I did my best impersonation of a cod fish catching flies.

Maurice recovered himself and cleared his throat.

“Er, um, I, um...here,” he mumbled, shoving a wad of cash in my direction, “Please take it. I’m so embarrassed, I...”

I hesitated for just a second then snatched the money from him. He was still red faced but at least I hadn’t had to go the full monty. I retied my bikini and counted out the cash. $200!!! I stopped myself from whooping out loud and gave Maurice an admonishing ‘too right’ look. His eyes pleaded with me to forget the whole thing, which I might just do in exchange for a little information...
“I can't apologise enough. It’s never happened before. I feel so embarrassed...”

“Well, these things happen,” I smiled sweetly, perching on the chair next to him and retying my bikini.

Now was my chance.

“So um, Maurice, did you know that girl that used to work here? The one that got murdered a couple of weeks ago?”

I tucked the money safely into my garter.

“Why do you wanna know about her for?” Maurice asked, looking alarmed.

Think fast, I told myself.

“Oh, well it’s just that the girls were talking about it in the dressing room earlier and it kind of freaked me out, you know?”

Maurice looked away and began to fidget.

“I don’t know anything,” he mumbled.

“I didn’t ask you if you knew anything. I just asked you if you knew the girl. Did you?” I pressed.

“Yes. I knew her.”

His voice was barely a whisper and he seemed kind of choked up. I kept going.

“You knew her well then?”

“She was my favourite. I used to come in and see her every week. She was beautiful, I...” his voice trailed off as he took a moment to collect his emotions.

“What do you think happened to her?”

The adrenalin pumped through my veins. I was getting somewhere!

“I told you! I don’t know anything! Never saw anything! I’m sorry Angel. I can't talk about this. I have to go.”

He leapt up and practically sprinted to the door. Strange...I could’ve sworn he was crying. I collected the clothes that were strewn across the room and limped back to the dressing room, praying that Cheetah wasn’t still there.

I was relieved to see that she’d vacated the area and plonked myself gratefully into a chair.

“Are you alright, Love?”

I hadn’t even noticed Mum when I’d first walked in. She was so tiny that it was easy to miss her.

“I think I sprained my ankle and I wrecked the costume too,” I groaned.
“Give us a look then,” Mum snatched at the glasses that hung from her neck on a chain and held them up to her eyes.
I held the costume out.
“Not the costume, your ankle.”
I kicked my leg out for her to inspect. Her knees cracked and popped as she bent down for a squiz.
“Hmm. Probably just needs an ice pack. It’s a bit swollen. I’ll cancel your next two podiums. If it’s still up in a couple of hours you’ll probably have to go home for the night.”
I mumbled my agreement. I’d had about enough excitement for one night. Mum grabbed an ice pack from a bar fridge at the end of the dressing room and slapped it onto my ankle.
“Hold it there,” she instructed.
“Ouch!” I complained.
The cold seemed to make the throbbing more intense. Mum rolled her eyes just as Cheetah made a grand entrance. Great. The night couldn’t get any worse, surely.
“Humph,” Cheetah grunted in my direction and smiled smugly to herself.
I wanted to punch her in the face.
“What the fuck is your problem?” I asked, hoping that Mum would back me up if things got rough.
“Who said I had a problem?” Cheetah sneered back.
“Well it’s pretty obvious. You’ve been nothing but rude to me and I haven’t done anything to you.”
“Fuck you!” she spat.
“Fuck me? Fuck you!” I yelled.
“Now girls...” Mum began.
“Shut up, Mum!” Cheetah hollered, which surprisingly, Mum did, “Who do you think you are coming in here and speaking to me like that, you little bitch? Huh?”
Cheetah advanced, ready to pounce. I gulped, wanting desperately to back out. But it was too late now. Me and my big mouth. Well, I reasoned, I’d already pissed her off. Might as well keep going.
“Who do I think I am? Who do you think you are to speak to me like shit? Just because you’re the oldest one here it doesn’t give you the right to go around intimidating people, you know!”

“You trumped up little mole!” Cheetah screamed, getting ready to slap me across the face.

“Hey! Break it up!”

Dallas had appeared from nowhere and grabbed Cheetah’s hand before it reached its target.

“That’s enough, Cheetah! Fuck!”

“I’ll deal with you later!” Cheetah pointed a finger at me and stalked out.

I let my breath out.

“Jesus! What was all that about?” Dallas asked, alarmed.

“I just asked her what her problem was. She’s been rude to me all night.”

“Bloody hell. You pissed her off pretty good. Better watch your back from now on. She’s got a real chip on her shoulder, that one. And if you get on her bad side, look out,” Dallas clucked.

“Why’s she like that?”

“She’s always been a bit of a bitch but last year she flipped out when Madison stole her boyfriend.”

“Who’s Madison?”

Dallas walked over to the dressing table and began fixing her makeup and spraying on deodorant.

“You probably heard about it on the news. That girl that was murdered in Reservoir?”

So Melody was using the stage name ‘Madison’.

“Anyway, Cheetah and Madison hated each other. Cheetah used to go out with this guy, Marcello, until Madison caught his eye. Cheetah was furious. One night she had a huge fight with Madison, grabbed her by the throat and threatened to kill her! Mum had to call security to break it up,” Dallas said knowingly.

It was hard not to get emotional hearing things like that about my sister, so I pretended my ankle was getting worse to deflect from the real reason why my eyes were watering.

“Shit this hurts!” I winced.
“Give us a look,” Dallas said, bending down for a peek, “Doesn’t look too bad. Just a bit swollen. Should be right in a couple of days.”

I raised an eyebrow, deciding to ignore her diagnosis and visit a doctor in the morning.

“I don’t think I can do any more dancing tonight,” I said, feeling relieved that the night was finally over.

“You should probably go home and rest up, Love,” Mum piped up from behind me.

It was the best idea I’d heard all night.
I hobbled into the kitchen to hunt for food the following morning, feeling like I’d been smacked in the head with a baseball bat.

“You look awful,” Mum chided, “I thought you were working last night. Why are you limping?”

“Thanks for that, Mum. I was working and a few of us decided to go out for drinks afterwards. That okay with you?” I retorted, a bit annoyed at her nosiness.

I tipped some Nutrigrain into a bowl and sloshed on some milk.

“Only asking,” Mum said, pulling a face at me, “Anyway, what happened? Why are you limping?”

“Oh, I, ah, got my ankle caught in a pallet and twisted it.”

“Oh. Give me a look then. Maybe I should bandage it.”

“It’s fine, Mum,” I mumbled between mouthfuls of cereal, “If it’s not better by tomorrow I’ll go to the doctor, okay?”

“Good. Anyway I’m glad you’re up. Dad and I are going over to Melody’s to pack the house up. We were hoping you’d come with us.”

“Sure,” I nodded, “Just let me get cleaned up.”

I rinsed my empty bowl and rummaged through a drawer for some Panadol. I took three, just in case, and jumped into a hot shower.

I was afraid of going to Melody’s house. It was like some small part of me secretly hoped that she wasn’t really dead - that she was still alive somewhere and it had all been a
practical joke. By going to her house I’d have to face the truth. I mean, I knew she was
dead. I’d been at the funeral. But I was still very much in denial and it was easier to think
that she’d somehow tricked me, that she’d just gone away.

By the time I’d thrown on a daggy tracksuit and brushed my hair, Mum and Dad
were in the car waiting for me.

“What took you so long?” Dad grumbled playfully.

I stuck my tongue out at him in the rear view and slammed my door. Dad
reversed, winking at me over his shoulder. I knew he was trying to lighten my mood and I
loved him for trying. Mum fiddled with the car radio until she found the country music
station.

“Mum,” I whined.

I hated country and western. It was always so depressing and today wasn’t really
the day for it. She pretended she hadn’t heard me and adjusted the volume. Jesus. At this
rate I’d be slashing my wrists by the time we got to Melody’s. I crossed my arms and began
to sulk. I knew it was childish but I couldn’t help myself.

“Oh don’t be such a baby,” Mum stuck her lip out and pulled a face to try and
make me laugh.

The corners of my mouth twitched. I never could stay in a bad mood with Mum.
We were too close. Both of my parents were amazing. I’d always been closer to Mum and
Dad than Melody. Even before she started stripping. We’d always shared a special
closeness and after Melody left our bond had only grown stronger. Dad became more
protective. The freedom that Melody had enjoyed was not an option for me. There were
no trips to the city with friends or hanging out at the Plaza at night. It was like they’d been
determined not to make the same mistakes with me that they’d made with Melody but it
wasn’t that they’d done anything wrong. Melody and I were just different people with
different goals and aspirations.

“So you’re on night shift now, eh Love?” Dad said, trying to make conversation.

“Mmm hmm,” I replied, avoiding his eyes.

“They paying you extra or something?”

“Uh huh.”

I felt really guilty about lying to them but I knew how they’d react if I told them the
truth. Especially Dad. I mean, he kicked Melody out when she told him she was a
stripper. I could only imagine what he’d do to me.
“I’m taking some time off soon, Rain,” Dad smiled, “Thought we might all go on a holiday or something. What do you reckon?”

Dad was a fitter and turner. He’d been working at the freezing works for most of my life. He was a man’s man, a no bullshit kind of guy. I’d always been more like my Dad. We had the same stubborn streak and straight up attitude and I’d always felt a special affinity with him. He was pretty intuitive and could usually spot a bullshitter from a mile away. I was worried that he’d suspect something so I needed to make sure I avoided talking about work as much as possible.

“A holiday sounds great, Dad. Where did you wanna go?”

“Well, your Mum wouldn’t mind going to New Zealand but I reckon if we’re gonna spend money we might as well go somewhere a bit more exotic. I was thinking about Bali.”

“I’d love to go to Bali!” I said, surprised that Dad would even suggest such a place.

I mean, Dad’s the kind of guy who won’t eat rice or garlic or anything even vaguely exotic. He was obviously doing this for me. I felt like crying at his selflessness. I threw my arms around his seat.

“Whoa! Careful, Love. I’m driving.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He patted my hand gently and winked at Mum.

We pulled into the driveway of Melody’s house and got out of the car. The house loomed before me, a lemon painted weatherboard with no garden and a crooked mail box. The grass was overgrown and junk mail had piled up on the ground next to the letter box. Mum stooped to pick it up and we all stood staring at the house. None of us really wanted to go inside but we knew we had to. Dad cleared his throat and took a key from his jeans pocket. My eyes wandered to the pavement. I knew that Melody had died right there. Alone. Tears prickled my eyes. I grabbed Mum’s hand and we walked solemnly to the front door.

The house smelled musty inside and I got the feeling that Melody hadn’t done a good spring clean in a long time. I swallowed hard and headed towards Melody’s bedroom. I switched on the light and closed the door behind me.

I pictured her sitting on the bed chatting on the phone and if I closed my eyes I could almost hear her laughing. I went to the bed and held her pillow to my face, inhaling her scent. The apples and cinnamon were there as well as a citrusy smelling perfume. God
how I missed her. The bed, a four poster, surrounded by fine white netting, was unmade. Clothes and shoes lay strewn about the room and the dressing table was a mess of half opened cosmetics. Still the same old, messy Melody. The mirror on the dressing table was shattered, as though someone had thrown something at it. It must have happened just before she died or surely she would have fixed it. Still, it was a little strange.

I pulled open a drawer in the bed side table and sifted through Melody’s things. More cosmetics, some loose change, a tube of KY and a handful of condoms. At least she’d been practising safe sex, I thought prudishly. I slid the drawer back into place and looked around the room. I wasn’t sure where to start. There was a knock on the door and Mum poked her head in.

“Here are some boxes, Love,” she said, kicking a few in my direction.

I said nothing, afraid that I might lose it if I did. Mum sat on the bed next to me.

“It’s like she’s still here, isn’t it?” she said, putting an arm around me.

I nodded, unable to find the words to express to her how I was feeling.

“Well, s’pose we’d better get started then. The sooner we do, the sooner it’ll be over,” Mum rose to leave.

“Thanks, Mum,” I managed, before she left me alone with my thoughts.

I began tipping the contents of the drawers into one of the boxes then started on the dressing table. I found Melody’s jewellery box in one of the drawers and opened it up. I picked up a delicate silver bracelet with tiny leaves etched into it. I smiled at the memory. I had one just like it at home in my own jewellery box, only mine had flowers instead of leaves. They’d been gifts from an Aunt when we were six and eight. I slipped the bracelet onto my wrist, amazed that it still fitted and kept packing.

My headache was finally beginning to abate, giving me a chance to think about the events of the previous night. Cheetah was number one on my list of suspects. She’d threatened to kill Melody. I wondered if anyone had mentioned the fight to the police. If they knew, they weren’t doing anything about it, that’s for sure. There had to be a way of catching Cheetah out but after our little run in last night there was no way she’d tell me anything. I’d have to be really cunning with her but I didn’t have any plans as yet. And then there was Maurice. He definitely knew something. He’d acted really weird when I began asking him questions and clearly he had a thing for Melody. If I could just build up some sort of trust with Maurice, I knew I could coax some info out of him. I’d have to make a point of paying him heaps of attention next time. He’d come around eventually.
After all, we’d practically had sex in the fantasy room. Or at least he had. I’d just fallen into it. Anyway, that had to count for something, surely. I threw the last of Melody’s clothes from the wardrobe into the second box and taped it closed. Only the book shelf remained.

Dallas had mentioned a boyfriend. A guy named Marcello. I couldn’t recall Melody ever mentioning Marcello to me, which was odd. Usually she’d tell me about guys all the time. He can’t have been that important if I didn’t know about him. And if I didn’t, did the police? And who was this Marcello character, anyway? I was somehow going to have to track him down so I could at least ask him a few questions. Weren’t the boyfriends usually the first suspects in a murder investigation? And if the police were aware of him, how come they hadn’t told any of the family? The whole case was beginning to look very suspicious. I’d only been on the job for 24 hours and it seemed as though I knew more than the police did!

I cleared the top shelf of the bookcase and began the second. Oh my God! I pulled a battered copy of Enid Blyton’s ‘The Wishing Chair’ from the bookcase and hugged it to my chest. I couldn’t believe she’d kept it all these years. ‘The Wishing Chair’ had been our favourite book growing up. The memories of Molly and Peter’s fantastic adventures came flooding back and I opened the book, eager to devour a few pages. I flipped the first page and a few pieces of ripped up paper fell out and floated to the floor. I bent down to retrieve them. The paper turned out to be a photo that had been torn into four pieces. Weird. I pieced them together. It was a picture of Melody with a European man, possibly Italian or Greek. His suit looked expensive, a double breasted black pinstripe, and he wore his red silk shirt open underneath. His dark hair was short and fashionably styled and he had this whole Billy Zane meets Sopranos vibe about him. He had one arm slung around a smiling Melody and a gold pinkie ring twinkled on his little finger. This was one hell of a guy. The kind that made women weak at the knees. So who was he and why had Melody ripped the photo up?

“You right, Love?” Dad called from the hallway.

“Youp, coming,” I yelled.

I pocketed the photo, set ‘The Wishing Chair’ aside and swept the rest of the books into the last box. I carried them out one at a time to the car and Dad loaded them into the hired trailer along with furniture and more boxes. Luckily, Melody didn’t have too much
stuff or we would’ve needed to do another trip. Mum closed and locked the front door of the house and carried a pot plant to the car.

“This’ll have to sit in the back with you, Raini.”

She opened the back door and slid the plant in on top of some newspaper. Dad put his arms around Mum and me and our eyes roamed to the spot near the mailbox where Melody had died. The pavement was still stained a dark brown. I tried to imagine Melody’s final moments and looked up to the sky, the last thing she would have seen before she took her last breath. The tears fell silently and we all took one final look at the house before climbing into the car. Mum sniffed and wiped her nose with a hanky as Dad reversed slowly out of the driveway. No one spoke on the way home.
The train was crowded and reeked of body odour and hot chips. We were approaching Flinders St Station, which, thank Christ, was my stop. An old man with missing teeth was giving me the eye from his seat across from me, making me really uncomfortable. I shifted in my seat and plucked the photo of Melody and the mystery man from my shirt pocket. I’d taped it together last night and the more I’d stared at it, the more familiar the background had looked. It hit me this morning that the photo had been taken at the club, just near the fantasy rooms. The red painted walls were a dead giveaway. I tapped it a few times and gazed out the window. I had to find out who this guy was.

The train squealed to a halt and I got squashed amongst the crowd in the rush to alight. I’m sure someone copped a feel of my arse but I couldn’t tell who it was so there was nothing I could do. I willed the culprit to miss his next train and smirked to myself all the way down the ramp. I jumped on a tram at Elizabeth Street and validated my ticket. It was only a few stops to King Street so I stood up. It had only just gone dark and the city was abuzz with Friday night excitement. Groups of teenagers and party goers trod the pavement looking for action and the over timers rushed from the office, desperate to get home and begin their weekends. Cars were backed up along Flinders, waiting for traffic lights to turn green, loud dance music pumping from a few. I looked to the left as the flames lit up at Crown, making everything around them glow brilliantly. Melbourne was dazzling at night. It made everyone and everything seem exciting. I got a rush of butterflies in my stomach as I watched the scene around me. It felt like I was really living
for the first time. Like I was actually a part of something bigger than me and it felt exhilarating.

I stepped off the tram at William Street and sprinted across the road through the traffic. The smell of teriyaki wafted from a Japanese restaurant as I rounded the corner and collided with a group of giggling young girls, all about the same age as me.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

The club was already open and Abraham stood guard at the entrance. He nodded at me as I passed and turned his attention back to the street. In another half hour, there would be two bouncers downstairs and another two stationed around the club. They were all really big, mean looking blokes and this alone usually discouraged the punters from starting trouble or trying to touch the girls. It made me feel safer, just knowing they were there.

I ordered a gin at the bar and went through to the dressing room to get ready.

“Hey,” Dallas greeted me, “How’s the ankle?”

“Good. You were right. The swelling went down after a couple of days. I must’ve just twisted it.”

Dallas secured her pink and silver-star patterned bikini in place and stared at her reflection before she began her nightly make up routine. She had it down to a fine art and within minutes, hey presto, a brand new face. I unpacked my back pack. With the money I’d made last weekend, I’d decided to splash out and buy myself some outfits. The dress was a slinky black lycra number that the shop assistant had assured me was slimming, and I’d purchased a pair of black stilettos, sans platform, that were much easier to walk in. I’d also bought two push up bras with matching g-strings, or as I liked to call them ‘dental floss’, and decorated them myself. The sequins and beads had taken me hours to sew on but I was pleased with the results. One set, I’d covered in plain black sequins and the other, gold. Now that my boobs sat up and the dress fit properly, I actually didn’t look too bad. I’d been watching my diet this week, too, and I reckon I’d lost a few pounds. I got changed and studied my reflection.

“You look hot!” Dallas winked, “Want me to do your make up again?”

“Could you?”

I planted myself in a chair and Dallas fluffed around me, make up in hand.

“Cheetah here?” I asked casually, inspecting a fingernail.
“Uh huh,” Dallas squinted, her tongue protruding ever so slightly between her lips as she concentrated intently.

My heart curled up and died. Another run in with Cheetah was something I really didn’t need. I decided that next time she said something, I’d just ignore her.

“There. All done.”

Dallas snapped the compact shut and I admired her work. I’d been transformed into someone else. Someone glamorous. I pouted at my reflection and pulled my hair back from my face. If I turned side on, my double chin disappeared and I had cheek bones. I brushed my hair out and slid into my new shoes.

I was nervous. My first podium was in 15 minutes and there was no getting out of this one. I almost ran to the bar, where I ordered a double shot of gin and two shooters of black sambucca. I downed the sambucas and sculled half the gin. I hadn’t eaten dinner so I knew it would take effect quickly.

A decent crowd had filled the place already and I searched the faces for Maurice. I couldn’t see him but figured he’d turn up later in the night. I washed down the rest of my gin and ordered another, helping myself to a bowl of peanuts. It was probably full of salmonella but it was a stressful situation and if I couldn’t have chocolate, peanuts would have to suffice. I checked the clock behind the bar and raced back to the dressing room to prepare. I was backstage taking off my dress and folding it neatly when Cheetah breezed past and hissed at me. I rolled my eyes and pretended not to notice. The DJ announced my debut.

“And on podium number one, put your hands together for our newest addition...send me an Angel!”

I couldn’t believe what happened next. The DJ was actually playing the song ‘Send Me an Angel’. I hummed the first few words.

“Do you believe in heaven above, do you believe in love...”

Taking a deep breath, I moved the curtain aside and stepped onto the stage to much whooping and cheering from the men seated around podium one. Christ! There were five of them - all young, all half cut. This was going to be a nightmare. I strutted out onto the catwalk and changed places with another dancer, a stunning Asian woman with raven hair and porcelain skin, and grabbed a hold of the pole.

“Yeah! Alright! Show us yer tits!” one of the men whooped.

I bent down, “No money, no honey!”
The man nudged one of his mates, who stood up and shoved a twenty in my garter and rubbed my leg suggestively.

“Uh, uh, uh,” I tutted, “No touching.”

The alcohol was doing wonders, making me feel braver than I really was. I did a body grind, or at least that’s what it was supposed to be, and removed my bra. The Money Man’s tongue was practically hanging out of his head and seeing as he was the one who’d paid, I decided to give him all the attention. I slid down the pole and onto my knees, giving him what I thought was my sexiest look. His mates jeered and poked him in the ribs. He licked his lips in anticipation. I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook my boobs in his face. He opened his mouth and licked my nipple.

“Hey!” I snapped, “No touching!”

I pulled back and ran my hands down my body, swaying in time to the crappy 80’s music. It might’ve been a huge hit in the eighties, but I really wasn’t that into it. I turned around and bent over, wiggling my butt as I removed my g-string and kicked it to the side with my foot. Then I tried, unsuccessfully, to swing around the pole and landed hard on my arse, much to the amusement of the inebriated group. I tried to recover and crawled back to Money Man, intent on trying the leg manoeuvre that Dallas had shown me. I rested my ankles on his shoulders and tried gyrating my hips, but instead, I looked like I was doing backwards push ups. Money Man’s tongue made an appearance and I quickly swung my legs away in case he tried to lick me again. I wasn’t getting caught twice. The song ended. I was sweating and out of breath.

“Thanks guys, show’s over,” I puffed, putting my bra and g-string back on.

“Oh,” the men grumbled.

“Hey, I’m happy to keep going if you wanna spend more money,” I offered.

They pushed back their chairs and walked away and I relaxed and tried to catch my breath. Tight arses. Secretly though, I was glad. A new song started and I decided to try and master the pole so that next time I might not make such an idiot of myself. I hooked an ankle around it and tried gripping with my thighs, which didn’t work. After two more hopeless attempts, I gave up and leaned back on the pole doing body grinds instead. I made a mental note to ask Dallas if she’d come in early next time and help me practise.

The place was filling up fast and one group of punters in particular, stood out from the rest. They’d just walked in and they all wore expensive suits and gold jewellery. Heads turned as they sauntered over to the bar and most of the dancers left the customers they
were hustling and flocked to the new arrivals. Whoever they were, they seemed important, or at the very least, rather wealthy.

“Miss Mitchell?”

I glanced down and made eye contact with a surprised looking Detective Reyes. Shit!

“Jesus! What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he shot back.

“I’m working. What does it look like?”

“We need to talk.”

“No, we don’t.”

“Don’t make me cause a scene.”

“Alright, alright. Just let me finish my podium and I’ll meet you at the bar.”

Reyes glared at me before walking away. Fuck! That’s all I needed.

“Okay guys, it’s time to introduce three new beauties!” the DJ announced, “On podium one, please make welcome, the one, the only....Dallas! On podium two, put your hands together for blonde bombshell...Jamie! And last but not least fellas, on podium three...”

I’d tuned out by then. I did the swap with Jamie and fought my way through the curtains. I pulled my dress on and checked my make up in the mirror. Still sweaty, but otherwise okay. I grabbed a towel and pressed it to my face, being careful not to smudge my make up too much. My heart was pounding at the thought of Reyes finding out what I was up to. If he decided to tell management, my cover would be blown and it was all over, red rover. I took a few deep breaths and made my way to the bar.

“Detective,” I smiled sweetly.

He ran a hand through his hair, which wasn’t tied back this time. It was black and shiny and made him look sexy as hell and not at all like a cop.

“Is there somewhere private we can talk?”

“Sure but it’ll cost you fifty bucks and you can only stay for 15 minutes.”

He arched a brow, “You can’t be serious. Are you trying to hustle me?”

I blushed, “No! Don’t be stupid, you’re a cop for chrissake. But I can’t exactly take you into the dressing room to talk now, can I? And unless you pay for one of the fantasy rooms, there’s nowhere private to go. Look around. The place is packed.”
He looked at me dubiously, sighed and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. He counted out five tenner's and swallowed the rest of his beer. I tucked the money into my garter and led him to the fantasy rooms. The hostess checked us in and I raced out the back and changed into a nurse's outfit that almost burst at the seams. By the time I got to the fantasy room a.k.a. the doctor's surgery, I was puffed again and hanging out of the costume uncomfortably. Reyes looked amused.

“So? What do you wanna talk to me about?”

“I know what you’re up to,” he said quietly.

“Really? And what might that be?” I peeled a stray lock of hair off my sweaty forehead and tried to look casual.

“You’re playing amateur detective, trying to find out what happened to your sister.”

I crossed my arms and wished he wasn’t so damn good looking.

“And what makes you think that?”

“Come on, don’t play dumb. How stupid do you think I am?”

Well, pretty stupid, but I wasn’t about to admit it. I either had to tell the truth or keep denying it. Either way I was busted so it didn’t really matter.

“Well someone has to do something,” I sniffed sanctimoniously, “You’re obviously not going to.”

“You need to listen to me,” he said angrily, standing suddenly and grabbing my wrist, and damn it if he didn’t have a perve at my cleavage, “It ends tonight, do you hear me? What you’re doing is bloody dangerous, not to mention idiotic. Whoever killed your sister meant business and if you think for one second that you’re any less likely to wind up the same way, you’re not as smart as I thought you were.”

“Let go of me!” I snatched my arm away and tried unsuccessfully to stuff my boobs into the nurse’s uniform, “Maybe I actually like working here. Did you think of that? Huh?”

“Come off it. Take a look around. You’re not exactly cut out for this kind of thing,” Reyes smirked.

“And what’s that supposed to mean exactly?” I asked through clenched teeth.

I knew exactly what he meant but I wanted to hear the bastard say it.

“I think you know what I’m talking about.”

“You bloody bastard! Well you’re no oil painting either, you know!” I retorted.

That was a lie. The guy looked like a Calvin Klein model.
Reyes shook his head, “I don’t want to stand here trading insults with you all night. I’m just telling you to leave this case to the police. You’re in very dangerous water here.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine. So how about you do your job and leave me alone to do mine!”

If I didn’t leave now, I’d end up smacking him, so I stormed out before he had a chance to say anything else.

I pushed my way through the crowd and managed to score a stool at the bar. I ordered a cocktail and began fantasising about Reyes falling down the stairs on his way out. So far the night had been going swimmingly. I’d had my nipple licked, made an idiot of myself during a podium and been insulted by one of the city’s finest. Could it get any better?

The bartender plonked a tall umbrella and fruit laden cocktail in front of me. I wasn’t sure what was in it but if this didn’t get me wasted, there was something very wrong. I took a sip. Mmm. Fruity and sweet. I could get used to these. I swung around on my stool to check out the crowd and figure out what I should be doing. It was easy to forget why I was really here. I needed to stay focused. What would Melody do in my situation, I wondered? Well for one thing, she wouldn’t be sitting around feeling sorry for herself, that’s for sure.

Loud laughter to my left caught my attention. It was the popular group I’d noticed from the podium. From my vantage point on the stool, I counted five men. There were four dancers with the group, each one perched on a man’s lap, giggling and flirting like crazy. One of the girls was Dallas. Perfect. I decided to go and introduce myself and see what all the fuss was about. I picked up my drink before sauntering over to their table and making eye contact with Dallas.

“Er, Hey,” Dallas said.

Judging by the strange look she gave me as I introduced myself, something was up.

“Hi guys, I’m Angel.”

Most of men returned my greetings with thick, foreign accents. I waved away a cloud of spicy smelling cigar smoke and turned my attention to the only unaccompanied man in the group. Holy shit! It was the guy from the photo! My heart thudded against my rib cage. Surely it couldn’t be this easy?

“Hi,” I stuck my hand out and smiled.
Dallas kicked me discreetly and gave me a ‘bad idea’ look, her eyeballs nearly popping out of their sockets. Geez, what was her problem? The man took my hand and pressed it to his lips. He was a real charmer, whoever he was.

“Hi, I’m Marcello.”

Shit! It was Cheetah’s ex boyfriend. The one Melody had moved in on.

“Drink?” he asked, motioning over a scantily clad waitress.

“Er, okay,” I mumbled, sucking down the rest of my cocktail and thrusting the empty glass in the waitress’s direction.

Marcello reached out and pulled over an extra chair from the next table. Clearly, he thought I was too heavy to be sitting on his lap. I plonked down and accepted a cigarette, allowing Marcello to be all gentlemanly and light it for me. At least I’d had a bit of practice with this, so I shouldn’t make too much of an idiot of myself.

“You new?” Marcello asked casually, blowing a thin stream of smoke up into the air.

“Yep. Just started last weekend.”

I puffed semi-expertly on my ciggie and allowed the smoke to drift out of my nostrils.

“You like it?” Marcello asked.

“So far, yeah.”

I felt another kick from Dallas.

“So what brings you here tonight?” I asked casually.

“Just showing my boys here a good time,” he replied, nodding in the direction of the other men, “Isn’t that right, Nick?”

The man replied with a raised glass and an extra smoky puff of his cigar.

“You know,” Marcello began, “You look kind of familiar...”

“Hi Baby,” Cheetah drawled, interrupting our conversation and planting herself territorially on Marcello’s lap.

She kissed him lingeringly on the lips, looking me straight in the eye as she did it. I finally worked out why Dallas had been kicking me. Obviously Cheetah and Marcello had decided to get back together now that Melody was out of the way. Something about this definitely wasn’t right. I decided to make myself scarce. I had enough problems with Cheetah already. I didn’t need any more hassles. I knew that eventually I’d have to try and
get Marcello talking but tonight didn’t seem like the right time. Not with Cheetah on the loose.

“Well, nice meeting you guys. I’d better go and make some money,” I waved.

I legged it and went back to the bar for another drink. I was nursing a gin and mulling things over when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Maurice!” I smiled, genuinely happy to see him.

“Drink?”

“Does the Pope pray?”

I swallowed the remainder of my drink while Maurice ordered me another. Not much seemed to be going right tonight but at least it looked like I was going to get drunk for free.

“So how’ve you been?” I asked.

“Okay. Staying out of trouble,” he chuckled.

I nodded, not really sure where to take the conversation from here. Small talk wasn’t exactly my forte. Usually I liked to get straight to the point. I wasn’t very good at this Inspector Morse stuff. Maybe I needed to get him drunk. I mean, really drunk. That normally loosened people’s lips, didn’t it?

“Hey Maurice, bet I can drink you under the table,” I winked.
Four hours and forty drinks later, I was still trying to extract information from Maurice. Okay, I was probably exaggerating about the forty drinks but I was beginning to feel really drunk and if I didn’t get it out of him soon I was going to go home empty handed both information and money wise.

“Nutha drink?” Maurice slurred.

I shook my head, reneging on my bet. I motioned for the bartender to push a bowl of peanuts in my direction. Hopefully they’d soak up some of the alcohol.

“Shuit yourshelf,” he shrugged.

“So, that girl - Madison, the one that was murdered?” I ventured.

Maurice swayed dangerously on his stool.

“I, um, well, I was just wondering what you could tell me about her...”

Maurice gulped down some more scotch and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You know, you short of look like her...” he said, signalling the barman for another refill.

“So people keep telling me.”

“That why you’re sho obshesshed with her?”

I shrugged and gnawed at a nail.

“She had a shecret, you know,” Maurice hiccupped.

I leaned in closer.
“Can’t tell you though.”
“Why not?” I hissed.
“Wouldn’t be a shecret then, would it?” he cackled like he’d just told a prize-winning joke.
I stuck my hands on my hips and gave him a stern look.
“If you don’t tell me, I’m going to have to go and leave you here all by yourself,” I mock warned him.
“Alright. But you have to promish me you won’t tell anyone,” Maurice stage whispered.
“Cross my heart,” I swore.
“Okay. She had another job. A shecret job.”
My heart rate increased.
“What? What sort of shecret, I mean secret job?”
“The kind she got paid a lot of money for...”
“Tell me!” I demanded, resisting the urge to grab him by the shoulders and shake the shit out of him.
“That’s all I know and that’s the truth,” Maurice said finally, missing his mouth as he attempted to gulp down more scotch.
“What? What do you mean that’s all you know? What sort of secret job? You must have some idea.”
Maurice shook his head.
“Hey Angel,” Dallas tapped me on the shoulder, making me jump. She wore a fluoro pink spandex dress that reached her ankles and was split up to mid thigh. Rubberized white rows of oblongs on the fabric glow under the UV lights.
“Oh, hey. What’s up?”
“Can I talk to you for a minute?”
I left Maurice to drown the rest of his sorrows and followed Dallas to the dressing room.
“Is this about that thing with Marcello before?” I asked.
“No but now that you mention it, you should probably stay away from him. Cheetah already doesn’t like you. Don’t give her any more ammo.”
“How long have they been back on for?” I asked.
Dallas shrugged, “Dunno. Couple of weeks. Why are you so interested anyway?”
“Just wondering...so if you didn’t want to talk to me about Marcello, what’s up?” I asked, anxious to change the subject.

“Well, I was wondering what time you were off?”

I checked the clock on the wall.

“About half an hour. Why?”

“Few of us are going out for drinks after. Wanna come?”

“It’s a bit late. Everything’ll be closed soon, won’t it?”

“No way! It’s only 4 o’clock. Everything’s just getting started. And besides, Recovery opens at seven.”

“Recovery?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never been to Recovery?”

I shook my head. I was pretty sure she wasn’t talking about post operative R&O.

“What clubs have you been to?”

“Well, I did go to a club in Werribee once last year for a work function...”

“Werribee? Are you kidding? So you’ve never been clubbing in Melbourne?”

“No,” I answered sheepishly.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything. You’re gonna love it!” Dallas enthused, clapping her hands together excitedly.

“But I don’t have anything to wear,” I grumbled.

“Just wear the dress you have on.”

“Are you joking? This thing barely covers my arse!”

“So? Don’t worry. You look great.”

I seriously doubted it but Dallas’s enthusiasm was infectious. The thought of my first night out in Melbourne was exciting. My stomach churned in anticipation.

“Okay. I’ll come.”

“Excellent!”

I checked the clock again.

“Shit! I’m late for my last podium!”

I sprinted to the stage entrance, wriggled out of my dress and strutted out. Jamie flashed me an exasperated ‘about time’ look and I wrapped myself around the pole and tried to slide down it without falling this time. I sat at the base of the pole and did some floor work, figuring that was probably going to be easier, and stuck my leg up in the air andiggled my arse. Luckily, the place was emptying out and there were no customers around
my podium. Only the most desperate of stragglers remained. One guy was asleep on a couch in the corner. I was sure I could see the drool running down his chin. Another guy stood at the bar trying to convince one of the dancers to go home with him. I could see her laughing and shaking her head. He gave her a sad puppy dog look and she laughed some more. Then he shrugged and finished up his drink. Can’t blame a guy for trying. I looked for Maurice at the bar but he’d gone too.

I was having trouble believing that Melody had a secret job. I mean, surely I’d have known. Wouldn’t I? I had to find out for sure because if it was true then a whole new realm of possibilities opened up. Was I even looking in the right place?

“Alright guys,” the DJ announced, “It’s that time of the night. Please thank our Hollywood Dancers, Tameka, Capri and Angel! See you next time, here at Hollywood Girls.”

Thank God for that. I exited ‘stage left’ and practically ran to my locker to get changed. I slipped into my regular underwear and pulled the dress back on. Then I stuffed everything into my back pack and sat down to wait for Dallas.

“You coming out with us tonight, Angel?” Jamie asked.

“Yes,” I nodded, surprised that she’d even noticed me.

The closest I’d ever gotten to a conversation with Jamie had been a podium swap. Perhaps now the other girls were beginning to accept me. I watched Jamie pull her hair back and change into a boob tube, mini skirt and fluffy pink leg warmers. Okay, call me stupid but since when did it become fashionable to wear your dog on your legs?

“They are the strangest things I’ve ever seen,” I laughed.

“These?” Jamie said, modelling them for me, “All the ravers wear them. They’re cool, you know.”

I didn’t know but I took her word for it and doubted I’d be seeing them around my hometown of Werribee any time soon. I noticed a tiny tattoo on her right thigh.

“Strange place to get a tat,” I observed.

“I know. I was 15 at the time and tried to get it somewhere my Dad wouldn’t see it and somewhere I thought it wouldn’t hurt. Stupid, huh?”

“No. It’s cute. Did your Dad ever see it?”

“Nah. He died before he ever got the chance.”

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry. He was a prick anyway,” Jamie shrugged.
“Alright, ladies, are we ready?” Dallas clapped, rushing to her locker to change. Her choice of outfit was nowhere near as strange as Jamie’s though the skirt was just as short. She chose to leave her stilettos on and a tiny, shoe string strap singlet was all that covered her top half. She looked around surreptitiously, reached into her handbag and handed Jamie and me each a little white tablet.

“Jesus! What the hell is this?” I asked.

“Well, Honey, it sure ain’t a Tic Tac,” Jamie smiled.

“Ssshhh. No need to red light me. It’s an E, what does it look like?” Dallas said in hushed tones.

“You mean ecstasy?”

“Yeah, why? Don’t tell me you’ve never had one before.”

I shook my head. I’d read about ecstasy in the paper and mags but I never thought for one second I’d be holding it in my hand. Truthfully, the mere thought of drugs scared the shit out of me. I’d read about a young girl in Sydney overdosing on ecstasy and had no wish to repeat her mistake.

“Thanks, Dallas, but I think I’ll pass,” I said, handing it back to her.

“Suit yourself,” she shrugged, washing two down with a gulp of Coke.

We spilled out onto King Street moments later, ready for action. I had no idea what to expect from city nightclubs and I had to admit that I was a little worried about Dallas and Jamie being on drugs. I mean, what if they O.D’d? I tried to put the thought out of my head as we walked up the street and told myself that if anything went wrong, at least there would be other people around who could help. It wasn’t much of a consolation but it was better than nothing.

“Here we are!” Jamie announced.

I could hear muffled dance music with a heavy bass line as we walked to the entrance and Jamie was already jumping around like she was on a dance floor. There was a decent queue and two bouncers flanked the entrance, like twin Terminators. I smiled at them as they allowed us immediate entry and resisted the urge to say, ‘Hasta la vista, baby’ as we sailed past. Dallas greeted the door bitch and managed to score us all free entry. We got our hands stamped with UV pass outs and Jamie checked our bags before we made our way downstairs. The muffled music became louder and louder as we descended into the darkness. The air was hot and humid and all I could see were flashing strobes and shadows. I put my arms out in front of me and someone grabbed my hand and led me
through the crowd while my eyes adjusted. I got squashed amongst overheated, sticky bodies and the sound of music and loud whistling was almost deafening. Now and then I’d see flashes of pink, green and orange as dancers waved glo-sticks around like air traffic controllers on acid. It was like I’d walked into the Twilight Zone. It was a world so far removed from anything I’d ever experienced that I was immediately overwhelmed. I stood still and listened to the music. My leg moved involuntarily in time to the beat and I looked around the club, able to see properly for the first time.

The dance floor was overflowing with ravers, trippers and clubbers, all dancing like lunatics. Even the DJ was having a good time, jumping around in his console and punching the air in time to the music. And in comparison to what people were wearing, Jamie’s outfit now seemed quite tame. There were men without shirts, women in bikinis and hot pants, trannies draped in feather boas and I could’ve sworn I’d seen the Village People. It was like I’d stepped into the ‘Studio 54’ movie only the disco music had been replaced by techno. Dallas shoved a Carlton Cold into my hand and pulled me over to a booth. My heart knocked against my ribs and I took a long swig of beer.

“So whaddya think?” Dallas screamed in my ear.

“It’s amazing!” I screamed back.

The DJ mixed in another song and Dallas jumped up suddenly and began bouncing around like the Duracell bunny.

“I love this song!” she yelled.

I couldn’t help it. The song was doing something to my head and I had to join her. My legs seemed to move of their own accord as I stomped around trying to mirror the movements of the people around me. I hoped I looked like I knew what I was doing. The music was hectic and I waved my arms around and clapped like a maniac. The music made me feel...free!

“Woooooo hoooooooo!” I screamed.

I could’ve danced all night. Sweat dripped down my face and back but I didn’t care. I just wanted to keep going. Jamie was up on a podium to my left, going crazy. She now wore a pair of white sunglasses and her fluff covered feet moved so fast I was surprised they weren’t smoking.

My eyes roamed to the bar where I immediately locked eyes with Marcello. Startled, I looked away. As good looking and charming as he was, he unnerved me for some reason. I searched for Cheetah, knowing that she’d be lurking around somewhere.
was right. She was sitting with Trish and Abraham two booths down. I stole another
glance at Marcello. He leaned casually on the bar, as if he owned the place and kept
looking over in my direction. I began to feel really uncomfortable so I sat back down and
gulped the rest of my beer. Dallas plonked down beside me, out of breath and started
waving her hands around in front of her face in an effort to cool down.

“Pass my beer!” she yelled.

“It’s not here!” I yelled back.

She passed me a twenty, “Go get us another one then.”

I grabbed the money and pushed my way through to the bar. I stood waiting for
the bar man to notice me, hoping desperately that Marcello wouldn’t. I turned away, ever
so slightly, so he’d at least only see the back of my head, and tapped my foot in time to the
music.

“Angel?”

Even though I was expecting it, I still got a bit of a fright.

“Er, hi,” I said casually, trying my best not to look as nervous as I felt.

My eyes darted to Trish’s table to see if Cheetah was watching. She wasn’t. She
was too busy hoovering rows of powder to notice anything.

“Having a good time?” Marcello smiled.

“Uh huh,” I nodded my head, my tongue now stuck to the roof of my mouth.

What was with me? Why was he having this effect on me? I felt like a dumb
school kid and the way he was looking at me made me weak at the knees. Stop it, I told
myself, he’s Cheetah’s boyfriend not to mention a major suspect in Melody’s murder.
Christ! How could I be attracted to this guy?

“Drink?”

I opened my mouth to decline but caught sight of Cheetah heading my way and
from the look on her face, she was probably going to claw my eyes out.


I raced off, Dallas’s drink now the least of my concerns, and hid in the corner of
the booth where Cheetah couldn’t see me. I took a peek. She was yelling at Marcello and
it looked like he was about to slap her.

“Where’s my drink?” Dallas asked.

“Sorry got side tracked.”
I thrust the money back at her and she went to get her own drink. Jamie fell into the booth next to me, sweating like crazy and radiating heat.

“Fuck it’s hot!” she screamed into my ear.

“No kidding,” I muttered to myself.

She reached over to the table at the next booth and stole someone’s half empty bottle of water. I scrunched up my nose, thinking of the millions of diseases you could catch from sharing water bottles, and hoped for Jamie’s sake that the bottle’s owner didn’t have a nasty case of oral herpes. I took another peek around the corner at Marcello and Cheetah. She seemed to have calmed down but it looked like she was searching for someone and that someone was most likely me!

“Check out Trish and Abraham,” Jamie nudged me in the ribs.

“What about them?” I asked, feigning interest and trying to figure out how I was going to get out of here without Cheetah seeing me.

“They’re doing it. Have been for ages. Trish tries to keep it a secret but we all know.”

I didn’t really give a crap about Trish’s sex life. It was neither here nor there to me. I searched for another exit. No go. I was going to have to brave it.

“I’m going,” I yelled in Jamie’s ear.

“Already?”

I nodded.

“Alright. I’ll see you at work next week then.”

I stepped out of the booth and dodged clammy bodies all the way upstairs, my heart doing its own version of the rumba the whole way. I got to the top of the stairs and turned around to see if Cheetah had followed me but it looked as if I’d had a lucky escape. I let out a sigh of relief and left the club to hail a taxi. I fell into bed that night still fully clothed.
“Raini! Wake up!”
“Mmmm,” I mumbled behind closed eyes, my mind still foggy and half asleep.
“Christ! It smells like a bloody brewery in here,” Mum moaned.
I heard a raking sound as Mum yanked my curtains aside and opened the window.
“Mum!” I whined, a dull ache beginning in the back of my head.
“Get up. There’s a girl on the phone for you.”
Sunlight poked me hard in the eyes as I forced them open and dragged myself out of bed.
“Did she say who it was?”
“Nope.”
I plodded into the kitchen and held the receiver to my ear.
“Hello?”
“Angel?”
“Dallas?”
“Hi.”
“Oh God! You didn’t ask for Angel did you?”
“Course not. You told me your real name, remember?”
I didn’t remember but thank God she did.
“Mmm,” I mumbled.
“Anyway, you forgot to get your back pack from the coat check so we picked it up and I have it here with me.”

I smacked my forehead, which was a really bad idea considering how much my head was already pounding.

“Shit! Thanks, Dallas.”

“Jamie and I are still up. Come over. We’re having a party.

“You mean you haven’t been to sleep yet?”

“No.”

“You’re insane.”

“I know. Isn’t it great?”

I yawned and scratched my neck.

“So? You coming over?”

“I can’t. I feel like shit. Thanks though. For inviting me and for remembering to grab my bag. Are you working on Wednesday night?”

“Yep. I’ll bring it with me.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, anytime. And Angel,”

“Yeah?”

“Try to loosen up a bit!”

“Uh huh.”

I hung up and groaned. That was seriously the last time I was ever going to get that drunk. Two hangover weekends in a row wasn’t exactly my idea of fun.

“Becoming a bit of a habit, this going out after work of yours,” Mum clucked.

“Unh,” I grunted.

“Coffee then?”

I nodded and watched Mum potter around the kitchen for a few minutes. She shoved a steaming hot cup of Nescafe in one hand and two Panadol in the other. I washed them down and waited for them to take effect.

“Wanna talk about it?” Mum asked, her blue eyes searching mine.

“Talk about what?”

“Well, your Dad and I have noticed that you seem...I don’t know. Different.”

“Nope. Still the same,” I smiled, avoiding her eyes and taking a sip of coffee.

“Anything you want to tell me?”
“Like what?”
Mum shrugged, “Thought maybe you might want to talk about Melody.”
I shook my head, no.

“Thought maybe that was why you’d been drinking so much,” Mum said, trying to be casual and understanding.

“Um, nope.”

“You’d tell me if something was up, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” I lied.

I hated lying to my parents but it was the only way. If I told them what I was up to, they’d not only try to stop me, I’d probably get disowned too. I just needed some more time. When it was all over and I had the information I needed, I’d tell them the truth. The whole truth. Except maybe about the stripping part.

I shuffled back to my bedroom and threw on some old shorts and a t-shirt. I had a crazy idea that a jog would clear my head and make me feel better. And besides, I really needed to get in better shape. As much as I hated to admit it, Reyes’ insult had really affected me. I tied my laces and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge on the way out.

I hit the pavement at a slow jog and cursed the sun for being so bright. I could smell freshly mowed grass and I breathed it in, enjoying the cleansing feeling it evoked. I ran past houses I’d lived next to all my life, waving to a few neighbours along the way. All the men in the neighbourhood washed their cars on Saturdays and kids tore up and down the street on bikes and skateboards.

My first thoughts about the events of the previous night were about Maurice. What on earth had made him think that Melody had a secret job? I tried to remember if she’d ever so much as hinted at it but couldn’t recall anything to make me think it was true. What worried me was that if it was true, then I was looking in the wrong place and the stripping would all be for nothing. And the other thing I wondered was whether the police knew about this other job and if they did, why they hadn’t told the family? I decided that later that day, I’d go through some of Melody’s things and search for some clues. I wiped sweat from my forehead and slowed down to a power walk.

The other thing that was bothering me was Marcello. Had the police even investigated him? Something about him was definitely shady. Okay, I admit that he was charming, good looking, well mannered and rather gentlemanly, but he made me uneasy and I didn’t trust him. Perhaps it was because he seemed to so easily have forgotten my
sister and taken up with Cheetah again, or perhaps it was the fact that he seemed to be the
type of guy who had the means to get rid of someone if he chose to. I wasn’t sure. But
either way, he’d earned himself a prime spot on my suspect list and he was going to have to
prove otherwise if he wanted to be crossed off.

The fact that Marcello was with Cheetah presented a major problem. How in the
hell was I going to get close to him without getting myself in more trouble with Cheetah?
For all I knew it could have been Cheetah who killed Melody, in which case, if it looked
like I was trying to move in on Marcello, I was dead meat. I stopped walking and tried to
catch my breath. This running idea wasn’t all it had cracked up to be. The sun was getting
hotter and my head was getting worse. I guzzled down half the bottle of water and turned
around to head back home.

“Raini!”

I recognised Paul’s voice instantly and though I wasn’t really in the mood for a
chat, I faked my best ‘nothing’s wrong, I’m feeling great’ smile, and waited for Paul to
catch up.

“How’s it going, Paul?”

“Good,” he breathed, slightly out of breath.

I’d known Paul for as long as I could remember. We were neighbours and we’d
grown up together. Our families often got together for BBQ’s and card nights and Paul
was my best friend.

“Didn’t get a chance to talk to you at the funeral,” Paul said, waiting to see what my
reaction would be.

I shrugged, avoiding the gaze of his green eyes and suddenly finding the pavement
insanely interesting. Paul touched my shoulder and turned me to face him.

“Raini, if there’s anything I can do...you know I’m always here for you.”

“I know. Thanks, Paul,” I said, tousling his messy orange crop playfully.

“Hey, Baby, don’t mess with the hair!” Paul joked, running his fingers through his
hair Fonzie style.

“We should go out for a drink soon,” I suggested.

“Cool. How about this weekend?”

“Mmm. This weekend’s no good, gotta work. How ‘bout next Sunday? We can
go to the beach.”

“It’s a date then.”
I hugged Paul goodbye and watched him trot across the road into his house. The buzz of a nearby lawn mower grated on my nerves as I treaded the pavement in desperate need of some more Panadol and a good plan. When I got to my driveway, I noticed a dark blue Skyline parked in front of the house. I didn’t know anyone who owned a car like it and I was pretty sure my parents didn’t either. I frowned and walked inside.

“That you, Raini?” Mum called.

“No, it’s Mel Gibson,” I called back sarcastically.

I kicked off my sneakers and padded into the kitchen in my socks.

“Raini, this is Detective Reyes,” Mum smiled.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! What the hell was he doing here? I was busted for sure.

“Yes, we’ve met,” I muttered, trying not to notice how good he looked in a suit. It wasn’t anything spectacular. Just an ordinary charcoal grey suit with a crisp, white shirt. But he made it look good. Real good.

Reyes sat at the kitchen counter, looking smug and sipping at a mug of coffee. I gritted my teeth, annoyed at Mum’s hospitality.

“Detective Reyes is here because he has some information about Melody’s case,” Mum said.

“I see,” I replied, keeping my distance and sitting at the table a few feet away.

He pierced me with his eyes, making me conscious of how I must’ve looked all sweaty and hung over.

“I was just telling your mother that we recently stumbled onto some rather interesting information,” Reyes began.

I let my breath out, relieved that he hadn’t brought me undone to Mum.

“What sort of information?” I asked, trying not to notice how hot he looked clean shaven.

“Well, it appears that your sister had an off shore bank account containing a rather large sum of money.”

“What do you mean a rather large sum? Like, how much?”

Reyes cleared his throat, “It’s over a quarter of a million dollars.”

Mum’s jaw dropped and so did mine. Quarter of a million? Where the hell did Melody get quarter of a million dollars?

“You can't be serious,” I scoffed.
“There’s no mistake. The account belongs to Melody. But where she got the money is a mystery. We were hoping that you might be able to fill in the blanks,” Reyes looked expectantly at Mum then me.

“Detective, I don’t think you understand. Melody’s life was a mystery to all of us. She left home at 16 and we only saw her every now and then. When we did, she never mentioned she was making all this money. As far as we knew, she was still dancing and last time I checked, stripping wasn’t that much of a lucrative career. Melody was secretive and kept her life very private. At least from her family anyway,” I said.

“You don’t know if she was involved in anything...illegal?”

“Like what?”

“Well, for example, maybe drugs. We know she was a social user. Do you know if she was dealing?”

I shook my head. The plot was thickening faster than Mum’s Sunday roast gravy and I was having just as much trouble digesting it - stripping, quarter of a million and now drugs?

Mum’s hand fluttered to her chest, “Oh my God. Drugs?”

I weighed things up and decided there was a strong possibility it could be true. If Maurice was telling the truth, and she really did have a secret job that made her a lot of money, selling drugs was completely plausible. But I wasn’t about to tell Reyes that. If I did, he’d want to talk to Maurice and then my cover would be blown at the club. And anyway, he was the cop. He should already know about it. It wasn’t my fault if he hadn’t done his job properly.

“Mrs. Mitchell, we’re not entirely sure about the dealing. At this stage it’s just a theory. But we have to investigate every possibility.”

“Of course. Thank you, Detective,” Mum said.

“Well, thanks for the coffee but I have to go. If you think of anything else, please give me a call.”

Reyes pushed a business card in Mum’s direction and drained the rest of his coffee. Mum stuck it to the fridge with a magnet and began cleaning the kitchen. I stood and trailed Reyes to his car, copping a nose full of something that smelled suspiciously like Brut 33. His hot-o-meter went down a notch. It was hard to fantasize about a man who smelled like my Dad.

“Any reason why you didn’t tell me this last night?” I hissed.
Reyes shrugged, “Need to know basis.”

“What? What the hell is that?”

“You’re on a need to know basis and right now—”

“I know what it is!” I said between clenched teeth, “You should’ve told me!”

Reyes unlocked his door, “Remember what I told you last night, leave this to the police. I don’t want to see you back at the club.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Take it however you like. I’m only thinking of your safety and I’m sure your parents would be just as concerned if they knew what was going on...”

“Bastard!” I yelled as he slammed his door with a smirk.

He revved the engine and I glared at him as he took off down the street. Great. Just great. I was going to have to be even more careful from now on and time was running out. I had to solve the case quickly before my parents sprung me. I stomped back into the house and hit the shower. If Reyes thought he’d gotten the better of me, he was dumber than he looked.
I don’t know why, but I’d just assumed that every night would be busy in a strip club. I was wrong. It was my first week night on the job and the place was emptier than my bank account. I drained the rest of my Coke and checked my watch. Dallas was running late, which meant that I had none of my costumes to wear. I’d already been told off by Mum for not being ready. She’d had to put all my podiums back and she was not in a good mood.

“Sorry I’m late,” Dallas called, rushing in and kicking her shoes off.

“Hey, Dallas,” I greeted her.

“I gotta talk to you,” she hissed, grabbing my hand and yanking me into the toilets.

“What’s going on?”

The toilets reeked of sickly sweet industrial strength disinfectant. Dallas plucked a piece of paper from her pocket and shoved it in my face. She’d obviously been through my stuff. Damn it!

“What the hell’s this?”

I gulped and stared at the picture of Melody and Marcello. Think quick, think quick.

“Oh, that? I, ah, found it.”

“What do you mean you found it?”

I cleared my throat, “It, was, um, in my locker. I don’t even know who that girl is,” I lied.
Dallas narrowed her eyes, sussing me out, “Why’d you keep it then?”

“Dunno,” I shrugged, “I only found it last weekend. Maybe my locker used to belong to her.”

Dallas shook her head, “Nuh uh, sorry, wrong answer. That wasn’t Madison’s locker. Now what the hell’s going on?”

Fuck! I was busted big time. I was going to have to take a punt and tell the truth but not here, not now.

“Look, Dallas, it’s a long story. Can we go for a drink after work? I promise, I’ll tell you everything.”

Dallas eyed me suspiciously and tapped her foot a few times.

“Okay. After work then and by the way, don’t let Cheetah catch you with this. I think you should get rid of it.”

“You’re right,” I said, screwing it up for effect and shoving it on my jeans pocket.

Satisfied, Dallas led me back to the dressing room.

I yanked on my bikini and dress and debated with myself about telling Dallas the truth. It was a huge risk, I knew, but what else could I do? And besides, Dallas had been very good to me and even though I didn’t know her very well, I got the feeling that I could trust her. I hoped I wasn’t mistaken. I strapped my feet into my heels and swiped on some make up.

“Hey, can you pass me that deodorant?” a pimply faced blonde asked from two seats down.

I threw a can of Rexona her way and went back to my reflection. I could really do with a decent hair cut but, in lieu of one, I decided to tie it up into a high pony tail. It wasn’t the sexiest style but it looked much better.

“Hey, Angel,” Jamie called, struggling into the room with two heavy looking suitcases.

“Moving in then, Jamie?” Dallas teased.

“Ha ha, very funny. Tonight’s my show night. Two shows, mind you,” Jamie grumbled.

“Show night?” I asked dumbly as Jamie settled into a seat next to me.

“Yeah, I’m doing two of the solos. Usually I only do one, but Cheetah’s away for a week having her nose fixed,” Jamie pulled a face at me in the mirror.

My heart did a little somersault and I had to hold back from whooping with joy.
“Oh, yeah, right,” I said casually, “So what shows are you doing?”

“Cop,” Jamie grimaced, “So old hat, but Trish insisted on that as well as the stupid cowgirl show.”

I nodded sympathetically and thanked Christ that it was Jamie and not me doing the solo performances. It was bad enough doing the mega strip, let alone a solo. The mega strip was every dancer on stage, doing a full mini strip to Motley Crue’s ‘Girls, Girls, Girls’. Afterwards, we’d strut around trying to sell ‘Hollywood Girls’ t-shirts to the punters for twenty bucks a pop. I’d been lucky enough to escape it on my first night, thanks to the swollen ankle and also on my second night because I was busy in the fantasy room with Reyes. I hoped I’d be excused again tonight. On stage with all of these model thin women, I’d look like the ‘D.U.F.F’ - designated ugly fat friend. Way to boost a girl’s ego. I sprayed a cloud of hairspray onto my crown and coughed out what I could.

“Angel!” Mum shrieked, “You’re on podium two!”

I spritzed on some J.Lo Glo and shuffled backstage. The DJ announced me and I sauntered out confidently, knowing the joint was empty...except for the group that’d just walked in. Damn it! I leaned back on the pole and thought about the hamburger I was going to mung out on after work. Mmm, hamburgers...

A tap on my leg snapped me out of my red meat reverie and brought me smack bang back to reality.

“M-Marcello,” I stammered, my eyes automatically searching out Cheetah even though I knew she wasn’t supposed to be there.

Suddenly I felt more exposed than ever. I started to panic as he seated himself at my feet and waved a wad of bills in my direction. I lowered myself onto the podium and he slipped the money into my garter. His touch sent a bolt of electricity up my leg and a warning signal to my brain. I shimmied up the pole in an effort both to look sexy and to get some distance. I had to play this smart. I needed to get close to Marcello but not too close. Then there was also Cheetah to consider. Not her feelings, because I was pretty sure she didn’t have any, but my safety was at stake here. I swung around the pole and landed surprisingly gracefully as a new song began to play. Great. It was Rod Stewart. I hated Rod Stewart and worse, I could see Marcello mouthing the words to ‘Tonight’s the Night’. I hoped he wasn’t getting any crazy ideas. I flipped my hair around in Marcello’s lap and leaned in close. He smelled like musky aftershave and Italian coffee. Suddenly, I was hungry again. I moved away and smiled at him as I untied my bikini and tossed it to
the side - very professional, if I do say so myself. His eyes never left mine. I traced a line
from my mouth to my chest and ran my hands down the sides of my torso, then back up
to my breasts. I pinched my nipples, teasingly and pouted like a sex kitten. Still his eyes
never wavered. I unclipped my g-string. That got his attention. He held up his hand.

“You don’t want me to take them off?” I asked, surprised.

What? Was he gay all of a sudden? Knowing my luck it was the sight of me half
naked that’d turned him.

He shook his head and leaned in closer, “I’d like you to come and have a drink with
me when you’ve finished your podium.”

So that was his deal, the old ‘suck her in  and let her think I’m a nice guy and don’t
just want to bonk her brains out’ routine.

“Oh, sure,” I managed.

He smiled and I watched him walk to the bar. I clipped my g-string back into place
and retied my bikini top just in time for the next podium change. I scooted backstage and
checked my make-up. I also decided to put the money he’d given me into my locker. I
pulled it out of my garter and almost had a heart attack. I hadn’t noticed in the dark, but it
was five one hundred dollar bills. What the hell? I peeled off two and shoved them into
my purse, intent on giving him back three. It’s not that I’m averse to people throwing
money at me but something told me that he was expecting a lot more than a flash of flesh
for the full five hundred. Not that I’d even earned the two that I’d taken but still... It
didn’t feel right taking the whole lot. I tucked the rest back into my garter and slammed
my locker shut. I could really use a drink.

I strutted out to Human League’s ‘Don’t You Want Me’ and scowled up at the DJ
for his crappy taste in music. I mean, Rod Stewart and now this? The guy was totally stuck
in a time warp. At 55, he was well and truly on his way down the hill but dressed like
someone 20 years his junior. He constantly wore a pair of wraparound sunglasses, even
inside at night and tried to flirt with all the dancers. He thought he was the epitome of
cool. You could just tell. But the general consensus amongst the girls was that he was just
a washed up old DJ who couldn’t get a gig anywhere else. Trish was always telling him to
play more top 40, but clearly, he was intent on reliving his youth.

I plonked myself down across from Marcello and slid the three hundred across the
table.

“What’s this?” he smiled.
“Your change.”
He shrugged and motioned over a waitress. She took his order and he thrust the three hundred at her.

“Keep the change,” he said, waving her away dismissively.
Was that supposed to impress me?
“So what’s your name?” Marcello asked, taking a sip of what looked like bourbon on ice.

“I told you. It’s Angel,” I smiled brightly.
“No, I mean your real name.”
I laughed and tried to look mysterious. Dallas had warned me about customers that asked for your real name. She said that a lot of them asked you because they thought that if you told them it made them feel different to the other customers, like they were special and their experiences were somehow more authentic

“I could tell you but then I’d have to kill you.”
His eyes sparkled. I could see his was enjoying himself.
“Really? Well, can’t have that now, can we, Angel?”
The waitress returned with our drinks. Cheap champagne for me and another glass of whatever it was he was already drinking. I plucked the strawberry garnish from the flute and popped it into my mouth. It was bitter so I chewed only once before washing it down with a mouthful of champers.

“So, ah, what is it that you do for work, Marcello?” I asked, shifting nervously in my seat.

“Property development,” he answered smoothly.
“Really? How interesting...” I lied.
What the hell was property development anyway? Was he some sort of fancy real estate agent? I sipped and smiled, sipped and smiled. Great detective skills, Raini, I thought to myself. If I couldn’t even get a decent conversation going to extract some info out of this guy, how the hell was I going to find Melody’s killer?

“What about you? What do you do with yourself? Apart from this of course,” he said with a sweeping gesture.

“Me? Er, not much. I used to work at a supermarket before this. That’s about it.”
“How interesting...” he smiled.
Interesting? I think not. In fact he was beginning to creep me out. He was giving me some serious ‘come to bed’ eyes only instead of being sexy they were leaning more towards the ‘run as far away as you can’ type.

“No, really,” he said, “Tell me about yourself.”

A few nights ago when we’d first met I’d been able to see why Melody had liked him. At first, he came across as charming, drop dead gorgeous and charismatic. But sitting here now, one on one, I was beginning to see him as a major sleazoid. Perhaps it was because of his reconnection with Cheetah or maybe he just wasn’t my type. I knew he was rich because Dallas had mentioned it once and I had a hunch that he definitely wasn’t a property developer. The fact that he was lying left me thinking that whatever it was that he did, it probably wasn’t legal. But was he capable of murdering my sister?

“Well, there’s not much to tell really. I’m an only child, I come from a small town and stripping is about the most exciting thing I’ve ever done in my whole life.”

“No boyfriend?”

I shook my head. Suddenly I felt small and naïve. Just a girl from the country whose sexual experience was limited to missionary position sex with the lights off and whose only serious ‘boyfriend’ had been the grocery manager from Safeway. God, talk about inexperienced.

“That’s surprising. A beautiful girl like yourself, I bet you could have any guy you wanted.”

I almost choked on my champagne. How desperate to get into my pants was this guy?

“Bet you say that to all the girls,” I said, cringing at my use of the well worn cliché.

“Only the beautiful ones,” he grinned.

“That’s nice to know…” I muttered, not believing a word.

“So listen, you wanna grab something to eat after work?”

“Sorry, I can’t. I have plans.”

“Tomorrow night then?”

This was it. This was my chance to get close to him.

“Okay, sure.”

“Where do you live? I’ll pick you up at eight.”

Shit! I couldn’t have him pick me up at Mum and Dad’s.

“Tell you what, why don’t I meet you?”
“Okay. Why don’t you call me around seven tomorrow night,” he flicked a business card in my direction, “And we'll take it from there.”

“Perfect.”

I finished my drink and noticed for the first time a new group of customers a few tables away. Suddenly I felt hot and cold all over as fear gripped my stomach and balled it up into a mass of twisted knots. That mop of red hair and face full of freckles could only belong to one person. My heart stopped. Paul?

Fuck! I turned back to Marcello. I had to get to Paul and do some damage control. “Thanks for the drink. See you tomorrow,” I waved dismissively.

I strode over to Paul’s table in a panic. How the hell was I going to talk my way out of this? I wasn’t exactly dressed like a secretary so he’d know instantly that I was dancing here. I just had to get him not to tell anyone what he’d seen.

“Raini?” Paul said, “I thought it was you when I first walked in but then I thought I had to be imagining things.”

“Sshhh!!!!” I glared at him, wanting to punch him in the face for calling me my real name.

“Phwoar! Pauly! You know this chick?” one of his mates jeered.

I clenched my teeth and gave him a sarcastic smile, “No, he just knows my name ’cause he’s a psychic, Arsehole! Paul, can I talk to you a minute?”

Paul didn’t move. “In private?” I asked, irritated.

“Ah, yeah sure. Where?” he slurred.

“In a fantasy room,” I said, grabbing his hand and yanking him towards me.

“Whoaaa, Pauly! The fantasy room!” his mates chorused.

“You actually hang out with these morons?” I snapped, dragging a half pissed Paul behind me.

I plucked a hundred from my garter and thrust it at the hostess. “Which one?” she asked, chewing over time on a piece of gum, her pupils so big they were well past the saucer stage and heading towards a full dinner plate.

“Anything. Whatever you’ve got,” I muttered.

“Well, it’s been a little slow tonight so all the rooms are empty, mind you, you should really pick one that has decent music ’cause most of the tapes are full of cheesy music and you don’t want to be dancing around to something really lame and not that I
should be pushing you one way or the other but I don’t mind the cheerleader one 'cause that Mickey song isn’t too bad and...

“Alright!” I barked, interrupting her rapid fire, speed induced monologue, “Fine. The cheerleader one will do.”

“Good choice!” she said, taking my money and giving me back some change.

I left Paul with her and raced out the back to get changed.

I almost cried when I saw a reflection of myself squeezed tightly into the cheerleader outfit. I looked like a total freak show. Fuck it, I thought, grabbing the pom-poms and hoofing it to the fantasy room.

As soon as I entered, Paul was hysterical with laughter. I put my hands on my hips and pursed my lips.

“It’s not bloody funny, Paul!”

“Raini, what the hell’s going on? What are you doing here? I mean, you obviously work here, but why? How?”

I guess the shock of seeing me dressed like a skanky, overweight cheerleader had sobered him up a bit. He wasn’t 100% but he was pretty lucid for a guy who’d been half drunk only moments earlier.

“Paul, you can’t tell anyone, okay?” I said, tugging down the red and white netball skirt so he couldn’t see what I’d had for breakfast.

“No one would even believe me, trust me...”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Paul scratched his head and looked around. It was then that I noticed he was actually embarrassed.

“Paul? Are you blushing?”

He turned an even brighter shade of pink beneath his freckles.

“Paul, it’s not what you think. Here, sit down,” I said, offering him a chair and kneeling in front of him.

“I need a smoke,” he muttered, taking a pack of Stuyvesants from his shirt pocket.

“Great idea. Gimme one of those, would you?”

Paul arched an eyebrow, “Since when do you smoke?”

“Paul, a lot’s changed in the past few weeks, my taking up social smoking being one of them,” I said, helping myself to a Stuyvy, “Now spark me up.”
The flame caught my cigarette and I puffed deep and hard, trying to figure out what I was going to tell Paul. Was it okay to lie to your best friend in certain situations? I didn’t think so but I had a lot to lose here. If Paul told anyone, even accidentally, it was certain to get back to Mum and Dad and I’d be in deeper shit than the Werribee Tip.

“Look, Paul, this is how it is. You know Melody was murdered, right? Well the cops aren’t doing anything to find the killer,” I stood up and began pacing the room, puffing furiously.

“Doesn’t explain why you’re dressed like a porn star cheerleader...” Paul muttered.

“I’m getting to that!” I snapped, “So the point is that I’m here undercover trying to find Melody’s killer.”

“What? The cops have you here undercover?” I rolled my eyes. God, Paul could be so dense sometimes.

“No. I’m doing this alone. When I find some evidence, then I’ll go to the cops.”

“Are you bloody crazy?” Paul asked incredulously.

“Well someone has to do something. The police don’t give a shit about a murdered stripper. Nobody does. Nobody except her family.”

“Raini, you’re in real trouble here. What if things go bad and you end up dead too? I can’t let you do this.”

“Paul! Are you my best friend or not?” He lowered his eyes and scuffed at the carpet.

“Well? Are you?”

Paul nodded, avoiding my eyes.

“Then you have to keep my secret. Mum and Dad can’t find out about this. Promise me?”

I stopped pacing and stood in front of Paul with my hands on my hips.

“Paul? Do you promise?”

Another nod from Paul. I wasn’t confident about his ability to zip it so I had to take desperate measures. I felt awful doing it but there was no other way. I knew Paul had had a crush on me since high school and I was going to cash in on it. Sorry Paul.

“You know, once all this is over we can, y’know, maybe give things a go...as more than friends...”

I saw a spark appear in Paul’s eyes as they met mine. I felt like a total and utter bitch. There was no way we’d ever be more than friends but I had to say something to
make him keep his mouth shut. After I caught the killer and they were safely tucked away behind bars, I’d tell him the truth. I just hoped that he’d forgive me.

“Really?”

“Really,” I smiled.

“Well, I can’t say I agree with what you’re doing, Raini. Just promise me something?”

“What?”

“Promise me that if things start getting dangerous you’ll get out and go to the police.”

“Intended to do that all along,” I lied.
It's true what they say about laudromats. They are the biggest pick up joints in town. I'd been here a little over half an hour and I'd already seen people doing some serious flirting around the washing machines then exchanging phone numbers at the drink vending machines. One couple who had apparently just met were even sucking face next to a washing powder and fabric softener vending machine. Incredible. I ducked down behind my magazine so it wouldn't look like I was staring and tried to concentrate on an article about Britney's latest stint in rehab but the words wouldn't sink in. Frustrated, I tossed it onto the empty chair next to me and wandered over to the dryer to check my washing. Still 20 minutes to go. It sucked that I even had to come here but I couldn't wash my costumes at home in case Mum saw me. And now I couldn't stop wondering if I'd done the right thing last night.

After work Dallas and I had gone to Maccas with some serious burger cravings and I told her everything over Big Macs and chocolate thick shakes. She'd taken it all surprisingly well. Even offered to help me if she could. But I still couldn't help feeling like I'd made a huge mistake. Still, now that Dallas knew the truth, I'd have an ally at the club who might be able to get even more information than me. I mean, she'd been there a long time and had the trust of the girls and most of the regulars. Who knew what she might be able to dig up?

"'Scuse me," a greasy looking fat man in stained trousers smiled, pushing past me.
He loaded his washing in the machine next to me and I copped a noseful of unwashed hair and body smell. I gagged and turned away to hide my grimace and busied myself with sniffing a bottle of jasmine scented fabric softener instead. It seemed ironic that this man who couldn't even wash himself properly was doing laundry. He started up the machine and leaned back on it casually before giving me an 'I'm totally into you' eyebrow raise. I moved away and tried my best not to puke. As if! The dryer stopped and I shoved my bits and pieces into my backpack much to the amusement of Smelly Fatman. I could see he was about to make his move so I scuttled out as quick as I could and trotted to the bus stop, praying there'd be a bus there waiting.

It was just pulling in and I waited while it hissed to a stop. I purchased a ticket and took a window seat near the back as the bus roared to life and pulled out onto the main road.

“Howzit goin', love?” a goateed youth drawled in my ear, tapping me on the shoulder.

I spun around ready to tell him to fuck off and noticed he was one of six so I changed my mind.

“Fine,” I mumbled.

“Aw, come on, love. Don’t be like that. Why dontcha come and sit over here?” he leered, patting the seat next to him.

His mates all laughed, poking and jostling each other as they eyed their brave mate.

“No thanks,” I said as calmly as I could manage.

The boy was probably only about 17. Three years younger than me. He had a missing tooth and greasy skin.

“Well how ‘bout sitting on this then?” he said, grabbing his crotch through his Adidas track suit pants.

I stood up and shot him the nastiest look I could muster and stumbled my way towards the front of the bus.

“Aw, whatsa matter, love? Too much man for ya, eh?” he called after me to much jeering from his buddies.

I took a seat next to an old lady who reeked of moth balls. She smiled at me and returned to her window. My stop was coming up in a few blocks. I prayed the dickheads up the back stayed on the bus as I jabbed the buzzer and stood up.
The 15 minute walk home seemed to take forever and when I finally arrived I could see suitcases strewn across the front lawn. Strange, I didn’t know we were expecting visitors and why was their luggage outside?

I dumped my backpack in my room and went looking for Mum so I could investigate. I found her in the garden, sipping coffee amongst her beloved roses.

“Hi, Mum. Whose bags?”

I noticed she’d been crying. She daubed at her eyes, refusing to meet mine.

"They're yours."

"What?"

"You lied to us, Raini."

A sense of dread washed over me like a bucket of freezing water, turning my insides to ice. I knew then that she knew.

"What are you talking about? I haven't done anything, I-"

"We know about the stripping, Raini."

"Mum, it's not what you think..." I pleaded.

"After everything that happened to your sister I can’t believe you'd do this!" Mum yelled, her eyes meeting mine for the first time, "It's like I don’t even know you anymore!"

"Mum, please, let me explain!"

She was shaking with anger, her coffee spilling over the sides of her mug.

"Do you want to end up like Melody? What’s wrong with you?"

"I just, I, I wanted to feel close to her..." I lied.

"And you chose stripping to do that?"

"I'm sorry...I..."

"Well sorry's not good enough. Your father wants you out of this house. I tried to reason with him but he wouldn’t listen. He wouldn’t even stick around to see you when you got home. I've never seen him so angry. I can't believe you’d do this to us," Mum cried.

"Mum!" I begged, tears now forcing themselves to the surface and rolling down my cheeks, "Please!"

"Just go. I can’t even look at you right now."

I tried to go to her. I wanted to feel her arms around me, hear her tell me that we’d work things out and everything would be okay. She pushed me away and the coffee hit the ground before she ran into the house, stifling her sobs beneath her hand. I stood, rooted
to the spot like one of Mum's rose bushes, and wept. My worst nightmare had come true. My heart ached, a ball of grief exploding in my chest. I'd lost my sister and now my parents. Maybe I should've told Mum the truth but by the sound of things it didn't matter what excuse I gave. And how did they find out anyway? Paul. It had to be Paul. There was no other explanation.

I dragged myself around to the front of the house and lugged my suitcases to the footpath. Where the hell was I going to go? I searched my backpack for my phone and called a cab. Then I called Dallas.

"I need your help," I sobbed.

"Angel, is that you?"

"I've been kicked out of home," I choked.

I sat on the edge of the footpath, the gutter catching my tears.

"Oh my God. That's awful. Are you okay?"

"No. Can I come over?"

"Sure. You know where I live, right?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay then. I'll see you soon and don't worry, we'll work something out."

"Th-thanks, Dallas," I sniffed.

A cab pulled up just as Paul's front door opened. The driver got out and helped me load my suitcases into the boot.

"Raini, wait!" Paul yelled.

"Fuck off, Paul!" I screamed.

"Raini, please! Let me explain."

"Get the fuck away from me, Paul or I swear to God..."

"It's not what you think. Just give me two minutes!"

I ignored him and climbed into the cab, slamming the door behind me. The driver took off and I turned around for a final glimpse of the guy who'd been my best friend since forever. He was red faced and angry, throwing his cap viciously onto the ground. I couldn't believe he'd betrayed me. I never wanted to see him again.
The cab pulled up in front of a terraced house down a cramped little side street in Richmond. I paid the driver and he reluctantly helped me unload my suitcases onto the curb with a grunt and a dirty look before speeding away. A black cat appeared from nowhere and rubbed against my legs. It looked as lonely as I felt. I bent down to scratch behind its ears, which turned out to be a really big mistake. It hissed and swiped at my outstretched hand, giving me a deep scratch for my troubles.

“Yow! Bad kitty!” I yelped.

It meowed and looked up at me expectantly.

“What?” I asked, trying to shoo it away with my foot.

It flicked its tail and rubbed its head against my legs again but I wasn’t falling into that trap a second time. I dragged my suitcases up the footpath, nearly tripping over ‘Psycho Kitty’ in the process.

“Go away!” I hissed, rapping on Dallas’ front door.

The cat ignored me and began sniffing around the terrace, knocking over some herb pots and generally sussing the place out. I heard a lock click and the door swung open.

“You look like shit,” Dallas greeted me.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, biting my lip to hold back more tears.

“That your cat?”
I shook my head, no.

“Here, Kitty,” Dallas cooed.

The cat meowed and padded eagerly to her. She bent down and scooped it up into her arms. It burrowed its head into her neck and began purring.

“Unbelievable…” I muttered.

“Cute,” she smiled, stepping back so I could follow her inside.

The house didn’t look like much from the outside but inside it was pretty impressive. My heels clacked on the newly polished floorboards and I admired some Aboriginal artwork that adorned the plum coloured walls. Two paintings down, was a framed Master of Arts in Languages Degree.

“Wow. Impressive.”

“Surprised?”

“Kind of…”

“Hey,” Dallas joked, “We’re not all drug addicts or abuse victims who do it because we have no other options, y’know.”

I nodded, unable even to crack a smile.

Dallas smiled and squeezed my shoulder supportively before opening a door on the left and leading me into a guest room.

“Make yourself at home.”

“Thanks,” I said, plonking my suitcase onto the bed and dumping my bag on the floor.

Dallas yanked back the drapes and sunlight streamed through the windows. The cat meowed again.

“Okay. Let’s get you some food,” she said to the cat, then to me, “Come on, I reckon you could use a drink.”

I followed Dallas into an open plan kitchen/living area with high ceilings and low lights. Everything about it was sleek and modern, just like Dallas.

“Great place,” I commented.

“Thanks. I bought it about four years ago and renovated. Did the interior design myself. Apparently I have a flair for it,” she said proudly.

Dallas released the cat onto the floor and hunted through the fridge. She took out a container of what I assumed were leftovers and tipped half into a bowl, which the cat pounced on as soon as it touched the floor. Then she grabbed out an open bottle of
chardonnay and poured two glasses. We moved over to the couches and she sagged into a bean bag while I sat on the couch and hugged a cushion.

“So what happened?”

I told her about the confrontation with Mum, explained how Melody had been kicked out when she was 16 and generally poured my heart out. At some point she must have passed me some tissues because when I’d finished I had a pile of soggy paper in my lap.

“Not to worry, Love,” she said, patting my shoulder, “I’m sure they’ll come around.”

I shrugged and blew my nose, doubting somehow that my parents would ever forgive me.

“Can I ask you a question?” I said tentatively.

“Sure.”

“Why do you do it? Why do you strip?”

“Well, first of all, it’s fun. Of course the money is one of the biggest draw cards. There’s no way I could make this much money doing a straight job. But honestly, I enjoy stripping.”

I thought about Melody. She’d always been a straight A student who was intelligent and diligent. She’d chosen stripping too despite the fact that she could easily have done something else.

“Also,” she continued, “I like the fact that I. I have complete control over what I do with my body and I get to rebel against what society expects a woman should do…but don’t even get me started on that!”

“Fair enough,” I said.

“Hey, why don’t we go out and get totally fucked up tonight? Always makes me feel better,” Dallas suggested.

Actually, getting wasted didn’t sound like a bad idea. Hell, I deserved it considering what I was putting myself through all in the name of justice.

“So? Is it a date?” Dallas smiled.

“Date! Shit,” I smacked myself on the forehead, “I have a date tonight.”

I’d totally forgotten about my plans with Marcello and after today I really needed to find Melody’s killer so I could get back to my normal life. I didn’t know how much more of this I could take.
“Great! It’s just what you need. A hot date and some kinky sex! That’ll take your mind off everything,” Dallas winked.

“It’s not that kind of date. There definitely won’t be any sex, kinky or otherwise. It’s strictly business.”

“Sounds boring,” Dallas mock yawned.

“Yeah, well I’m not looking forward to it either.”

“Any reason why?”

“Because it’s with Marcello.”

“Ah. Say no more…”

“Anything you wanna tell me about this guy?”

“What do you want to know?”

I shrugged, “Anything. What’ve you got?”

“Well, he’s a drug dealer for one thing. Sells a lot of coke, ice and smack.”

“Drug dealer?”

Dallas nodded and petted the cat that had finished eating and made itself at home on her lap. Alarm bells went off in my brain as I considered the fact that the cops were now investigating a possible drug link in Melody’s murder.

“Did Melody know?” I asked.

“Darling, everybody knows.”

“Shit!”

“Why? You think he killed your sister?”

“I’m not sure of anything yet but what if he did? I could be going on a date with a murderer. A MURDERER for chrissake!”

I stood up and began pacing the room.

“Calm down. You don’t have to go if you don’t want to. Does she?” Dallas asked the cat.

“Come with me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Come with me. On my date.”

“Are you crazy? I’d rather go out with a two-toed sloth than Marcello Morales.”

“Pleeease,” I begged.

“No way. There is nothing in this world that could convince me to go out on a date with you and Marcello,” Dallas shook her head and crossed her arms.
“My shout,” I scrambled for something to sweeten the deal, “Dinner and drinks!”
Dallas hesitated before shaking her head. I nearly had her.
“And anything in between…”
“Well…I don’t know.”
“Come on, think about it. A free night out with all expenses paid. And besides, I could be going out with a murderer. You don’t want anything to happen to me, do you?”
“Alright then. But I’m only going so I can keep an eye on you.”
“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”
I threw my arms around her neck and the cat let out a wail and a hiss. I poked my tongue out at it.
“Alright, alright. No need to get all emotional on me.”
“You won’t regret this, I promise.”
I leaned back on the restaurant toilet cubicle door and breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Raini!”

The door vibrated as Dallas began banging. I reluctantly twisted the lock and opened it up. Dallas glared at me with her hands on her hips, her face matching the colour of her tight red dress.

“Won’t regret it, huh? Do you realize he’s expecting a threesome tonight?” she hissed, pushing past me and slamming the toilet lid down.

I shut the door and watched her tip the contents of her little black clutch purse out. She rummaged through the junk and came up with a plastic gram bag full of white powder – the anything-in-between I’d promised, not thinking I’d be forking out almost $300 for what looked like a teaspoon full of cocaine.

“I swear to God you better not think I’m sleeping with the arsehole,” she said, emptying the powder onto the toilet lid and expertly turning the pile into perfect little white rows.

“Quick, gimme a note,” she said.

I passed her a hundred.

She rolled it up and hoovered up three lines. Her eyes watered and she blinked it back, sniffing hard.

“Here,” she said, passing the note to me.

I politely declined.
“Suit yourself,” Dallas shrugged.

She snorted the rest before running her finger over the lid and rubbing what was left into her gums.

“Ew! Gross. Do you have any idea how many germs you just ingested,” I said, wrinkling my nose up.

“Sweetheart, I’ve had much worse than that in my mouth,” Dallas winked.

“Oh my God, I don’t even wanna know…”

“Righto then. What’s the plan, Einstein?”

“Well, the thing is, I don’t actually have a plan. I thought I’d just get him drunk and he’d spill whatever information he had. I’m not exactly experienced at this stuff, y’know. I’m no Nancy Drew.”

“Honey, he’s expecting it Inspector Rex style tonight and if we don’t come up with a plan I am not sticking around for the finale.”

“Very funny.”

“Okay. I’ve got an idea. Why don’t I ask him about your sister? He knows we used to hang out sometimes so he probably won’t get suspicious. Anything in particular you want to find out about?”

“I need to know if Melody was selling drugs.”

Dallas arched a perfectly plucked brow, “Okay. What else?”

“I dunno. Anything. Just get him talking. I’ll know it when I hear it.”

“You owe me big time.”

“I know.”

We opened the cubicle door and Dallas fluffed her hair in the mirror and reapplied her lip gloss.

“Showtime,” she said to her reflection.

I trailed behind her as she sauntered back to our table, drawing attention from the other male patrons, much to the annoyance of their female partners. I made a mental note never to take Dallas with me on covert operations that required near invisibility.

“Where’ve you been? I was starting to think you’d left,” Marcello drawled, flashing an ‘I don’t really believe you’d leave me ‘cause I’m too good, Babe’ smile. I tried not to roll my eyes as I sat down. I wondered what had possessed Melody to enter into a relationship with this drop kick.

“Just powdering my nose,” Dallas whispered.
“Well why didn’t you say so? I would’ve joined you.”

“Sorry,” Dallas said sweetly, “Ladies only.”

“You want dessert?”

“Couldn’t eat another bite,” I said patting my stomach.

“Don’t be stupid,” Dallas kicked me under the table, “She was just telling me how much she’d love some crepe suzette. Weren’t you, Angel?”

“Er, yeah,” I agreed.

Marcello brushed an imaginary piece of fluff off his grey Armani suit jacket and summoned over a waiter.

“A crepe suzette for the lady and another bottle of pinot,” he ordered.

The waiter nodded and left.

“Nice place, huh?” I commented feebly.

I wasn’t lying. It really was a nice restaurant. Small and exclusive, ‘Clique’ was the kind of restaurant that usually only took bookings and had a waiting list two months long. Unless of course, you were an underworld drug dealer and one of your biggest clients was the owner. Or at least that’s what Marcello had bragged about on the way here. It had a comfortably intimate atmosphere with low lighting and expensive silver ware that gleamed shinier than tin foil.

I sipped pinot from fine crystal and admired the artwork surrounding us, enjoying the mixed aromas of what smelled like chocolate soufflé and strong coffee. Marcello was leaning close and whispering something in Dallas’ ear. She giggled flirtatiously and I thought I saw her grimace as she gulped down a mouthful of wine. I tried to hide my laughter by concentrating on the group next to us. Two forty-ish looking Toorak couples who probably had more money than they knew what to do with. The men roared with laughter at some inane joke they’d made while the women smiled politely and fingered their pearls. Probably real. No, definitely. The women looked freshly Botoxed and bored. Probably been married for twenty years and come here to talk about how rich they are. Jealousy. It’s a curse. I turned my attention back to Dallas and Marcello.

“So, anyway, Marcello,” I heard Dallas say loudly, “Have you heard anything about the investigation into Madison’s murder?”

“C’mon, Princess, let’s not talk about morbid shit like that.”

“I was only asking,” Dallas pouted, stroking his silk tie suggestively, “I was wondering if they’d questioned you or anything.”
“Why the fuck would the cops question me?” Marcello snapped.

Interesting…

Dallas shrugged, “Dunno. Just thought that seeing as you guys were an item once they’d wanna talk to you.”

The crepes arrived and the Marcello motioned for the waiter to place them in front of me. I shook my head and pushed them towards Dallas.

“Well, if you insist,” she smiled.

The waiter leaned over, poured brandy on the crepes and set them alight. Dallas yelped and shoved them towards Marcello, whose tie was swinging about an inch above the table thanks to Dallas’s amorous attention. The tie caught alight instantly.

“FUCK!” Marcello screamed.

He jumped up and waved his arms around, his eyes searching wildly for water.

“Here!” Dallas threw her wine at his flaming tie.

Whoosh! The flames burned brighter and the fire spread to his shirt.

“HELP!” Marcello screeched.

He was trying desperately to pat the flames out, stumbling backwards all the while. Patrons sat, mouths agape and eyes wide with shock as they were stunned into statues.

“SOMEBODY FUCKIN’ HELP ME!!!”

Waiters came running from every direction, one carrying a fire extinguisher. He blasted Marcello, knocking him backwards. We all watched in horror as Marcello fell, smacking his head into a chair before he hit the deck and lay there motionless, covered in white powder.

“Somebody call an ambulance,” a woman called out.

I groaned and reached for my mobile.

“Now that was cool,” Dallas breathed.
I paced the Alfred Hospital waiting room, gnawing on an already demolished nail. I hated hospitals. They smelled like death and disinfectant.

“For God’s sake, sit down. You’re stressing me out,” Dallas moaned.

I plonked down next to her, the plastic chair squeaking in protest, and picked up a battered Woman’s Day. I flipped the pages noisily, irritated. It felt like we’d been waiting for hours despite the fact that the clock told me it had only been 45 minutes. A decrepit looking old man coughed next to me and reached into his brown overcoat pocket for a crumpled up hanky to catch the phlegm. I leaned closer to Dallas and tried not to shudder.

“How long’s it gonna take?” I whined.

Dallas shifted and adjusted her position, draping Marcello’s suit jacket over her knees for warmth. I heard the unmistakable jangling of a set of keys.

“Hey, gimme that,” I said, snatching the jacket up and rummaging through the pockets.

“What’re you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“And what exactly are you going to do with those?”

“What do you reckon?”

“Oh no. You can’t be serious. You can’t just go and break into his house.”

“I won’t be breaking in. I have keys!” I grinned.

And better yet, I’d get to hoon around in his Mercedes.
“You can’t just leave me here!” Dallas protested.

“Well, someone has to stay. And besides, you’re going to have to call me when he leaves the hospital to warn me.”

“I’m not your bloody sidekick, you know.”

“Yeah, well I’m not exactly Batman either but I’m desperate and I need your help.”

“You owe me!”

“Put it on my tab,” I called, exiting the sliding doors and heading for the car.

I heard a bleep as the car unlocked electronically and the lights flashed. I opened the door, climbed into the driver’s seat and started the ignition. The motor hummed to life and I indicated to pull out onto Commercial Road. I knew Marcello didn’t live far from here. I’d been able to get his address from his license when we checked him into the hospital. I cruised down Commercial Road, turned right at Punt and started looking for Davis Street. I found it two more streets down, took a left and pulled up in front of a weatherboard house with a wrought iron fence. I killed the ignition and stepped out into the dark. The security light flicked on, illuminating the front porch and a security screen door.

I was shaking as I fumbled for the keys and tried them all until I found the ones that opened the two locks to the entrance. A dog barked from the yard next door and I yelped and shut the door behind me. He’d left the lights on in the lounge so I followed the amber glow into the main living area and tried to get my bearings. My heart was pounding and I was having second thoughts. I mean, what did I think I was going to find exactly? I was no expert but I was pretty sure murderers didn’t just leave evidence lying around their houses.

“Shit!” I cursed under my breath, “What am I doing?”

I smacked myself on the forehead and groaned. Well, I was here now. Might as well make the most of it.

I tip-toed to the lounge and headed for the bookshelf, impressed at how immaculate he kept his house. Nothing seemed out of place, though to be fair the house was pretty sparse. Not a single photo or ornament adorned the walls or shelves but there was a large sculpture in the corner of the lounge. I cocked my head, trying to work out what it was but no matter which way you looked at it, it still just looked like a great big lump of wood to me. My eyes scanned rows and rows of books on the bookshelf; Chaucer, Homer, Shakespeare, Yeats, some books about post modernism, and a lot of
foreign names that I couldn’t pronounce. For a sleazy drug dealer, Marcello sure read a lot of classic literature and I was quietly amazed. Most of his pick up lines were straight out of a Mills & Boon! Maybe he’d been a literature major at Uni. Any wonder he’d turned to dealing drugs. Last time I checked, book reviewers weren’t making much money. The lounge wasn’t yielding any clues so I moved to the kitchen and rummaged through some drawers. Nothing out of the ordinary here except maybe that for a bachelor, his fridge was well stocked with food instead of beer. I helped myself to a handful of strawberries and nudged the door shut with my foot.

I found the gun in the laundry behind the tumble dryer. Bingo! It felt heavy in my hand as I picked it up and imagined Melody being shot with it. I trembled and had to stop myself from throwing up on the spot. Reason told me that it probably wasn’t the gun she’d been shot with. In all the movies, the killer usually threw the gun into a river…didn’t they? But what if it was? I was shaking so bad that the gun clattered to the floor. I bent down to retrieve it.

“What the fuck?” a voice boomed in surprise.

I jumped and leapt back, the gun pointed in front of me like I’d seen them do on ‘Law and Order’.

“Stay back or I’ll shoot!”

Marcello stared at me incredulously but unafraid. Why hadn’t Dallas warned me? I felt around my pocket for my phone. Shit! Where was my phone?

“Hey, it’s my house, remember? And my gun. And what the fuck are you doing here?”

“I kn-know you k-k-killed Melody,” I stammered, wiping the sweat that suddenly prickled my forehead.

Marcello took a step towards me. I sidestepped from the laundry into the kitchen and backed up against the fridge. Good work, moron, I told myself. This wasn’t a magical fridge that would open up and whip me into Narnia.

“Back!” I shouted, the gun shaking in my hands.

“Relax,” Marcello said calmly, “I’m just grabbing a drink.”

He walked to the fridge and took out a bottle of water, chugging half down in two big gulps, the gun trained on him the whole time.

“Do you mind getting that thing out of my face? I didn’t kill anyone,” he said, wiping his mouth, “And how do you know Melody anyway? Who are you? Really?”
“Melody was my sister and you’re about to join her, arsehole!” I spat, sounding a hell of a lot braver than I felt.

Marcello laughed, “It’s not loaded, you know.”

I knew nothing about guns. In fact it was the first time I’d even seen one. I turned it over in my hand and saw .45 engraved into the silver metal.

“Gimme that,” Marcello said, snatching it from me, “You shouldn’t play with guns.”

Strange. He was awfully cool, calm and collected for a murderer who’d just been busted big time.

“Hey!” I snapped.

“I should’ve seen it. You even look like her. Explains why I was drawn to you,” Marcello muttered, more to himself than me.

“Funny, I thought you just wanted to get me into bed regardless of what I looked like.”

“Gimme a break. I can have just about any girl I want. There was a reason I wanted you. You remind me of your sister.”

“Get over yourself,” I said, rolling my eyes and pretending that his comments hadn’t stung, “And by the way, you never had a chance with me and I don’t know what Melody saw in you.”

Marcello laughed, “Yep, you’re just like her alright. She played hard to get at first too.”

He was seriously irritating me. Luckily he’d already taken the gun off me or I really would shoot him.

“So how long was Melody selling drugs for you before you had her killed?” I demanded.

“What? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Come on, Marcello, the cops know she was involved in drugs and it’s pretty obvious that you are too. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to work out that—”

“Whoa, hold on a minute. Firstly, Melody was not selling drugs. Not for me or for anyone else. Secondly, I didn’t kill her. I loved her. Why would I kill her?”

“Well if you love her so much, why did you break up with her?”

“I didn’t. She broke up with me.”

“Why?”
Marcello sat down at the kitchen table and lit a smoke.

“About two weeks before she died, we had a fight. She said she was gonna be in another movie. A skin flick. I didn’t want her doing it anymore. Things between us were starting to get serious and I didn’t want my girl doing porn. She told me I didn’t own her, accused me of trying to ruin her career and kicked me out. Then I find out she’s dead…” Marcello turned his head.

“Melody was doing porn?”
Marcello nodded. Shit! That explained the money at least.

“So if you didn’t kill Melody then who did?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to find out,” Marcello said, wincing as he gingerly touched the back of his head.

“Nasty bump you’ve got there,” I said, trying not to snigger.

“Tell me about it. Remind me, whose bright idea was it to order the crepe suzette?”

I snickered, giving him my best, ‘you deserved it, arsehole’ face.

“Hey, it’s not funny.”

“You know, you’re awfully calm for a man who just knocked himself out, ended up in emergency and came home to find some crazy chick pointing a gun at him.”

Marcello grinned, “Must be the sedatives they gave me at the hospital. And anyway, I knew you weren’t gonna shoot me. You don’t have the killer instinct.”

“You know, you’re not such a bad guy when you’re not trying to get into my pants.”

“And you wouldn’t have let me?”

“I only agreed to go out with you so I could figure out if it was you who killed Melody.”

“Sure, Princess, whatever. So now that you’ve figured out I didn’t and finished ransacking my house, what are you gonna do?”

I shrugged, “Keep looking.”

“Got any leads?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“You’ve got none. Have you?”

Damn! Was it that obvious?

“Do you?”
“Nothing concrete.”

“Well?”

“Look all I know is that it was a professional hit. Nothing the cops don’t already know. The difference is, I have a better chance of getting to the shooter than they do and when I do…”

I stared hard into his eyes, trying to figure out if he was telling the truth or not but he was unreadable. Still, the night hadn’t been a total disaster. Okay so it had been but I’d still managed to find out some interesting information. It wasn’t much but at least it was something.

“Marcello, you don’t happen to know the names of any of the movies Melody was in, do you?”

“No, why?”

“I’m not sure yet but it could be important. One last question.”

“Yeah?”

“Can you call me a taxi?”
I slumped back in the tattered old chair in the corner of the dressing room, stuffing my face with Twisties.

“You’re not gonna make any money if you sit here like that all night, Love,” Mum clucked knowingly.

I shrugged and tipped the remaining contents of the Twistie bag into my mouth before screwing it into a ball and aiming for the rubbish bin, which I missed. God, I needed chocolate. Things always seemed better when there was chocolate…

“Hey, Angel,” Dallas hollered, clomping down the stage stairs, half naked and sweaty.

“What?” I grumbled.

“There’s some guy out there asking for you.”

“So?”

“So I told him you’d be right out.”

I groaned and watched Dallas towel herself dry and spray on some Rexona. She reached for the body glitter, smearing it over her breasts and stomach before tying on a gold bikini top and reapplying lipstick.

“Better,” she pouted at her reflection.

I shoved my feet into my stilettos and followed her out onto the floor. The music was slow and sexy, some kind of R&B, and the club seemed quieter than usual.

“Hey, I meant to ask, have you seen Jamie lately?” Dallas asked.
I shook my head.

“There you are,” a voice murmured from behind me.

I smelt his aftershave before I felt his arm snake around my waist.

“You! What the…”

“C’mon. You owe me another fantasy,” Reyes smirked, pulling me away before I could protest.

Reyes paid for the fantasy and I reluctantly went backstage to get changed, cursing him all the while. I stormed into the fantasy room dressed like the bride of Chucky and raked the curtain closed.

“You didn’t have to go to all that trouble just for me, y’know,” Reyes chuckled.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re playing at? Are you trying to blow my cover?” I growled through clenched teeth.

“Nope. Just like seeing you dressed up,” Reyes smiled, lighting up a ciggie.

I jabbed the play button on the stereo and Billy Idol’s ‘White Wedding’ blasted from the speakers.

“Well?” I demanded.

“Aren’t you going to bust a few moves first?”

“Quit it!” I snapped, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Checking up on you. Making sure you don’t get yourself killed.”

“If you’re here to try and blackmail me it won’t work. Mum and Dad already know.”

“So I hear.”

“What? Are you spying on me now?” I said, fighting with the lace veil that had somehow become tangled up in my hair.

“Actually your Mum rang me. Asked me if I could try and talk some sense into you.”

“My…what the hell?”

Great. Now Reyes was in collusion with my Mum he was going to be on my case even more. As if it wasn’t bad enough already. And why did Mum care so much anyway?

“She’s worried, you know.”

“Yeah, that’s why she kicked me out.”

“People do some strange things when they’ve been hurt.”
“Hey, enough with the crappy lecture, alright? If you have nothing else to say then
go home. Oh and by the way, you owe me fifty bucks for the dance.”
“What dance?”
“The one I’m about to do on your head if you don’t get out of here.”
“C’mon, Raini, don’t be like that,” Reyes stood up and smiled.
God, he looked hot. Stop it, Raini, I told myself, he’s annoying and you don’t like
him. He moved closer. I could feel heat radiating off him.
“So how long are you gonna keep this gig up before you realise it’s a lost cause?”
Reyes asked, his voice more serious.
“It’s not a lost cause,” I replied, shifting nervously.
“Oh? Found something then?”
“Yes, if you must know.”
“Well?”
“Why should I tell you?”
“Because we’re on the same team.”
“Funny. I thought I was on my own,” I muttered.
“Look, all I care about is finding out who killed your sister and arresting them. If
you’ve found out something that might be useful I’d really like to know.”
I mulled over the idea of telling him everything then decided to keep the part about
the movies to myself.
“Well, there is something.”
“Okay.”
“One of the girls told me that Cheetah threatened to kill Melody.”
“Anyone who can verify this?”
“Maybe but you can’t go poking around or you’ll blow my cover.”
“Well, that’s no bloody help then, is it?” Reyes sighed, “Anything else?”
“No,” I lied, thinking about the breaking and entering, almost shooting Marcello
and finding out about the porn.
Reyes eyed me suspiciously before leaning in close, one hand on the wall just above
my head.
“You wouldn’t keep anything from me, would you?” he almost whispered.
My heart began to beat faster, his mouth only inches from mine. I swallowed hard.
“No.”
“Good.”

And then he was gone leaving me with only the scent of his fruity shampoo.

My legs gave way but not because of Reyes. My damn stiletto had gotten caught in the stupid wedding dress. Seriously, I was a costume catastrophe. I ripped the veil and half my hair off with it and hoicked the dress up around my waist so I could walk back to the dressing room without breaking a leg.

“Help me get this bloody thing off, can you?” I called out to Mum.

I did an about face so she could unzip me.

“Can’t,” she said, tugging on the zipper, “The silly thing’s stuck.”

I groaned.

“Hang on, Love, I’ll have to cut it off you.”

A few seconds and a pair of scissors later I was free. I came to the conclusion right there and then that I just wasn’t cut out for the fantasy thing. Literally. I checked my watch. It was five minutes until the end of my shift and I couldn’t wait to get out of here. I went to my locker and yanked on a pair of jeans and a comfortable old tee-shirt. I shoved my swollen feet into a pair of Nikes and piled everything into my locker before slamming it shut and bidding Mum goodnight.

I plodded down the stairs and yawned, expecting to be greeted with a lungful of fresh night air. Instead, I was met with a fist in my face before I was hauled off around the corner into a dark alley. I tried to scream but a hand muffled my mouth.

“You fucking boyfriend stealing bitch! I’ll kill you!”

Cheetah? I put my hands up in defense, feeling her nails dig painfully into my arms as she cat-scratched me. I screamed and tried to fight back but she was strong. She somehow managed to get me onto the ground and into a head lock.

“What…the…fuck?” I gurgled.

I was answered with another punch in the face. I tasted blood.

“Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!”

I could hardly breathe and I was seeing tiny speckles of light in front of me. I was about to pass out when suddenly she released me. It took a few seconds for me to be able to draw a breath and when I finally did I let out a strange squeal and then promptly burst into tears, while Cheetah scuffled with an unknown assailant of her own.

“Are you okay, Angel?”
I blinked and focused. Maurice had Cheetah’s arm twisted up behind her back and face first into the wall. For an old coot he was pretty strong. I nodded my head and Maurice dropped Cheetah.

“You stupid old prick!” she snarled.

“Just leave it, Cheetah. Go home!” Maurice ordered.

“This isn’t over,” Cheetah growled before stalking off into the night. Maurice helped me up off the ground.

“You’re shaking,” he said, offering me his jacket. I shook my head, no.

“You okay?”

“I’ll be alright,” I stammered.

“What the hell brought that on?” Maurice asked.

“She thinks I’m trying to steal her boyfriend.”

Maurice raised an eyebrow, “Psycho loony bitch.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Going home?”

“Yeah.”

“Need a lift?”

I knew I probably shouldn’t accept rides from customers but Cheetah had really freaked me out. I hated to admit it but I was scared.

“Well…okay, thanks.”

Maurice directed me to his car, a bombed out little Triumph with chipped blue paint and ‘Magic Happens’ hippy stickers on the back window. It wasn’t exactly a limo but at least I’d be safe from Cheetah. I climbed into the passenger side and Maurice fired up the engine and pulled out onto King’s Way. We chugged past the Casino and I shivered, hugging myself and thanking Christ that Maurice had been there. Although how he managed to be there at just the right time, I didn’t know.

“Thanks for rescuing me,” I said, trying to smile with chattering teeth.

“No problem. Damsels in distress are my specialty, y’know,” Maurice winked.

“No really, if you hadn’t been there I could’ve been much worse off.”

“Happy to help.”

“So why were you there? I mean, how did you know I was in the alley?”
“I was on my way up to the club when I heard screaming coming from around the corner. So I checked it out and lucky I did because it looked like you needed help.”

“Oh,” I mused.

Come on, Raini, I told myself, what did you think he was gonna say? That he was stalking you?

“That Cheetah’s real bad news,” Maurice warned, “Always picking on the younger, prettier ones.”

“Yeah? Like who?” I asked, sensing an opportunity to gather some primo info.

“Well, Madison for one – you know, the girl you asked me about?”

I nodded encouragingly.

“I know she had a beef with Cheetah over that gangster whatsisname. Madison had been sneaking around with him for months before Cheetah even found out. Don’t know how they managed to keep it a secret for so long. They weren’t very discreet. He’d drive around the corner from the club and Madison would meet him – right under Cheetah’s nose!”

“And you know this how?”

“Er…” Maurice shifted in his seat uncomfortably and it was then that a new idea occurred to me.

He might not have been stalking me, but he had been stalking Melody. How else would he know all this stuff? And what else did he know? Hell, he could’ve even been the one who killed her! You saw that sort of stuff on American crime shows like CSI all the time – obsessed fan kills the woman of his dreams in a jealous rage. And now I was in the car with him!

“Just pull over at that Maccas on the right can you, Maurice?” I asked, resisting the urge to wind down the window and scream for help.

“Work up a bit of an appetite back there, did you?” Maurice chuckled.

“Uh huh.”

“Madison loved McDonalds. Always ordered the Big Mac, no pickles.”

“Great,” I fake smiled.

“Hey, did I mention you look a bit like her?”

That was it. I had to get out of this car. Maurice had barely bumped the curb when I opened the door and leapt out. I slammed it shut behind me.

“I can find my own way home from here,” I said.
“Are you sure because I don’t mind waiting and-”

I was gone before he could finish and headed straight to the McDonalds toilets to call Dallas and ask her to pick me up. Unfortunately I had to wait a long time for her to arrive. Maurice might have left straight away, I'm not sure, but I was too scared to come out on my own and Dallas was still working for at least another hour. Some sleuth I was turning out to be. By the time I did get home, I was so beat I fell asleep before my head even hit the pillow.
Whenever I get stressed out, I eat. The amount I consume usually depends on the degree of stress I’m under and judging by the amount of chip packets and chocolate wrappers I was surrounded with, I was way past stressed – I was totally freaking out.

Last night’s shenanigans had me all worked up, not to mention bruised up. I reached for my compact to check my face out for the umpteenth time and to tried to figure out how to cover up the black eye and cut lip. I groaned and reached for a Boost bar.

“Meow.”

“Great. What do you want?” I snapped at the cat, which Dallas had named ‘Dim Sim’.

“Oh, poor Dimmy, is Raini being mean to you again?” Dallas yawned from the kitchen behind me.

“Morning,” I called, hating her for looking so perfect in the morning despite the bed hair and bunny slippers.

Dallas adjusted her hot pink and black Playboy bunny robe and made herself a herbal tea that smelled like something the cat had sicked up. She took a tentative sip and joined me on the couch.

“Whoa! Check out your face, Rocky. It didn’t look this bad last night.”

“I told you I had a bit of a run in with Cheetah,” I managed between mouthfuls of Boost.
“Christ,” Dallas said, turning my head from right to left as she inspected me, “She beat the shit out of you!”

“Thanks. That makes me feel so much better.”

“Hmm,” she mused, “I think I can cover the black eye up for you, but that cut on your lip is another story.”

“The lip is the least of my worries. What am I gonna do about Cheetah? She’ll kill me if I go back to the club.”

“What about your boyfriend? Surely he can help?”

“If, by boyfriend, you mean Marcello, he’s not my boyfriend and what can he possibly do?”

“Talk to Cheetah, for one. Assure her that you’re not trying to sleep with him and that he’s not a lying, cheating sack of shit. Even though he is.”

I shrugged. I guessed it was worth a try. And at this point it couldn’t hurt more than last night.

“And then there’s Maurice,” I said.

Dallas giggled.

“It’s not funny. He could be a killer. And he’s definitely a stalker.”

“Maurice? No. He’s harmless.”

“Trust me. If you’d heard the way he was talking about Melody last night…I’m telling you, it was creepy. He knew about her affair with Marcello, even knew her favourite McDonalds burger. He may even been the one who killed her. Oh and F.Y.I – I could be next on his list!”

“Shit. You really have a knack for attracting psychos, don’t you? So what are you gonna do?”

“Well, I’ll take your advice and call Marcello. Hopefully he can smooth things over enough for me to go back to work. In the mean time, I can’t go back to the club and work with my face like this so I’ll use the next couple of days to try and track down some of Melody’s movies and get some background info on Maurice. I know someone who might be able to help.”

“Really? Who?”

“Um, no one important,” I said, mentally kicking myself and deciding to keep Reyes under wraps for the time being.

“Okay. Well let me know if you need my help.”
“Thanks, Dallas. I really appreciate it.”

“Anytime, Rocky,” Dallas grinned.

I reached for my mobile and took a deep breath before calling Marcello.
“You looking for work, Love?”

I shook my head, surprised that a 50ish looking, blonde woman would work in a sex shop.

“Then whatcha want?”

I’d entered the Club XXX Sugar Shack with more than a little trepidation after having spent the last hour working up the courage to descend the stairs that had led me here. There was a stale, musky smell in the darkened little foyer in which I stood. I smiled at the woman behind the Perspex window with the little breathe holes in it, hoping to God it wasn’t true that tiny particles of whatever it was you could smell actually went up your nose.

“Er, I, I….”

“You here to see the peepshows? Behind you and through that door. They’re two bucks for thirty seconds. I got change if you need it,” the woman barked, not batting an eyelid.

“No, I’ll be right thanks,” I stammered, moving out of the way as a man pushed through a curtained area to my right and buttoned his jeans.

“Oi! Whadda the signs say about jerkin’ off in the theatre, Arsehole?”

The man ignored her and kept on walking. He looked normal, like the kind of guy you’d seeing barbequing with his family on a Sunday and not at all like the kind of guys I thought would come here.
“Bloody bastards…Listen, Love, if you’re not here for the peeps and I can’t imagine you’re here for the cinema either, then what is it you want?”

“I’m looking for some DVD’s.”

The woman arched an overgrown brow, “Oh. Then you’ve come in the wrong entrance. Round the side on Flinders Lane is where you wanna go.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I took the stairs two at a time and gulped a lungful of fresh air when I reached the street. A few passersby gave me weird looks as I exited the shop. I glared back, challenging them but they broke eye contact and kept on walking.

I followed the woman’s directions and found myself in a large book and video shop that smelled like disinfectant and old gym socks. A young dude wearing a beanie and an Iron Maiden tee-shirt with an earring through his bottom lip stood behind the counter playing air drums to a song only he could hear on his iPod. There were only two other customers in the shop and both had their backs to me and didn’t look up as I entered, engrossed in the magazines they were pouring over.

I walked past rows of dildos, vibrators, lube, condoms, various blow up toys and mechanical vaginas on my way to the counter and couldn’t help but stare. There must have been every conceivable toy in here – whips, chains, costumes, butt plugs, and hundreds of other things I had no idea what to do with. Who knew sex toys came in so many forms? Maybe I’d buy myself one on the way out. Just as a souvenir, mind you. I wouldn’t really use it…

“Er hem,” I cleared my throat in an effort to get the store clerk’s attention but failed and eventually had to tap his hand.

“Oh, sorry,” the youth smiled, his eyes mildly surprised at my presence, “What can I do for ya?”

I pulled a photo of Melody out from my bag.

“Do you have any movies here with this girl in them?” I asked.

The boy took the photo and fingered his goatee thoughtfully, “Sorry.”

“Are you sure?”

The boy shrugged, “Sorry, man, it’s like you seen one pair of tits, you’ve seen ’em all. Know what I mean?”

I tried to hide my annoyance.

“Mind if I have a look at your merchandise?”
“Knock yourself out, man. They’re over there,” he pointed to my left.

I thanked him and walked over to the shelves full of DVD’s. Where the hell was I supposed to start? My eyes scanned rows with signs marking the type of porn on offer – erotica, hardcore S & M, bondage, gay and lesbian, European, Asian – the list went on. I was pretty sure I could rule out Asian but I wasn’t sure about the others, so I started with what I thought would be the softer option to kind of ease myself into it.

I picked up the first erotica DVD. I’d read about erotica in Cosmo and knew that it was aimed at women but I still got a shock when I turned over the cover to find a picture of a woman between another woman’s legs. I mean, it’s not like I’m a prude or anything but I’d never even heard other people having sex let alone watched a girl on girl porn film. I looked at the face of the woman I could see, saw it wasn’t Melody and quickly put it back.

This practice went on as I scanned faces and tried to ignore the various poses, and penises, depicted. I’d been at it for an hour when my phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Raini? It’s Detective Reyes. You left a message for me?”

“Oh, hi. Yes. I did.”

“Ah huh. So what can I do for you?”

I looked around to see if the other customers were within earshot.

“Can we meet somewhere?”

A pause.

“Now?”

“No. Not now. I’m kinda busy. How about in a couple of hours.”

“Sure. Where?”

“How about the place I’m staying?”

“In Richmond? Sure.”

“How do you know I’m staying in – look it doesn’t matter. I’ll meet you there in two hours.”

“Done deal.”

I hung up and tried not to be too annoyed with Reyes for keeping such close tabs on me. I was just about to give up looking and head home to meet him when a DVD in the bondage section, called ‘Ruff’ caught my eye. I pulled it off the shelf and held it up for closer inspection. On a bed on all fours with a whip in his mouth and a dog collar around his neck was a blonde man flanked by two raven haired women brandishing black leather
whips. The women were wearing skin tight black PVC outfits that left little to the imagination and the man appeared to be naked except for a lethal lathering of body oil and fake tan. There was no mistaking that one of the girls standing next to the bed was Melody and I had no doubt that whatever it was she was doing on this film, it certainly wasn’t just standing there and looking pretty. I took it up to the counter to pay for it.

“Like it ‘ruff’, do ya? Never would’ve picked it, man,” the clerk sniggered.

“Just give me my damn change,” I said between clenched teeth.

“Have a nice day, man,” the clerk grinned.

I replied with a one fingered salute and hurried across the road to the tram stop. I only had an hour to get home.
“Hello?” I called, walking through the front door and locking it behind me.

When I got no answer I was quietly relieved. I didn’t want to tell Dallas about Reyes. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust her, but if she thought I was working with the cops, things could get complicated and she might not share any information she gathered with me. I’d learned enough to realize that people in the sex industry got all funny about talking to cops and I didn’t want to jeopardize my position. I helped myself to a white wine from the fridge and took the DVD out of my bag. If I was going to have to watch it, I’d need a hell of a lot more wine than this. I was interrupted by the door bell. I gulped down some wine and went to answer the door.

“You’re early,” I greeted Reyes.

“Sounded urgent so I thought I’d get here as soon as I could. Nice place,” Reyes said, shutting the door behind him.

“Dallas has very good taste.”

“What happened to your face?”

“Nothing.”

Reyes looked unconvinced but didn’t pursue it. Forever the cop. I led him to the kitchen.

“Wine?”

“Not while I’m on duty.”
“Suit yourself,” I shrugged, guzzling down the rest of my glass and pouring another.

Reyes paced the dining area, looking outside and generally sussing the place out. He was dressed casually in a tight black Bonds tee-shirt that accentuated his abs and a pair of blue jeans. There was nothing that didn’t look good on this guy.

“So? You gonna fill me in?”

“There’s this customer at work – he used to be a customer of Melody’s actually. Name’s Maurice. I was wondering if you could do a background check on him, see if you can dig anything up.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because we’re on the same team, aren’t we?”

“Funny. I thought that was my line. Look, you’ll have to give me a bit more than that.”

“I don’t know. I just get the feeling he was obsessed with Melody. The way he talks about her – totally creepy and he seemed to know a lot about her private life. Too much for a customer.”

“Okay. I’ll check it out. And what are you going to do for me in return?”

Reyes moved closer, sitting opposite me at the kitchen counter. My mouth went dry so I wet it with more alcohol. I scraped my tongue across my lips.

“Depends.”

Reyes lowered his eyes, “On wh-whoa ho ho, what’s this?” he said, picking up the DVD.

Fuck. I’d completely forgotten about it.

“I didn’t know you were into this sort of stuff,” Reyes smirked.

“I’m not!” I said, snatching it off him.

“Really? Then what’s it doing here?”

“It’s Dallas’s,” I lied.

He searched my face, finally deciding I was telling the truth.

“Yeah? She into that sort of shit, is she?”

I shrugged, grateful that he hadn’t noticed Melody on the cover.

“So about that favour we were talking about…” Reyes breathed while I got lost in his eyes.

“What about it?” I asked dreamily.
And then his lips were on mine. He tasted sweet, pepperminty, like a Tic Tac. Our tongues touched and I was a goner. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him harder, my fingers buried in his hair. He responded by pulling me closer to him, crushing my lips between his and kissing me like I’d never been kissed before. At least that’s what happened in my mind. What actually happened was worse…

I leaned in closer, feeling brave from the wine, and puckered my lips ever so slightly, expectantly.

“I was hoping you’d be able to help me go through some of your sister’s stuff, address books and what not, see if anything stands out,” he said, all matter of fact.

“Oh, er, sure,” I managed, my face burning red.

Nice one, Raini, you moron! Had he noticed?

“Great. So swing by St. Kilda Road tomorrow sometime. We’ve got the stuff in evidence.”

I nodded like an idiot and he waved me good bye before letting himself out. I smacked myself on the forehead and groaned. I could be such a dipshit sometimes.

I picked up the DVD and turned it over. The blurb on the back asked me if I liked it ‘ruff’. Christ. Could it get any cornier? No way could I watch this. I felt sick just thinking about it and not just because it was a shitty storyline. Besides, how was watching it going to help me figure out who killed Melody? What I really needed to do was figure out who made the DVD and how I could get in touch with them. I read the small print. Bingo! There was a website. Dallas had a laptop but she wasn’t home yet. I’d have to go online and get an address. Maybe the porn company would give me some leads. All I needed was the address and I’d pay them a visit, see what I could dig up. I yawned. All the wine had made me sleepy. Maybe I’d have a quick snooze before Dallas got home.
It had been two days since I’d discovered the DVD and my black eye was gradually turning jaundice yellow. Attractive. It meant I still wasn’t quite ready to return to Hollywood Girls but at least the swelling had disappeared and the cut on my lip had healed. Nothing a good dose of lipstick wouldn’t hide, anyway. I gave my lips a double coating of plum coloured lip gloss and pouted at myself. Excellent. I rubbed some concealer around my eye and dusted some bronzer over my face and neck. Better. Much better. A lick of mascara, a big pair of Paris Hilton style sunglasses and I was good to go.

I closed and locked the front door behind me and headed for the nearest tram stop. I crossed the road, dodging passing cars and inhaled lungfuls of carbon monoxide. Who needed cigarettes when exhaust fumes were free? I patted my shoulder bag, feeling the outline of the DVD and reminding myself of the day’s agenda.

When I’d checked the small print on the back of the DVD I’d managed to find the name of the company that had produced the films – Fantasia Productions. A subsequent Google search had revealed a PO Box number in the city. I was sure that if I went to the Post Office, I’d find some sort of clue. At any rate, I had nothing to lose. The tram rattled to a stop and I climbed aboard. I purchased a ticket and took the only remaining seat, getting stuck next to a woman who reminded me of one of the Addams Family. Her beady eyes peered out at me from beneath her fringe, which seemed to cover half her pock marked face. Her fingers raked at the folds of her long black dress, continuously moving
up and down like she had some sort of nervous disorder. I stared back until she broke my
gaze, her eyes darting nervously from side to side. Creepy. I busied myself by inspecting
the clasp on my bag and ensuring that it was in fact doing its job. The unmistakable odour
of someone’s fart inched its way into my nostrils, distracting me from Cousin It. God, I
hated public transport. The sooner I could afford my own car, the better.

My stop was a block away. I stood up, grateful to get as far away from the stench
as I possibly could and waited for the tram to screech to a halt. I stepped down, the
exhaust fumes a welcome relief, and headed for the Post Office in Bourke Street Mall. I
passed a giant granite purse sculpture and got harassed for a dollar by a bony looking
youth.

“C’arn, I juss needa make a phonecall, eh,” he said, clawing at his face while barely
able to keep his eyes open.

“Get a job!” I snapped.

“Well fuck ya then, stuck up bitch!” he said, tripping over an imaginary step.

I shook my head and ascended the stairs to the Post Office. I didn’t think I was
stuck up. Why should I have to give random people money for a fix? I worked my arse
off for my cash – literally – and I wasn’t about to start throwing it away.

I surveyed the various counters trying to decide which cashier would be the most
helpful. There were five. The first two were middle aged women who had most likely
spent their entire lives since leaving high school working here. They knew the drill and
probably wouldn’t give up any information that easily. Counter three was a young man,
probably only about my age. He looked a bit nerdy but a few feminine wiles and some
gentle persuasion might get him to spill his guts. Counter four was attended by a chubby,
sour faced woman, possibly in her 30’s. The look on her face told me she had a chip on
her shoulder and probably wouldn’t like me so I’d be wasting my time with her. The last
counter revealed a fat, balding guy who sweated a lot. He probably didn’t get a lot of
female attention so who knew what he’d do if I gave him some of mine? Hmm. A tough
decision, it was going to be a choice between the two men. The women would be too
smart and not at all susceptible to my charm. But which of the two men should I go for?

I took a deep breath and approached the young nerd.

“Yes?”

“Ah, hi. How’s it going?”

“Can I help you, Lady?” he asked rudely.
“Well, I’m actually here to enquire about a post office box.”
“Long or short term hire?”
“Actually, I don’t want to hire one. I just want to get some information about a particular box number.”
“What sort of information?”
“See, I have this PO Box number and I just need to find out who pays for it…”
“Well we don’t just give that sort of information out.”
Damn it. Something told me this guy wasn’t as easily persuaded as I’d initially thought and if my ‘gaydar’ was working properly, I doubted that flirting would do it either. There was only one thing left to do.
“What’s your name?” I snapped.
“What?”
I reached into my bag and took out my purse.
“My name is Detective Veronica Reyes,” I said, opening my purse and flashing it so fast he wouldn’t see that it only contained an old student ID, “And if you don’t tell me who hires that box I’ll have you charged with perverting the course of justice.”
The guy frowned, unconvinced.
“On second thoughts,” I said, going in for the kill, “Where’s your boss? I’d like to speak to him and tell him how incompetent you are.”
“No, wait!”
“Why?” I snapped, depositing my purse back into my bag.
“Please don’t tell my boss anything. I just started here two weeks ago. I really need this job,” he wheedled.
“You’re lucky I’m feeling generous,” I said, trying not to laugh.
“What’s the box number? I’ll get you all the information you need.”
I scribbled it onto a piece of paper and pushed it across the desk.
“Box 4331,” he said, tapping some keys at the computer, “Ah huh, here we go. That box belongs to T & A Holdings.”
“Got an address?”
He scrolled down the page with the mouse.
“Yes. 224 Sutherland St, Elsternwick.”
I wrote it down, folded the paper neatly in half and deposited it into my handbag.
“You’re not going to say anything to my boss, are you?”
“Er, no... no need for that. You’ve been very helpful thanks.”

“Thank you, thank you,” he breathed, his relief obvious.

I gave him a brief nod like I’d seen TV cops do when they were trying to be serious, left the scene and headed for the train station.

I arrived on Platform 7 and boarded the Sandringham train. The carriage was almost empty except for me and another woman who looked about my age. Her iPod was so loud I could hear Timbaland from 10 seats down. I took a window seat and felt the train lurch forward. I had no idea what I was going to find when I arrived at my destination. For all I knew, the address was bogus and I’d find an empty building, which would take me right back to where I started. I was so lost in thought I almost missed my stop.

I stepped onto the Elsternwick platform, headed down the ramp and into a car park. Across the road was a large building with a neon ‘Daily Planet’ sign. I was no expert but I was pretty sure I wouldn’t find Clark Kent anywhere inside. I left the car park and headed up the main road. I passed a juice bar and a Russian restaurant, the delicious spicy aromas from the restaurant making my stomach growl. I realised I hadn’t eaten all day so I decided to grab a bite to eat and ask for some directions at the same time. I really wanted to eat at the restaurant but I was in a hurry, so I needed food to go. I reluctantly entered the juice bar hoping they’d sell huge greasy burgers and chips. The menu board told me otherwise.

“Hi, what can I get you?” a bright eyed, pig tailed assistant chirped from behind the counter.

“What’s the unhealthiest thing you sell here?” I enquired hopefully.

She cocked her head and looked at me like I was the most uninformed human being on the planet.

“I’m sorry, all of our juices are 98 percent fat free and organic. Our products contain no added sugar or preservatives and...”

She’d lost me at ‘fat free’.

“Just give me a smoothie. Strawberry please. With ice-cream.”

“Sorry. We don’t have ice-cream. I can give you a scoop of frozen yoghurt if you like.”

I nodded, disappointed, and watched as she busied herself, scooping fresh strawberries into a shaker followed by some no fat milk.
“Hey, you wouldn’t happen to know where I can find Sutherland Street, would you?” I asked loudly, trying to make myself heard over the whizzing of the milkshake machine.

“Sure. It’s two streets north and to your left,” the girl smiled, handing me my smoothie.

I thanked her, paid up and left sucking on a smoothie that tasted pretty good considering it was fat free. I contemplated jumping on a tram to go north but decided the walk would do me good. The street was busy with idling traffic and hasty shoppers. I walked two blocks and took a left at Sutherland. The address I was looking for was another three blocks down and I arrived puffed and sweaty from all the exercise and sunshine.

I double-checked the address against the piece of paper in my bag. This was it alright. I don’t know what I’d been expecting but it certainly wasn’t the middle class suburban house I now stood in front of. Two large trees stood guard either side of the driveway that led up to a double garage next to the front entrance. A small plaque on the front door read ‘T & A Holdings. It looked like the house had originally been a reasonably sized, double storey Victorian cottage that someone had renovated and added on to. I half expected to see a Mum and two kids bound out the door at any moment. I was wondering whether or not to go and knock on the front door when I saw some movement.

The front door opened and a blonde woman stepped out into the sunlight, locking the door behind her. I stepped behind one of the trees and tried to get a better look at her. My heart skipped a beat as I realised it was the woman from Melody’s funeral. Shit! What was I going to do? Should I run up to her and demand some answers or wait and follow her? My mind was racing and I decided I needed to get my wits about me before I approached the woman again. Last time I’d acted so rashly she’d bolted before I had a chance to quiz her properly. I pretended to dig around in my handbag as she passed me and headed for the main street on foot. I stayed back at a safe distance before following her.

She led me to a small bar and I entered about five minutes after her. It was dark and I had to remove my sunglasses so I could see. I hadn’t seen her yet and I hoped she hadn’t noticed my entrance or made me. It took my eyes a moment to adjust and I saw her sitting in a booth right at the back. The bar was cosy in a trendy sort of way and lit by an amber glow that seemed to emanate from the alcoves unobtrusively. There were booths,
couches and tables and the main colour scheme was a deep purple. I weaved my way past a few patrons and ordered a drink at the bar.

“Whatcha havin’?” a handsome European bartender asked me, a cocktail umbrella clenched between his teeth.

“I’ll have a Heineken,” I murmured.

He winked and grabbed a beer from the fridge while I tried not to gag. I bet he was the kind of bartender who went home with a different girl every night without a second thought. Gross! I paid for my beer and sat in a booth where I could watch the woman without being noticed. She was still as beautiful as I remembered her except now I could see her eyes. They were a brilliant, movie star green. She stuck a smoke between her pink glossed lips and checked her watch, apparently waiting for someone to join her. I wondered who. I didn’t have to wait long to find out.

A burly man wearing Blues Brother sunnies strolled casually into the bar and sat opposite the woman. The woman wasn’t smiling. She kept looking around as though someone might catch her doing something she shouldn’t be. The man seemed to be doing most of the talking. I tried to catch what they were saying but I couldn’t hear over the Michael Buble that was playing in the background. I cursed under my breath and tried to figure out what the hell was going on.

I signaled the bartender for another drink and sidled up to the bar, being careful to shield my face from view. It felt like a scene from a bad film as I inched closer to the woman’s table, my elbow resting on the bar with my hand covering the bottom half of my face. I ended up at the very end of the bar, catching the arse end of the conversation. The man said something aggressively in a foreign language and grabbed the woman’s wrist.

I gasped and quickly looked away as she snatched her hand back and placed it protectively in her lap. She replied in the same funny language, her tone pleading. God I wished I could understand. I swilled some more beer before chance another look. The woman was alone. Her hands shook as she lit a cigarette.

“Remember me?” I asked, seating myself across from her.

The woman jumped, her breath catching as the colour drained from her perfect face.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, looking around more nervously than she’d done before.
On closer inspection I realised her eyes were red rimmed and a little glazed. Not the first drink of the day obviously.

“I was going to ask you the same question,” I replied, my gaze steely.

“That’s none of your business!”

“Really? Then perhaps you’d care to explain who you are to the police, including a recap of the conversation we had at the cemetery!” I snapped, whipping out my phone.

“Please. Wait!”

Bingo.

“Give me one good reason or I’m calling,” I warned, my thumb hovering dangerously over the keypad.

“Look, I know that the last time we met I said some crazy stuff but I may have exaggerated slightly…”

“Exaggerated? You told me your life was in danger!” I hissed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know what I was saying. I was just so upset and well, my emotions got the better of me,” she explained feebly.

“I’ll let the cops be the judge of that,” I said, scrolling my phone for the number I needed, “In fact I’ll call Detective Reyes, the detective in charge of Melody’s case. I’m sure he’ll be quite interested to know that I’ve found the mystery woman I spoke to after Melody’s funeral.”

“No, wait. Please don’t call him. Please,” she begged.

I had no intention of calling Reyes but she didn’t need to know that. My plan had worked. I hesitated just long enough to make her think I was serious.

“Right then. You can start by telling me what the hell’s going on.”

“Look. I don’t know for sure. But a few days before Melody died, she told me she was in some kind of trouble.”

She paused long enough to take a hard drag of her cigarette and drain her glass, which I assumed was filled with whiskey judging by the smell. I sipped some more of my beer, waiting for her to go on.

“Your sister was my friend,” she said, blinking back tears, “We worked together at the company, did a couple of movies together, hung out sometimes. She knew how to party and we partied pretty hard. She was one of those people who have that special something that makes everyone want to be around them, y’know?”
I nodded. I knew all too well how charismatic my sister had been. It was a quality I’d always envied.

“When I found out what had happened to her I was devastated.”

I watched as she butted out her cigarette, her hand visibly trembling as she tried to regain her composure.

“About a week before she was killed she told me she’d found something out and she wanted to go to the police, said it wasn’t right.”

“What sort of things?”

“I don’t know. She never said. But whatever it was, it had her spooked. She got real paranoid, said people were trying to set her up.”

“Who? What people?”

“I don’t know. She wasn’t very specific.”

“Do you have any idea what she could have been talking about? Anything at all?”

The woman shook her head, no.


“I don’t know the answer to that either. But we don’t call it T & A Holdings. That’s just the company name. The business name is Fantasia.”

Maybe I’d find some clues at Fantasia. So far, my undercover snooping had taken me this far. If I went undercover at Fantasia, who knew where it might lead me?

“I need you to get me in,” I said.

“What? What do you mean?”

“I need you to get me into Fantasia – get me a job there.”

“What?”

“You can vouch for me. Talk to the manager. Tell them I’m interested in working there.”

“You want to do a film?”

“Good God No! Jesus!” I said, calming my horror with another good swig of Heineken.

“Well, what else is there?”

“There must be something available that doesn’t require me to have sex on camera, surely.”

“I don’t know…”

I reached for my phone again.
“Don’t make me do it. I’m not opposed to calling immigration as well,” I threatened.

“Okay, okay. I’ll talk to my boss tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” I said, reaching into my bag for a pen and paper, “Look, here’s my number. I want you to call me as soon as you’ve organised it, okay?”

I wrote my number down and pushed the piece of paper across the table. She took it and deposited it in her pocket.

“Who was the guy you just met with? Did he have anything to do with Melody?”

“No. Nothing, I swear.”

“Who was he?”

“No one. An ex boyfriend.”

“Things looked serious.”

“It’s nothing,” she said, unable to meet my eyes.

She was definitely hiding something but I decided not to press it. For now.

“By the way,” I asked, “What’s your name?”

“Jasmine. My name’s Jasmine.”
I nodded hello to Abraham as I entered ‘Hollywood Girls’. He gave me a quick nod, his expression serious as he continued his door duty. I climbed the stairs and tried not to be scared. Dallas had told me that Cheetah wasn’t rostered on tonight but I couldn’t help being worried. And then there was Maurice. He’d really scared me the other night and there was a strong possibility that he’d killed my sister. Part of my brain told me I was over reacting and that he was probably just a crazy, harmless stalker but I didn’t know for sure. I’d decided to come to work earlier than usual so I could talk to Trish about what had happened and hopefully she would help by giving me different shifts to Cheetah and asking security to keep a close eye on Maurice.

The club was empty upstairs. I headed straight for the bar and got myself a shot of tequila to try and calm my nerves then knocked on Trish’s office door. I heard a muffled ‘come in’ and closed the door quietly behind me. Trish smiled and told me to take a seat. Just as well. Her perfume was so strong that I thought it might knock me out.

“I thought you might want to see me,” she said.

“So you’ve heard…”

“Cheetah gave me her version of the events. I’d like to hear yours.”

“So you know she attacked me?”

“Yes, I heard.”
Trish stood up and smoothed the creases from her Black mini dress. It had silver reflective squares on the front that accentuated her ample cleavage and she wore matching silver ankle strap stilettos.

“Do you know why?”

“She mentioned something about Marcello, yes.”

“She thinks I’m trying to steal him and I’m not, I swear.”

Trish cocked her head and smiled, “Look, don’t take it personally. Cheetah can be quite paranoid when it comes to that man and I can’t say I blame her, considering what he’s like, although I certainly agree that her actions were a little extreme.”

“A little? Christ! She could’ve killed me! If Maurice hadn’t come to my rescue, who knows what might have happened.”

“Look, I’m not excusing what she did but I’ve spoken to her and she is sorry for what she’s done. I’ve told her to take a week off and that when she comes back I won’t tolerate any more fighting between you girls. She assures me it won’t happen again. I’ve decided to get you both together for mediation if you agree.”

I nodded, glad that Cheetah had cooled off.

“Fabulous. Because if you can’t get along I’m going to have to let one of you go,” she said seriously.

I got the feeling it wouldn’t be Cheetah.

“Good. Now go and get changed for your shift,” Trish smiled.

“Ah, Trish, there is one more thing,” I said, chewing nervously on a fingernail.

“What’s that?”

“Well, it’s Maurice.”

“What about him?”

“See, he sort of helped me out the other night with Cheetah and then drove me home.”

“You accepted a ride home from a customer?”

“I know. It was stupid. But I was scared and he was being so helpful and…anyway, it was a huge mistake. He’s crazy! Obsessive. He was saying some really freaky stuff that made me think he could be like a stalker or something.”

“Old Maurice? No, he’s harmless.”

“Trust me. You had to be there to hear what he was saying.”

“And what was that exactly?”
Shit! I couldn’t tell her about Melody.

“That’s not important. He just scared me and I was hoping you could ask Abraham and the other guys to keep an eye on him.”

“Well, it doesn’t sound like Maurice but I suppose if it makes you feel better, I can mention it to them.”

“Thanks, Trish. I really appreciate it.”

“Sure.”

Trish’s phone began to ring.

“Sweetie, I’ve gotta get this. We’ll talk some more later,” she said, politely waving me out of her office.

I thanked her and left.

Girls had started arriving and the dressing room was all hustle and bustle when I walked in amid a cloud of hairspray.

“Has anyone seen my black sequined dress?” a tall, olive skinned girl yelled from the other end of the dressing room.

There was a murmur of ‘nos’ and some complaining from the girl with no dress. It felt good to be back. I couldn’t figure out why, but somehow, despite my initial apprehension and more than a few mishaps, I’d grown to like my new job and the atmosphere that came with it. It was like we were all part of a secret world where ‘straight’ rules didn’t apply. We were sister strippers bound by skin, sex and the scent of faceless men. I was starting to love this world and the feelings it evoked. It somehow made me feel alive, like I was a part of something, like I belonged. But most importantly, it made me feel closer to Melody.

“Hey, Hon,” Dallas puffed, planting herself in the chair next to me and unzipping her make-up case.

“Hey, yourself,” I smiled at her in the mirror.

“Where were you all day? I cooked dinner and you didn’t show,” Dallas pouted.

I watched her apply make-up – a task which she had down to a fine art, and ‘poof’ as if by magic she was an instant porn star.

“Just had a few things to do, leads to follow up.”

“Any luck?” Dallas began teasing out her hair.

“Maybe. I’ll let you know in a few days,” I promised.
Dallas held a white spandex dress adorned with rhinestones up to herself, checked out her reflection, nodded and set it aside.

“Hey, don’t you think it’s strange that no one’s seen Jamie for over two weeks now?” Dallas mused.

I shrugged, “I guess. I mean, I don’t really know her so I don’t know.”

“Jamie and I usually spend a lot of time together. She rings me, like, every day just about and she hasn’t turned up for work, hasn’t called in sick. She’s just disappeared. And her phone’s switched off too.”

“Maybe she’ll turn up in a few days,” I said.

“Hmm. Maybe. I’m worried. This isn’t the first time you know.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“About three months ago, Jessica stopped turning up for work one day. And six months before that, same deal with Chanel.”

“Don’t forget about Honey,” a voice belonging to a pixie-faced blonde called from two seats down.

“Yeah, her too,” Dallas continued, “She was the first to vanish. I mean it’s not uncommon for girls to just stop turning up but usually there’s at least one person from here that they keep in contact with. But Honey, Jessica and Chanel – it was like they just disappeared off the face of the earth. And now I think the same thing could have happened to Jamie. I’m really worried.”

“Maybe they’ve been abducted by aliens,” Mum suggested, to much laughter from the other girls who had obviously all stopped to listen in on our conversation.

“Come on, you guys. I’m serious. Don’t you all think it’s a little weird?”

A few girls shrugged. Some nodded. It was weird. Four missing girls and one, my sister, murdered. Could it be a coincidence or were they all somehow connected?

“Angel,” Mum shrilled, “You’re late for your podium!”

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath.

I hair sprayed my newly teased do, dusted some more gold shimmer onto my décolletage and ran for the stage. I headed for podium three, realised I was actually supposed to be on podium two and did an about face. The girl I exchanged places with was less than impressed with my tardiness.

“About time,” she snapped.
I mouthed, ‘sorry’, and grabbed hold of the pole. A slow R & B number strained from the speakers. Terence Trent D’Arby’s voice filled the air and I began to move my hips to ‘Sign Your Name’. There was a guy already seated at my podium and he edged his seat closer. I hoped he was a good tipper. I smiled and bent down for him to tuck some money into my garter. A fifty. Excellent start to the night. I shimmied up the pole and gave him my best ‘come to bed’ eyes. He licked his lips. I smiled and let the song sweep me away. My bikini top disappeared. I knelt down so I was closer to him and tweaked my nipples, feigning ecstasy though actually enjoying the ritual of the dance. I leaned over him so my breasts were inches from his face and I could feel his breath hot on my skin. I touched my hand to the nape of his neck, pulling him closer, my feet resting on his lap. His hands fumbled for more money from his pants pocket and I let his hand linger just a second longer while he shakily put the notes into my garter. I’d learnt my craft well in such a short time. Not that it was always this easy but the art of seduction for a price could be quite rewarding and this guy was rewarding me very well.

“Oh, hmm,” a voice coughed behind me.

I whipped around only to be greeted by a smirking Reyes.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I hissed.

“Great view,” Reyes smiled, his gaze firmly stuck to my chest.

I felt my cheeks burn.

“Excuse me, but I kind of paid for her first,” my customer said to Reyes, “You’ll have to wait your turn, mate.”

Reyes glared menacingly. The guy’s eyes widened and he was out of there. Wuss.

I looked around to see if anyone in the club had noticed but no one seemed to care.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I yelled.

“Might wanna keep your voice down there, babe,” Reyes smirked.

“Go fuck yourself,” I snapped, my face getting hotter and hotter.

Who the hell did Reyes think he was? He couldn’t hold me to ransom anymore. My parents knew. So what the hell was he doing here?

“Touchy. Listen, you think you can put some clothes on so we can talk? Unless of course you’d prefer to stay the way you are ‘cause I don’t have a problem with it…”

“Five minutes in the fantasy room. And you can pay for the room and for me, Arsehole.”
Reyes walked away laughing and I finished my podium in a huff. By the time the next girl walked out to swap with me, I was ready to go and give Reyes a piece of my mind.

I stormed into the fantasy room brewing for a fight. Reyes had made himself comfortable behind the desk in the fake classroom.

“What are you? Some kind of pedophile? ‘Cause only pedophiles fantasize about school girls,” I said acidly.

Unperturbed, Reyes ignored my comment, concentrating instead on my face, which was actually making me more uncomfortable than if he’d still been ogling my breasts.

“Found anything out yet that you want to share with me?” he asked.

“Is that the only reason you’re here? You’re the detective extraordinaire, shouldn’t I be coming to you asking for information? Or do I have to do your job for you too?”

“Look, I didn’t come here for a fight, okay?” Reyes said, his hands raised defensively.

“Then why did you come here?” I demanded.

“Would you believe me if I said I was concerned for your safety?”

I snorted derisively, “As if.”

“Why do you find it so hard to believe? I am a cop, you know. It’s my job to keep people safe. I’ve given up on the idea of you ever taking my advice and staying away so the least I can do is keep an eye on you and make sure you don’t go and get yourself killed,” he said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

Wait. What was happening here? Was he really concerned or could I actually be onto something and he wanted to keep a close eye on me to see what I managed to dig up? I was confused. His eyes *did* look sincere.

“I…” I began, not really knowing what to say.

And before I knew what was happening, he kissed me. For real this time. And I kissed him back. He tasted like pineapple.

“What was that for?” I breathed.

Reyes smiled and touched my cheek. The next thing I knew we were all over each other and I was just about to have real sex in the fake classroom on the fake desk.

“Wait,” I gasped, “If we get caught I’ll get fired. We’re not allowed to do this with the customers.”

“Well I’m hardly a customer,” Reyes purred, his mouth kissing my neck.

“But they don’t know that,” I sighed regretfully.
Reyes got up, “Good point.”

I adjusted my school uniform and tried to get a hold of myself. It suddenly felt a tad uncomfortable.

“Well, ah, I suppose I’d better head off then,” Reyes said sheepishly.
“Yeah. S’pose so,” I uttered.
“So, ah, I’ll see you soon.”

I nodded and Reyes planted a polite kiss on my cheek before breezing out and leaving me to cool down. In all the excitement I’d forgotten to talk to him about Jasmine. Bugger!

I headed backstage for a quick change, which also gave me a chance to compose myself, and headed back out onto the floor where I collided with Maurice. Shit! I did an about face and was about to make a run for it.

“Please! I just want to talk to you,” Maurice begged.

Security appeared from nowhere like ninjas, “Everything alright here, mate?”

Something in Maurice’s voice made me want to hear him out. I spun around and looked him directly in the eye trying to ascertain whether or not I was in danger, which of course was pointless seeing as I’m not a mind reader. Still, I figured I was in a public, very public, place with three security guards so I was fairly safe.

“It’s okay,” I said to the bouncer.

He nodded curtly and left.

“Alright. I’ll talk to you but on one condition,” I said.

“Okay. Anything.”

“First, you have to book a fantasy room. Second, you answer all of my questions.”

“Okay, anything,” Maurice nodded his head emphatically.

I led him to the fantasy hostess and he handed over a fifty.

“Be with you in a jiff,” I said.

I scampered to the dressing room and flung open the locker for the cheerleader fantasy. I unzipped and kicked my dress to the side then changed into the shorter than short red and white mini skirt and matching midriff top. This time, they fitted me perfectly. I had a flashback to the last time I’d worn this outfit and shuddered. I tied my hair up into pigtails, securing them with ribbons, and grabbed the pom poms.

“You seem to be having a busy night in there, Love,” Mum smiled.
“Yep,” I answered, giving her my best ‘you betcha’ smile and heading to the fantasy room.

I found Maurice sitting on the bench in the fake locker room, waiting expectantly. He smiled when I walked in. I put the cassette on and the first bars of ‘Mickey’ began playing. I took a seat next to Maurice.

“Right then. Explain to me how you know so much about Melo…I mean, Madison,” I said sternly.

“It’s okay. I know her name was Melody. And despite how I may have come across the other night, I’m not a psychotic stalker.”

Unconvinced, I arched an eyebrow.

“Melody and I met here and became friends. Very good friends in fact. You can check with any of the girls. They all know. It’s not unusual for me to hang out with some of the girls after work. See, I’m a widower and I’m retired. I get pretty lonely. Melody kept me company. She felt sorry for me I think.”

I bit my bottom lip.

“I was heartbroken when I found out she was dead. I’ve been using my contacts in the force to try and find out what happened to her. I’m a retired cop, you see.”

Shit. Now I really felt bad. I had no reason to suspect that Maurice was lying to me and I had the means to see if his story checked out via Reyes. Come to think of it, Reyes had never gotten back to me about Maurice. I made a mental note to call him.

“Look,” I began, “I’m sorry I did a runner on you the other night. You just really freaked me out.”

“Sorry. I was going to come in and get you but after half an hour I knew you weren’t coming back.”

“You waited half an hour for me?”

Maurice smiled.

“My turn to ask you a question now,” he said.

“Sure.”

“Why are you so interested in Melody?”

I sighed, not sure about whether or not to tell him. If I told the truth it could blow everything. But on the other hand, he might be able to help me and he did genuinely seem to care about Melody. Besides, I could use the help of someone with a car…

“Okay. But if I tell you, you’re sworn to secrecy,” I said seriously.
“Scout’s honour,” he promised.
I arrived at Jasmine’s wearing what I hoped was appropriate porn industry attire – jeans, t-shirt and denim jacket. I wasn’t sure what I’d be doing there or if they had a uniform so I’d dressed for comfort. Hopefully I looked okay. I pressed the doorbell of Jasmine’s apartment building and waited.

“I’ll be down in a sec,” Jasmine’s voice crackled over the intercom.

I leaned against the building, watching cars go by on the busy street. My mind drifted back to the conversation I’d had with Maurice at the club the night before.

He’d been surprised when I’d told him who I really was and repeated what Marcello had said – that I looked like Melody and that was why he was drawn to me. I was flattered but slightly insulted. I wanted people to be drawn to me for me, after all. He’d also provided me with some interesting information, which I hoped I’d be able to confirm today. Apparently all of the missing girls from the club had been in porn films. I wondered if there was a connection between my sister and the girls and Fantasia. I was relieved about Maurice and convinced now more than ever that I was on the right track.

The apartment door swung open and Jasmine greeted me with a tentative smile.

“Ready then?” I smiled encouragingly.

Poor Jasmine. She was petrified. We hailed a cab and drove across town to the studio in Elsternwick.

I don’t know what I’d been expecting but it certainly wasn’t what I saw when I walked into the house. The foyer had been turned into a reception area and waiting room.
It sort of looked like a doctor’s surgery. A male receptionist that looked freakishly like Marilyn Manson sans make-up greeted Jasmine with a big smile and a wave.

“Just gimme a minute, Socrates. Gotta introduce the new girl to Jonathan.”

“Mmm hmm,” he said, snapping his fingers and giving me the once over from behind his computer.

A middle aged couple, two men and a woman, occupied the sandy coloured leather couches that lined the walls. The couple looked nervous, the woman tapping her foot impatiently on the polished floorboards. Her husband held her hand reassuringly, all the while staring down at the beige and white floor rug in between the two couches. The two men flipped idly through magazines. They were both very good looking. I couldn’t help but wonder if they were actors. The woman sitting alone looked a lot like Jasmine. She had long, fake baby pink coloured nails, big boobs and blonde hair. She looked up at me from her mobile phone and smiled before continuing to text at a frantic rate.

“Are all of these people here to be in movies?” I whispered to Jasmine.

“Yep.”

“Even the couple?”

“Un hunh. And by the looks of things, it’s their first time too,” she chuckled.

“They’re not going to try and make me do a movie, are they?” I asked, remembering that my last job interview had ended in my becoming a stripper.

“Not unless you want to.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Relax,” she said patting my hand, “You’ll be just fine.”

She ushered me through the door behind the reception desk where we entered another, smaller, foyer that led off into a studio. Cameras surrounded an empty set which looked like a jail cell and it appeared that filming was about to begin. To the left was a dressing room. Two actors, a mustached man and a pretty, olive skinned brunette, were having their make-up done. The man wore what I supposed was supposed to be prison garb, though I’d never actually been to a prison so if they wore orange jumpsuits in Australian prisons, I wouldn’t really know. The woman wore a blue, tight fitting prison guard’s uniform. Oh God! It occurred to me that I might actually have to watch them go at it. The thought made me burn red.

“Er, Jasmine. Exactly what am I going to be doing?”
“Jonathan!” Jasmine called across the floor to a guy who looked like he was in charge.

He looked up and waved before returning to his conversation with a group of cameramen and a woman with a clipboard.

“Jonathan’s the director,” Jasmine explained, “You’re going to be working for him as his personal assistant.”

“And exactly how ‘personal’ do I have to get?” I gulped.

“Don’t sweat it. You’re basically just going to be running around making him coffee and stuff. Jonathan’s a real sweetheart and unbelievably talented.”

We approached him slowly, walking around cameras, spotlights and other equipment. Jonathan appeared to be explaining the first scene to the film crew. He ended his conversation and came over to greet us.

“Hi,” Jasmine air kissed him.

“And who’s this pretty little thing?” he asked.

“This is your new assistant,” Jasmine beamed.

“Hi. I’m Raini,” I said shakily, extending my hand.

Jonathan wore a short, flowing leopard print shift over tight black pants and a black mesh singlet. John Lennon style tinted glasses framed his line-free, smooth-skinned face. It looked like he was wearing pink tinted lip gloss.

“What’s with the formalities?” Jonathan exclaimed, pulling me into a small hug and another round of air kisses then pushing me back so he could appraise me properly, “You remind me of someone…”

“So, Jonathan, Raini makes a fabulous cup of coffee,” Jasmine said, nudging me in the ribs.

“I do?”

Jasmine smiled and stepped on my toe.

“Oh yeah. I do,” I laughed nervously and fiddled with a button on my jacket.

“Fabulous. We’re going to get along famously. Coffee machine’s in the staff room over there,” Jonathan pointed.

“Right,” I nodded, leaving him and Jasmine to talk while I went to do his bidding.

The staff room was warm and already smelled of freshly brewed coffee. A red haired woman wearing a white robe and fluffy slippers sat at the table amid open textbooks. She looked up at me from her notes and smiled when I walked in. The text books
looked academic but I couldn’t see the titles. I looked at the espresso machine and started
to panic. Excellent. First hour on the job and I was already about to stuff it up.

“Need help?” the woman drawled in an American accent.
“Yes please,” I squeaked gratefully.
“I’m Alabama,” she smiled, her perfect pearly whites almost blinding.

What was it with American state names? It seemed like every second dancer I met
had one – Dallas, Alabama, Montana, Memphis, Dhakota. Maybe I could be New York…

“Nice to meet you,” I said shaking her hand, “I’m Raini.”
“Cool name.”
“Er, thanks.”

I watched Alabama busy herself with the espresso machine, paying attention to
what she did and making mental notes so I’d be able to do it alone next time. I tried to
make myself useful, handing her the milk and watching her as she frothed it like an expert
barista.

“What are you studying?” I asked.
“Environmental Science,” she explained.
“Wow. Sounds interesting,” I said.
“It is. Pass me that saucer,” she directed.
I handed it over.
“It’s for Jonathan, right?”

I nodded. She placed the cup onto the saucer, sprinkled the frothy milk with
chocolate and placed two sugar sticks and a teaspoon next to it.

“All done, cappuccino with two” she announced triumphantly.
“Thank you. You’re a life saver.”
“Well hey there, Sugar,” Alabama greeted a newcomer behind me.

I knew that voice. I spun around and was surprised to see Abraham standing
behind me with a box cradled in his arms. The look on his face told me he was surprised
to see me too. What was he doing here?

“Jonathan around?” he mumbled.

Alabama pointed towards the set. Abraham nodded and left without
acknowledging me. Were we supposed to pretend not to know each other? I mean,
Abraham had never been much of a talker but blatantly ignoring me was just plain rude.
What was he doing here anyway? Moonlighting? Maybe. Or maybe not. Something wasn’t sitting right with me. I’d now established a link between Melody, the club and Fantasia. All I had to do was figure out what that meant.
The phone scared me awake at 3am. I leapt out of bed and hunted beneath discarded clothes for my phone.

“Lo,” I mumbled.

“Raini?”

“Mum?”

I was suddenly wide awake.

“Raini, I’m at the hospital with your father.”

“Why? What’s happened? What’s wrong?” I asked, my heart beating frantically against my chest.

“Your Dad’s had a heart attack,” Mum said, her voice beginning to crack.

“A h-h-heart attack?” I repeated.

“I’m at the Werribee Mercy. Can you come?”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I hung up and tried not to choke on the sob that was stuck in my throat. I quickly pulled on my dirty jeans and found a clean tee shirt on the back of my chair. I brushed out my hair, washed my face and scrubbed my teeth, mentally telling myself to calm down and take deep breaths. It had been weeks since I’d heard from my parents. I’d tried not to think about them, instead focusing on my goal to find Melody’s killer. I figured I’d tell them the truth about everything once it was all over. But now, Dad might never know.
I was in a cab and on my way in minutes. It was a long drive from Richmond to Werribee and my anxiety levels increased with each kilometer. I cranked the window down and sucked in some fresh air, completely oblivious to the stench of sewerage that poured in as we passed the Werribee South turn off. We weren’t far now. A few more kilometers and we pulled up in front of the Werribee Mercy Hospital.

“That’ll be $54.00,” the cab driver said, extending his hand expectantly.

I gave him $60 and told him to keep the change then sprinted into the hospital. I got directions from a nurse to where Mum was waiting and the moment I saw her, a flood of emotions escaped.

“Sssh. It’s alright,” Mum comforted, folding me into a hug.

The familiar scent of Coco Chanel enveloped me and I felt a little calmer.

“Wh-what happened?” I choked.

Mum swiped at a stray tear, “We were asleep and your Dad woke up clutching his chest and gasping for breath. I called an ambulance. The paramedics say it’s his heart.”

“I-I-is he gonna be okay?”

“He’s with the doctors now. A nurse said he’s stable but they need to run some tests.”

Mum handed me a bunch of tissues. I blew my nose and we sat down to wait in the too bright waiting area. Aside from the odd nurse or doctor walking past, the hospital was quiet. An older couple huddled together a few seats down, fighting off sleep. I looked at the coffee machine opposite me. Suddenly the thought of caffeine seemed very appealing. I dug into my pockets for some change.

“Mrs. Mitchell?” a doctor in a white overcoat called.

My mother rose to greet him. He had kind blue eyes and dark brown hair with a pinch of grey at the sides.

“Is my husband okay?” Mum asked nervously.

“He’s going to be fine. We’ve just taken blood so we can run a few tests and we’ve given him Anginine, which seems to have worked. I’m going to keep him overnight and do some more tests in the morning,” the doctor smiled tiredly.

“Can we see him?”

“I can’t see why not. Just try not to excite or upset him. Okay?”

“Thank you, doctor.”

I looked at Mum.
“Perhaps you shouldn’t see him at the moment, Love. Maybe wait for a bit, just until he’s better.”

“I just have to see him, Mum, even if it’s from a distance” I said, choking back a sob. “Well, alright then,” Mum agreed.

We followed the doctor to Dad’s room and I stopped at the door way. It looked like he was sleeping. He was hooked up to a drip and his face looked a sickly pale grey. I tried to be brave but seeing him lying there like that was too much. A strangled, gurgling sound began in the back of my throat and the tears spilled onto my cheeks.

“Oh, Mum…” I sobbed.

She hugged me to her and kissed the top of my head like she used to when I was a little girl.

“Don’t cry now, Love, we have to be strong,” she said taking my face between her hands.

I could see the tears shining in her own eyes. I hugged her hard, wishing that things were different. I didn’t want to leave but I knew that it was for the best. If I upset Dad, he could have another attack.

“Go on then, Love, I’ll call you later today,” Mum sniffed.

“I love you Mum. Tell Dad I love him too.”

Mum nodded and squeezed my hand goodbye. I left the hospital and jumped into another cab as I fought back more tears. I’d never felt so lonely in my whole life. I took out my mobile phone and found the number I was looking for.

“Reyes? It’s Raini. Can I come over?”
Soft snoring to my left woke me. I cracked open an eyelid and tentatively peeked over at a sleeping Reyes. I inwardly groaned. I had a feeling that last night had been a big mistake and I cringed at the memory. I’d arrived at Reyes’ house in tears and craving physical contact. I was not disappointed.

I’d barely gotten through the door before he grabbed me and kissed me in the hallway, his body pressing mine against the wall, the plaster hard against my back. The memory of those kisses was fresh in my mind. My lips still tingled. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to remember everything. He’d undressed me right there, his hot kisses exploring my body before his tongue found the spot that made me weak at the knees. We slowly made our way to the bedroom, stopping with each step, unable to keep our hands off each other.

His body was lean and hard but his skin was soft and smooth. I remembered what it had been like to run my hands down the velvety skin of his back and shuddered. He had taken his time bringing me to orgasm, those slow kisses burning my skin and making me tingle like I was on some sort of drug. I’d returned the favour with some sexual gymnastics of my own that made me blush just thinking about it.

I opened my eye again to make sure he was still asleep. The clock blinked 10am. “Crap!” I cursed, almost falling out of bed and stumbling to the shower.

My second day at my new job and I was gonna be late. I’d just stepped under the water when I heard a light tap on the door.
“Raini?”
“Yeah,” I called back to Reyes.
“You okay?”
“Yeah, I’m alright,” I answered, lathering myself with body wash and trying to act casual.

“Were you planning on leaving without saying goodbye?”
“No. Of course not,” I lied.
“Want some breakfast?”
“No thanks. I have to be somewhere.”
“Okay. You sure you’re alright?” Reyes sounded worried.
“I’m sure.”
“Want some company?” he growled sexily.
“No!” I said quickly, “It’s, um, it’s just I’m running late. I’m in a hurry.”
“Okay. Raincheck then.”
“Sure,” I squeaked.

I finished my shower in peace and threw on my dirty clothes. I said my goodbyes to Reyes and promised to call. He looked confused as I left. I walked to a taxi stand and thought seriously about buying a car as soon as I had enough money. I decided to call Mum and check in on how Dad was doing. Her phone was switched off and I figured she was at the hospital so I left a message asking her to call me asap. By the time I got to Fantasia I was totally late.

“You! Coffee!” Jonathan yelled at me from across the set.

I scurried to the staff room and busied myself at the espresso machine, trying to forget about Reyes. It was noisy today and there seemed to be a buzz of excitement in the air. Actors and actresses sat in small groups around the studio, gossiping. The film crew discussed various scenes. Jonathan looked like he was trying to do a hundred things at once and Jasmine was working reception. I made three coffees, took one to Jonathan and then two to Jasmine’s desk so we could catch up. The waiting room was empty today. I pulled up at seat next to her.

“Second day and you’re already late,” she teased.

I stuck my tongue out and sipped my latte.

“What’s with all the excitement today?” I asked.
“We just found out that Fantasia’s on the short list for the adult film of the year,” Jasmine replied.

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“That’s good…I guess,” I said, not really knowing what the correct response to news like this entailed.

“It’s a pretty huge deal. It’s our first nomination.”

“Really?”

“Un hunh. Everyone can’t stop talking about it.”

I sipped some more coffee. I didn’t find the news as exciting as everyone else, though I had to admit that I was curious. I didn’t even know that they had adult film awards.

“So have you found anything out yet?” Jasmine asked, her long, lilac coloured nails tapping the side of her cup.

“Not really. I mean, where do I start? It’s not like I can just start questioning everyone, is it?”

“No. Guess not…”

“There was one thing though.”

“What’s that?”

“A guy came in here yesterday. His name’s Abraham. He does security at Hollywood Girls. Do you know him?”

“Yeah, I know who he is. I don’t know him well, but he comes in from time to time for meetings with Gabe.”

“Who’s Gabe?”

“The Manager. You won’t see him much. He’s always upstairs in his office as far as I know.”

“When do I get to meet him?”

“Dunno,” Jasmine shrugged, “He doesn’t really have a lot to do with most of the employees. I’ve never even met him. We all report to Jonathan and he deals directly with Gabe.”

“Why would Abraham be meeting with this Gabe guy?”

“Don’t know. If I had to guess I’d say they were discussing business of some kind but I honestly have no idea what that business is.”
I stared thoughtfully into my coffee cup. What could a strip club bouncer and a porn company manager possibly be meeting about? What was Abraham up to?

“Where’s the new girl?” I heard someone yell loudly from the set.

“Gotta go. Jonathan’s calling,” I said, “Thanks for the chat.”

“Good luck,” Jasmine called after me.

I scurried to the set where Jonathan waited impatiently. Today’s props had a fairytale theme. I didn’t even want to know what Snow White intended on doing with the seven dwarves…

“Where’ve you been?”

“Sorry,” I blushed.

“I need some lube. We’ve run out.”

“Sure, er, where is it?”

“Now. I need it now not tomorrow. Just get it!” Jonathan snapped.

I bristled and legged it out of there. Ye ah, he was a real sweetheart alright. I hoped he wasn’t always this pissy.

“Jasmine,” I called, almost tripping over myself in my hurry to get to the reception desk.

I must have frightened her because she jumped.

“Yeah, Hon?”

“Lube. We got any?”

“Mmm, just a sec,” Jasmine said, pulling open a few drawers at her desk, “No, none here. We might have some upstairs.”

She opened another drawer and removed a set of keys then pushed a button on the computer.

“Mind the desk. I’ll be back in a minute.”

I sat down and swung around in the chair a few times. The computer screen was turned off. Why would she do that? Come to think of it, she’d been jumpy when I rushed in too. What was she up to? I reached for the on button and the screen flicked back on. The wallpaper had lady bugs in bikinis on it. Cute. I inspected the screen more closely. The tool bar on the bottom had some foreign writing on it. A minimized email. As though it had a mind of its own, my hand went automatically to the mouse and clicked it. An email popped up on the screen with some foreign writing on it. Yugoslavian or Russian maybe. Weird. Why would Jasmine be corresponding with someone in a foreign
language. Wait! When I’d seen her at the bar the other day she’d been having words with a big foreign bloke. What the hell was Jasmine into? Was she somehow involved in what happened to Melody and lying to me? I didn’t have time to figure it all out there and then. I hit print and put the computer screen back the way I’d found it. I collected the document and shoved it into my pocket just as Jasmine returned.

“Here you go,” she said, tossing me the lube.

I finished off the last of my butter chicken and tossed the empty take away container into the bin. I leaned back in my chair and patted my stomach with satisfaction.

“Good one, Genius. That’ll take at least half an hour to go down before you can dance,” Dallas laughed.

“Great. Then we’ve got plenty of time for you to decipher that email for me,” I hinted.

I pushed the email across the dressing room table. Dallas rummaged in her handbag for her glasses and bent over it, studying intently.

“Was I right? Is it Russian?” I asked in hushed tones.
“Where the hell did you get this?”
“Well, I guess you could say I kind of…borrowed it.”
“I’m not even going to ask.”
“What does it say?”
“Well you were close. It’s Ukrainian. It says, ‘Call me when you’re ready. I’m sending you another one. You know what to do. Call Dimitri for pick up when it’s done.’ What the hell?”
“Ssh, keep your voice down.”
“Raini, where did you get this? Who knows what to do? Who’s Dimitri?”
“Nothing. It’s nothing.”
“My arse! What have you gotten yourself into? Is it drugs, gambling?”
“What? No, don’t be crazy.”
“Crazy? Crazy is stealing a threatening email from a Ukrainian crime gang.”

“It’s not what you think,” I pleaded, “Wait. A Ukrainian crime gang? What do you know about Ukrainian crime gangs? What makes you think a gang has anything to do with this email?”

“I know that you don’t fuck with them, that’s what I know,” she warned, “And as for how I know that this email has anything to do with them, well, I don’t. But it sounds suspicious enough to warrant it.”

“Why? What are they into?”

“What aren’t they into more to the point? Drugs, prostitution, people trafficking, extortion – and that’s just off the top of my head.”

“How do you know all this?”

“You have to be living under a rock not to know.”

“Well consider me a rock dweller. Enlighten me please.”

“Sorry, I forget you’re still new to this business. We get Ukrainian customers in here sometimes, drug dealers mostly from what I can tell. They get very cagey when you ask them what they do for a living. Actually, I’ve seen Marcello with a couple of them now that I think about it,” she mused.

“Marcello was here hanging out with Ukrainian gangsters?”

“Yeah. Can’t remember their names though. It didn’t seem important at the time. Sorry.”

Had Marcello lied to me? Did he know more than he was letting on? It seemed like everything was connected somehow but I just couldn’t figure it all out. I was missing something. Some vital piece of information.

“Hello, Earth to Angel. Where did you go?” Dallas clicked her fingers, bringing me out of my reverie.

“Sorry. I was just thinking.”

“Well don’t. You need to leave this one alone. The Ukrainians do not fuck around. Before you know it, you’ll be six foot under and no one will ever find your body.”

I shuddered at the thought. What was Jasmine up to with the Ukrainians? What did the email mean? Had my sister been killed by a Ukrainian crime gang because she knew something? And if so, what was it?

“Raini!” Mum called, “Trish wants to see you.”

“Now?”
“No, tomorrow. Of course now!”

“Dallas, we’ll talk more later. I promise.”

“You’d better,” she growled.

I walked to Trish’s office, my full belly weighing me down with each step. Shit. She was probably gonna go off at me for not being out on the floor. I knocked on the door and Trish called me in. I closed the door and looked at her expectantly.

“Look, Darl, I’m not going to sugar coat this. I’m going to have to let you go.”

“Let me go? You mean you’re sacking me?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t keep both you and Cheetah on after what’s happened. And I heard it wasn’t the first time you two have had problems.”

“But why? I don’t understand. We can work different shifts and—”

“Look, one of you has to go and I’m afraid that because Cheetah’s been here a lot longer it has to be you,” she said finally, getting up to open the door for me.

I didn’t have the strength to argue. I left quietly with my head held high. But secretly I was crushed. I felt a bizarre attachment to the club. As well as enjoying the work and the atmosphere, I felt close to Melody when I was here. Her ghost echoed everywhere I went and I felt comforted by it. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat.

Dallas had left the dressing room when I went to pack up my things and empty my locker. I heard the DJ announce that she was on podium three. I grabbed my few possessions, stuffing them into my backpack, and changed into street clothes. Dallas had neatly folded the email I’d forgotten and slipped it through one of the vents in my locker. I picked it up. She’d written out the English translation for me. I wrote her a quick note explaining that I’d been fired and left it in her make-up bag. I checked my watch. It was just after midnight. I slammed my locker and took one last look around the empty dressing room before running outside to hail a cab.

It sucked that I’d been fired but right now I had to focus. I stared out the window of the taxi and tried to figure out what the email might mean. Who was Dimitri? What did the sender of the email mean by ‘another one’? Another what? A light patter of rain began and droplets now flecked the window as the cab pulled into the driveway. I paid the driver and went inside.

I took a hot shower to clear my head. It wasn’t fair. Why did I have to get sacked instead of Cheetah? I yanked open the fridge and found a corked bottle of chardonnay. I poured myself a generous glass and went to sulk in front of the TV. Dim Sim eyeballed me.
from an armchair. If looks could kill, that cat would have had me strung and quartered. I hissed at him. He flicked an ear before turning around to face away from me and going back to sleep.

I wondered what to do next. I had a couple of options. First, I needed to question Marcello about the Ukrainians. Secondly, I had to talk to Jasmine and find out why she was under threat from them. Thirdly, I could talk to Reyes and ask him about Ukrainian crime gangs and what the police knew about them. The third option was probably the best but I was too chicken to call Reyes after sleeping with him. It wasn’t that I didn’t like him, I just wasn’t good at relationships. Even casual ones. Not that I’d had more than one but that was the whole point. I was embarrassingly inexperienced when it came to men and I didn’t want him to know. After all, he was handsome, charming and super hot so he’d no doubt been with way more experienced women than me. I was afraid of his expectations, that I wouldn’t live up to them and that it would ultimately result in me making a complete and utter fuckwit of myself, not to mention the possibility of getting my heart broken. I slapped myself on the forehead and groaned. I should never have slept with him.

My mobile rang, interrupting my mental lecture to myself. Dallas’ name flashed on the screen.

“Yeah,” I sighed into the phone.

“Raini, what happened? I just tried to speak to Trish but she won’t see me,” Dallas said.

“She sacked me because of Cheetah. I don’t understand. The other night she told me she wanted me to have mediation with her and then she sacked me anyway!” I said angrily.

“That sucks.”

“No shit.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to get another job I guess.”

“I hear Sunset Strip are looking for dancers…”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, I almost forgot to mention.”

“What?”

“Marcello’s here.”

“He is?”
“Yup. And he was asking about you.”
“He was?”
“What do you want me to tell him?”
“Tell him I need to see him,” I said, feeling my fighting spirit return.
“Should I give him your number?”
“He already has it. Just tell him to call me and make sure he knows it’s urgent.”
“Will do. And Raini?”
“Yeah?”
“Try not to stress, okay? We’ll work something out.”
“I’ll try.”
“Okay, see you in a few hours.”
I hung up and waited for my phone to ring again. I wasn’t disappointed.
“Marcello?” I answered.
“Hey, Princess. Why aren’t you here?”
“They fired me.”
“You’re joking. Why?”
“Unfortunately not. And as to why they fired me, ask your girlfriend.”
“Cheetah? But I sorted things with her and you. Or at least I thought I did.”
“Yeah well I guess she didn’t think so because Trish told me there’s only room for one of us.”
“Sorry. I tried.”
“Yeah. Thanks.”
“So what’s up? Why did you want me to call you?”
“I need to see you. Can you meet me?”
“What? Now?”
“Please?” I wheedled.
“Alright. Where?”
“Your place.”
“My place? What…? Never mind. Okay, Princess. I’ll see you there in about half an hour.”

I quickly tied my wet hair up into a loose bun and put on some socks and sneakers. I left the house and walked the short distance to Bridge Road where I hailed a cab. I was
really starting to get sick of handing all my hard earned dough over to taxi drivers but at this point I didn’t have a choice. The taxi pulled over and I climbed into the back.

“Where to, Miss?” a plump driver with a nasty habit of breathing heavily through his nose asked.

I gave him Marcello’s address and he pulled back out into the traffic. It was almost one in the morning. The cab stunk of B.O and something else I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I cranked down the window. It didn’t take long to get to Marcello’s. I paid the driver and knocked on Marcello’s door. There was no answer so I sat down on the doorstep to wait. I wondered how much I should tell him. He was going to want to know why I was asking about the Ukrainians. Perhaps I should clue him in just a bit. I mean, if the Ukrainians were involved he’d have a much better chance of finding out than me. And maybe I’d be able to convince him to take me with him. I heard a car turn into the streets and headlights swung into the driveway. Marcello killed the engine and got out of the car.

“So, Princess, what is it that was so important that I had to drop what I was doing and meet you straight away?” he asked, opening the front door and motioning for me to go inside.

“Sorry,” I smiled, “It’s about Melody. I think I have a lead.”

I followed him into the kitchen. He took two beers out of the fridge, cracked them open and offered me one. I perched on a stool and he looked at me expectantly.

“Okay so I think there might be a connection between Melody’s murder and the Ukrainians,” I said, taking a swig of beer.

Marcello arched an eyebrow, “And what makes you think so?”

“I can’t tell you exactly but let’s just say that I’ve recently met someone connected to Melody who is also in trouble with some Ukrainians and I have a feeling that somehow Melody was caught up in whatever it is that’s going on between them.”

“And why did you have to tell me this right now at two in the morning?”

“Because I heard that you know some Ukrainians and I thought that you might be able to find some stuff out,” I said matter of factly.

Marcello looked at me incredulously, “So let me get this straight. You’ve met someone who’s in trouble with the Ukrainians, you can’t tell me who they are, you think but don’t know for sure that Melody was involved somehow and now you expect me to go to the Ukrainians and find out if they killed Melody based on this half arsed story that you’ve just told me?”
“Exactly,” I smiled happily.
“You’re fucking crazy,” he muttered, shaking his head.
“What?”
“It’s not like I can just rock up and say, hey guys, by any chance are any of you involved in the murder of my ex-girlfriend? Get serious.”
“Well there must be something you can do. What do the Ukrainians do, anyway?”
“Mostly they’re into prostitution and people trafficking. They bring in a lot of young girls from overseas and sell them to illegal brothel owners. Usually other Ukrainians.”
“You mean they actually sell people? Young girls?”
“Underage girls and yes, they do sell them.”
“That’s horrible!” I said in disgust.
“Yeah well the world often is, Princess,” Marcello sighed.
“You’re not into any of that, are you?”
“Don’t be stupid. I just know a few of them, that’s all.”
“How?”
“Business.”
“Oh,” I said, remembering that he was a drug dealer after all.
He produced a pack of cigarettes and offered me one. I lit it and took a long drag, hoping that the smoke would kick my brain into action and I’d come up with a plan.
“That’s it!” I said.
“That’s what?” Marcello asked.
“Where do the Ukrainians hang out?”
“At their restaurant usually, why?”
“Well, you could go there and I could come with you and we could like, question them without them realising what we’re up to,” I said.
“Are you always this bird-brained?”
“Huh?”
“You do realise how dangerous that would be, don’t you?”
“Danger, shmanger,” I said dismissively.
“Listen to me,” Marcello said seriously, suddenly grabbing me by the shoulders, “You do not fuck with these people. They’re dangerous. If they think we’re up to anything it could end badly. Very badly.”
“Well that’s what I have you for, isn’t it? To protect me?”

“And why exactly do you think I would want to put myself in that position?”

“Because you told me you loved my sister. Or was that just a lie?”

“Don’t…”

“You did. You said you loved her. Don’t you want to find out the truth? Don’t you want the people who murdered her to pay?”

I searched his face to try and figure out what he was thinking. All I could see in his eyes was pain and I realised then that he had loved my sister. Perhaps more than I’d realised.

“If we’re doing this, I’m going armed up,” he said, disappearing into the laundry and reappearing with the gun I’d almost shot him with. He opened a drawer and pulled out a box of bullets. I watched him load the gun.

“And if we’re gonna do this, you can’t go in dressed like that either,” he said.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” I asked.

“No offense, Princess, but every girl I take out is a ‘glamour’. You’d better get changed into something sexy. And for God’s sake do something with the hair.”

I touched my hair self consciously.

“Well you’d better drive me home then,” I said.

“Way ahead of you, Princess,” Marcello said, dangling his car keys.
By the time we got to the restaurant it was just after two am. The sign told me that the restaurant was called ‘Maxy’s’. Marcello grabbed my hand. We walked in and though you couldn’t really tell from the street, it was jam packed and the bar was crowded with customers. Some foreign music was playing, it sounded Russian, and some of the drunker patrons were up on the dance floor. We pushed our way to the back of the restaurant where a table full of about eight men and a few gaudily made-up women were seated.

“Marcello!” one of the men boomed in a thick accent.

“Eh, Marat,” Marcello greeted him.

“What brings you to us, my friend?” Marat enquired.

“Just showing off my new friend here,” Marcello winked, inclining his head towards me.

“I don’t blame you, my friend,” Marat said, licking his lips lasciviously.

I felt like a piece of meat on display as each man at the table stared. More so than when I was stripping. I admit – I’d gone a little over the top. I wore a black, figure hugging dress, cut in a low vee, giving a maximum view of my cleavage. Gold beading around the bust line accentuated my breasts even more and judging by the look on the men’s faces, it was definitely doing its job. I’d let my hair out and it gave me a sex kitten look that I’d always envied on my sister. Combined with great make-up and some blood red lipstick, I had to admit, I was a knock out.
Marat offered us a seat at his table. Marcello seated me next to Marat, introducing me as ‘Angel’ and then sat next to me. Marat introduced me to everyone. Most had Russian sounding names and I forgot them instantly. Marat didn’t look like what I’d envisioned a Ukrainian gangster would look like. Not that I really knew, but still. He wore a pale grey cashmere sweater and black jeans. He had baby smooth skin with rosy red cheeks and dimples when he smiled. He wore his sandy coloured hair longer at the front with short back and sides and his pale blue eyes had a bug like quality to them that reminded me of Steve Buschemi, the actor. His teeth were white and perfect and I couldn’t imagine him being involved in anything dangerous. He looked too clean cut. I guessed him to be in his mid thirties.

Drinks were brought over to our table. We toasted and the music seemed to get louder. Raucous laughter could be heard coming from a group of revelers at the bar. Marat lit a cigar. The spicy scent of the smoke was overpowering. I leaned away from it towards Marcello. He slung an arm around me, his hand practically resting on my right breast. I kicked him under the table. He responded by moving his hand lower. I resisted digging a stiletto into his foot.

Marcello flung a small bag of white powder onto the table.

“Help yourself boys,” he said casually.

One of the men nudged his girlfriend who promptly opened the bag and began to rake it into perfect white rows with a credit card.

“Excuse me, everyone, just gotta take a leak,” Marcello said.

He left and Marat’s attention turned to me.

“Such a beautiful woman should not be left alone,” he said, taking my hand in his and touching his lips to it ever so gently.

Puh-lease. Where did they find this guy? He was like an actor doing a romantic scene in a bad foreign film.

“Tell me, are you Marcello’s new girlfriend or just a casual acquaintance?” Marat enquired, placing his hand on my knee.

Whoa – sleaze alert. My brain went into panic mode as his hand started caressing my knee and inching higher. Fuck! Where the hell was Marcello when I needed him? What was I supposed to do? If I didn’t say something, his hand would soon be in my crotch.

“What do you know about the murder in Reservoir?” I blurted.
“What did you say,” Marat said coldly, snatching his hand away.

“I, um, I, er…”

Before I could dig myself out of the hole I’d just fallen into, I was seized by the shoulder and yanked up out of my chair by one of the men at the table. And unlike Marat, this guy, who was about six feet tall and a little bit crazy looking, did look like a Ukrainian gangster.

“Wait! P-p-please,” I tried to explain as I was being half-carried half-dragged from the room and into a kitchen.

Marat was following us and finally I was plonked down on a chair in a dingy little office at the back of the restaurant with a cold, hard pistol pressed into the side of my face. I started to shake.

“Who are you?” Marat demanded.

The door burst open suddenly and two more men the size of King Kong and just as hairy were manhandling Marcello into the office as well.

“What the fuck are you morons doing?” Marcello yelled, “Get off me!”

“Shut up!” Marat commanded, “What is the meaning of this? Why is this woman asking me about the murder in Reservoir? Is she a cop?”

Marcello shot me a ‘you fuckin’ idiot’ look. The pistol ground into my cheekbone.

“Look, guys, I can explain,” Marcello began.

“It better be good,” Marat said, his eyes narrowing into slits.

“She’s not a cop. Her sister was the one that got knocked in Reservoir. She’s obsessed. It’s nothing personal – she asks everyone. She even asked me,” Marcello explained.

“And you bring her here, to my restaurant? What the fuck are you playing at?” Marat demanded, “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t shoot you both right now?”

“Look, I’m sorry. It was a mistake bringing her here. I thought she was over it but I thought wrong. The truth is I was hoping to show her a good time and get laid. What can I say? She’s a beautiful woman and I’m a sucker for a pretty face and a hot body,” Marcello said apologetically.

There was silence in the room while Marat digested everything that Marcello had said. I stared at a spot on the wall, praying to a God that I no longer believed in to let me get out of this alive. And then Marat erupted into a fit of laughter. His goons followed suit.
“It’s true, Marcello, you always were a sucker, ruled by that thing in your pants more than the brain in your head,” Marat managed.

I would have laughed myself if I weren’t so scared.

“So, we cool?” Marcello asked, smoothing his hair back into place.

“Yes, my friend, we are cool,” Marat shook Marcello’s hand, “And you, young lady, should learn to keep that pretty little mouth of yours shut.”

The pistol moved away from me and Marat tilted my chin towards him and kissed me on the lips. I didn’t move a muscle, despite the fact that he tasted like garlic.

“My apologies again, Marat,” Marcello said obsequiously.

“Forget it, my friend, but next time, I might not be so understanding, ah?”

“Don’t worry, there won’t be a next time,” Marcello said, grabbing me roughly by the arm and pulling me towards him, “Thank you for your hospitality, Marat. We’ll catch up soon.”

“Take it easy, my friend,” Marat waved as we exited the office.

Marcello dragged me towards the back exit and out into the night.

“Ouch! You’re hurting me!” I protested.

“That’s the least of your worries, Princess. Do you realise you nearly got us killed tonight?” Marcello hissed, shoving me into the car and slamming the door.

“It was an accident. He nearly had his hand up my dress. I just freaked out. How was I supposed to know he’d get so upset?” I said, rubbing the sore spot on my arm.

“Oh gee, I don’t know, maybe because I already told you these are dangerous people that you don’t fuck with,” Marcello spat sarcastically.

“I’m sorry,” I said sulkily.

“Don’t be sorry. Just be grateful that we’re both still alive.”

Marcello started the engine and we were gone in a screech of rubber and smoke.
Marcello was silent for the entire drive home. I shifted nervously in my seat, waiting for him to yell at me again. Instead, he pulled up in front of Dallas’s and silently waited for me to get out. Unfortunately for him, I wasn’t going anywhere without talking first.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” I asked.

“What do you want me to say?” he growled.

“That you forgive me or that you don’t. Anything is better than the silent treatment.”

“Gee sorry, Princess, but I’m a little lost for words right now,” he said angrily, his eyebrows knitting together into the scariest look I’d seen on him yet.

“But—” I started to protest.

“I don’t think you quite understand what just happened back there,” Marcello said, “This is not the kind of thing that just goes away. We may have escaped with our lives and it may be over for you but not for me. Definitely not for me.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” I asked, “They seemed fine when we left. They were laughing. I don’t understand.”

“No. You don’t,” he sighed, “And that’s the problem.”

“So try me.”

Marcello killed the engine. This was obviously going to take a while.
“There’s two things that will happen now. One, I’ll lose a lot of business. Two, I’ll lose a lot of respect.”

I hadn’t thought about that. I knew Marcello was a drug dealer but I hadn’t realised that he was in business with the Ukrainians. What that business entailed I had no idea, nor did I want to know. I tried to feel bad about him losing drug money over what had happened but I couldn’t. I hated drugs. As for the matter of respect, it must have been a male thing ‘cause I didn’t get that either.

“Why do you care if people respect you or not?” I asked.

Marcello groaned, “You just don’t get it, do you? In this business, respect is everything. Respect can make or break you. When people stop respecting you, you become a target.”

“A target for what?”

“Trust me, it’s better that you don’t know.”

I shivered. I had a feeling he wasn’t talking about the kind of target that lived to tell the tale. Now I did feel bad.

“I’m sorry, Marcello. Really.”

“It’s done now.”

“Come in for a drink. I could really use one,” I said.

Marcello checked his Rolex for the time, “S’pose I could too.”

We got out of the car and Marcello locked the doors and enabled the alarm. We navigated the darkness to the front door. Dim Sim appeared at my feet by the mailbox, miaowing like a cat possessed.

“Get!” I hissed at him.

Stupid cat. What was his problem?

The front door was ajar when we reached it and it looked like someone had jimmyed the lock. Bits of splintered wood were sticking out around the lock and scattered on the ground. What the hell?

“Shit. Wait here,” Marcello instructed, removing the gun from the back of his pants and entering the house.

A feeling of pure and utter dread enveloped me and I felt like throwing up on the spot. What if someone was in the house? I didn’t think I could handle another near death experience tonight. Dim Sim reappeared and looked at me smugly in an ‘I told you so’ way.

He waited by the door with me, sniffing the air like he could sense something I couldn’t when Marcello reappeared.

“It’s okay. There’s no one in there. But you’d better prepare yourself. Someone’s wrecked the joint.”

“What?” I asked incredulously.

I stepped over the threshold afraid of what I’d find once inside. Marcello flicked on the light in the hallway. Broken glass crunched under my feet. Dallas’ degree lay strewn on the floor in a broken frame along with all her beautiful artwork. I sucked in a breath and grabbed onto the wall for support. Marcello walked ahead of me and turned on the rest of the lights in the house. I met him in the kitchen where he stood amongst broken dishes, food and various other kitchen equipment that had been carelessly flung onto the ground. Dallas was going to lose it when she saw this.

“Oh my God,” was all I could manage.

I moved into the lounge and could hardly believe what I was seeing. The couches were tipped upside down, stuffing spewing out from the cushions. The TV screen was broken and DVD’s and CD’s lay broken next to it on the floor. The bookcase had been cleared of books, pages torn from them and used to start a fire in the middle of the room, leaving behind a black spot and the acrid smell of burnt paper and carpet. Marcello appeared behind me with a bottle of whiskey.

“Found this in the kitchen. No glasses though. They’re all broken,” he said swigging from the bottle before offering it to me.

I took it gratefully and had a long drink that left me coughing.

“You’re gonna have to call the cops,” Marcello said, “And I don’t wanna be here when they get here. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention my name.”

“Of, of course,” I stammered.

“Hope Dallas has got insurance,” he said, taking another long swig from the bottle before using his jacket cuffs to wipe his prints from it and handing it back to me.

I dug around in my handbag for my mobile.

“Thanks, Marcello. I’m really sorry about everything,” I began.

“Don’t worry. Nothing I can’t handle,” he replied, trying to make me feel better.

“I don’t understand. Why would someone do this?”
“Only three reasons I can think of. Either this is completely random and someone’s burged the joint. But somehow I doubt it. Usually if it’s a burg they just take what they want and leave. Whoever did this wrecked the place on purpose. So either they were looking for something or trying to send you a warning.”

“A warning? A warning about what?”

“Judging by this, a warning to stop whatever it is you’re doing and mind your own business. Next time, it might be you instead of the house that gets damaged,” Marcello said sagely.

“Fuck. I can’t believe this. Do you think the Ukrainians did this because of what happened tonight?”

“No. Not their style. They’d just kill you.”

I shuddered at the thought.

“You gonna be alright, Princess?” Marcello said softly.

I nodded and held up my phone.

“Right. Well I gotta go then. Good luck. Call me tomorrow, Princess,” he said kissing me lightly on the forehead in a brotherly way.

I thanked him and waited for him to start the car before I called Reyes. Then I called Dallas. I told her to come straight home and that it was an emergency.

I hung up and surveyed the disaster. I was in way over my head. I took another long swig of whiskey that burned my throat then I up-righted a couch and sat on it with no cushion. What had I gotten myself into? If Marcello was right and it wasn’t the Ukrainians, then who could possibly be after me?

My thoughts were interrupted by a forceful knocking on the front door. I shot up off the couch and headed for the hallway then thought better of it, back tracked and left the whiskey in the kitchen before answering.

Reyes stood in the doorway, worry etched on his face. He didn’t wait for me to invite him in.

“What happened?” he asked, walking the length of the hallway and into the kitchen.

“I just got home and it was like this,” I replied making a sweeping gesture with my hand.

“So,” he began, “Take me through what happened.”

I relayed the events of the evening beginning with arriving home. I was careful not to mention that Marcello had been with me. I also omitted the part about the Ukrainians
and told Reyes I had no idea who could have done this. As I was finishing my story I heard the front door bang shut and Dallas was beside me in seconds.

“Whoa,” she breathed, “What the fuck?”

Her eyes widened as she took in the scene before her.

“No! Not the couch. I paid two grand for that couch,” she moaned, wistfully picking up a cushion and trying in vain to push some of the stuffing back in.

“Don’t worry,” the Reyes said reassuringly, “Insurance will cover it. You are insured, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but it’s not the point. I fucking loved that couch.”

“The couch is the least of your worries,” Reyes said, “Is anything missing?”

Dallas left to go and check her bedroom and I stayed put while Reyes continued to question me. I answered all his questions as truthfully as I could, considering, and he seemed satisfied with what I said.

“Given what’s just happened with your sister, I doubt this is a routine B & E,” Reyes said ominously, “Hey, are you alright?”

He pulled me into a hug, the formal cop stuff out of the way, and I reluctantly allowed him to soothe me.

“It doesn’t look like anything’s been stolen,” Dallas yelled, reappearing from the front of the house, “The laptop is still there, none of my jewelry is missing. The TV is broken but still there. I don’t get it.”

“I have to call this in,” Reyes said, “We need to get forensics out here to look for prints.”

He took out his phone and walked out to the back yard to report the break in.

“Raini, what the hell’s going on?” Dallas whispered.

“I don’t know but I’m so sorry. This is all my fault,” I said, tears pricking my eyes.

“Hey, don’t cry. It’s not your fault. Blame the psychos who did this, it’s their fault,” she soothed.

“Yeah but if it wasn’t for me, those psychos wouldn’t be wrecking your house. I’m putting you in danger by being here,” I sniffed.

Dallas put an arm around me and pulled me into a hug, “It’s okay. It’s not your fault and you’re not going anywhere. We’re in this together, okay?”

I nodded, wiping the tears from my face with the back of my hand.

“Th-thanks,” I whispered.
“They’re on their way,” Reyes said as he walked back into the house.
I nodded.
“I’d offer you a coffee or something but I don’t think any cups survived,” Dallas said.

I left to go to my room, Reyes following close on my heels.
“Raini, can we talk? You haven’t returned any of my calls.”
I shut my bedroom door and plonked down onto my unmade bed.
“Sorry,” I mumbled, unable to meet his eyes, “Been busy.”
Reyes sighed, “Maybe this isn’t such a good time.”
“Agreed.”
“Dinner then? Sometime this week?”
“Mm hm,” I said.

We heard cars pull up outside.
“Forensics are here,” Reyes said, getting up and walking out to meet them.
I looked at the clock and saw that it was 4am. I wondered when I was going to be able to get some sleep.
I woke up after lunch time the following day and trudged out to the kitchen to make a sandwich. It was wet and miserable weather and I hadn’t wanted to leave the warmth of my bed to face the day. I chomped down a peanut butter sandwich, washing it down with mouthfuls of strong, hot coffee. There was a note from Dallas telling me she’d catch up with me later tonight. I binned it and checked my phone for messages. I had one from Reyes.

“Raini? It’s um, me. Javier. I, ah, haven’t heard from you so, yeah, give me a call when you can. Ciao.”

I put the phone down and banged my head on the breakfast bar. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Ow!”

I quickly rubbed my forehead. That had been a dumb idea. But lately I’d had a lot of them, it seemed. In the light of day I realised that going to see the Ukrainians the other night had been quite possibly one of the dumbest ideas I’d ever come up with. I’d nearly gotten myself and Marcello killed. If it hadn’t been for Marcello’s quick talking...well I didn’t even want to think about it. Then again, if I’d been home when the break in had happened who knows what would have happened to me? I could have been hurt or much much worse. Thinking about having a gun to my head made my heart palpitate all over again. My stomach churned and I had to block the thought from my mind. I probably had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or something. Didn’t that happen to people who had been
through traumatic events? Shit. I really needed to find Melody’s killer quickly before someone killed me. There was only one way to find out for sure about the Ukrainians and I should have done it from the start. I picked up my phone and punched in Jasmine’s number.

“Hello?” she answered, her voice hoarse like she had the flu.

“We have to talk.”

“Raini?” her voice cracked as though she was about to cry.

It sounded like she’d had a bad night.

“Where can you meet me?”

“What’s this about?”

“I don’t want to talk about it on the phone. It’s important.”

“Okay, well can you come over?”

“I’ll see you in about an hour.”

“Okay.”

I hung up and washed up my dishes. Dim Sim materialized at my feet and looked up at me expectantly.


He blinked and walked to his bowl where he sat down and started grooming a paw.

“Food? You want food?”

He looked up at me again and blinked.

“For God sake, didn’t Dallas feed you this morning or something?” I muttered, opening a cupboard to look for his cat biscuits. I tipped some into one of our new ceramic bowls because Dallas still hadn’t replaced his broken one and went to scratch him on the head. He hissed at me.

“I swear that is the last time I try to be nice to you. I don’t know why she keeps you around,” I admonished.

He ignored me and started crunching. I took a quick shower and got ready. I was at Jasmine’s in less than two hours. She buzzed me up and I knocked on her apartment door. She was still wearing her pyjamas as she answered with bleary eyes and bird nest hair.

“Come in,” she waved.

Her studio apartment was tiny. It had a small kitchenette immediately to the right and a not much further from that, a two-seater sofa, a bookshelf and a double bed. Three
large suitcases overflowing with clothes were stacked in a corner near a big window looking out onto the main street and I assumed that behind the door near the bed was the bathroom. The apartment smelled like smoke. There was an empty wine glass sitting near a full ashtray.

“Sorry 'bout the mess. I don’t have many visitors,” Jasmine apologized.

“No, it’s fine,” I lied.

“Here, sit down,” she offered, moving a blanket off the couch to make room, “You want a drink?”

“No thanks.”

“Mind if I do?”

“Go for it.”

She opened the bar fridge in the kitchenette and unscrewed a half drunk bottle of cheap white wine. She filled the empty glass and sat next to me, taking two large gulps.

“So what’s up?” she asked, lighting a smoke and blowing it out through her nostrils.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” I replied, unfolding the stolen email and smoothing it out for her to see.

“Where did you get that?” she snapped, snatching it off me.

“It doesn’t matter. What I want to know is why there are Ukrainians sending you emails and what this has to do with my sister?”

“You stole this from me!” she shrieked, jumping up off the couch.

I leapt up to face her.

“Yeah, well I’m going to do a lot more than that if you don’t start talking!” I said menacingly.

She sank back down onto the couch, her face in her hands and started to sob. I felt guilty.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean that last bit,” I said sheepishly.

I patted her shoulder and tried to comfort her.

“It’s not what you think,” she sniffed, “I had nothing to do with Melody’s murder. But I th-think these people might have.”

My eyes widened.

“You’d better tell me everything,” I said quietly.
Jasmine stubbed out her cigarette and lit another. She took two deep drags and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her pyjamas.

“It started about three months before Melo dy was killed. I was in debt. A lot of debt, you know. I needed money. A friend told me about some guys she knew that could help me out. She introduced me and they lent me some money. Enough to dig myself out of the hole I was in,” she blew a long stream of smoke out and drained her wine glass.

“Go on,” I said.

“So it was high interest, you know? And I couldn’t pay it all back so I made a deal with the guys. They said all I had to do was look after some Russian girls and they’d wipe the debt.”

“What do you mean, look after?”

“Dimitri – he’s the guy you saw me with at the bar – brings girls to me. I take them to Fantasia to see Gabe and they make movies. Most of them don’t speak English. I speak Russian so I translate and look after them.”

I started to get suspicious. Dallas and Marcello had both said that the Ukrainians were into people trafficking.

“And what exactly does this have to do with Melody?”

“I told her about the girls. A lot of them were underage. Some of them asked me to help them, said they’d been kidnapped back in Russia. But what could I do? I still took them to Gabe. He’d force them to do the movies. They’d cry so he’d dope them up and start filming. Please, I had no choice,” she pleaded.

I was disgusted. At that moment, I really wanted to punch her face in.

“I told Melody. She started talking about helping the girls to escape. I got scared and told the Ukrainians. But I swear, I thought they were just going to rough her up a bit. They told me they were just giving her a warning to mind her own business.”

“You did what?” I exploded.

That explained the black eye I’d seen Melody with at Christmas.

“I’m sorry, I was scared. Please, you have to understand. They threatened to kill me if I didn’t do what they asked,” Jasmine begged.

“So that story you told me about Melody saying that people were trying to set her up, that was all a lie?”

“I’m sorry. I had no choice. I couldn’t tell you the truth.”
“What do you mean you had no choice? Because of you my sister is dead!” I screamed, advancing on her, barely able to contain my rage.

“Please…” Jasmine cried, raising an arm defensively.

I didn’t hit her. But I really felt like it.

“And all this time I’ve been working at a goddamn porn company digging for information that you knew the whole time? I can’t believe this,” I yelled, kicking the couch.

“Please, I’ll do anything to make up for it. I’ll help you. Anything.”

God, I was such an idiot. Why did I believe her in the first place? All this time I’d wasted trying to find an imaginary killer at Fantasia and the real ones were kicking back in a Ukrainian restaurant like nothing had happened. I trembled with anger. I had to do something.

“Alright, here’s what you’re gonna do,” I said carefully, recalling the message in the email, “You’re going to tell them to bring the girl to you tonight.”

“Yeah, and then what?”

“Let me finish,” I snapped, “You’re going to get them talking.”

“What?”

“The Ukrainians. You’re going to meet them here in your apartment and get them to talk about Melody’s murder. I’m going to go out organize some recording equipment. I know someone who can help.”

“And then what?”

“And then we go to Fantasia and you get Gabe on tape admitting the same thing. After that, we take that recording equipment to the police and they do their job and Melody’s killers will rot in jail where they belong.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“That’s because it is.”

“Nothing ever is…”

“You said you’d help. Don’t get scared on me now,” I warned, “You’re lucky I’m not going to the police straight away.”

“What with? A few suspicions and nothing to back it up. They’d never believe you.”

“Maybe not. But I’m sure you don’t want them digging around too much. Who knows what they might find? Last time I checked, enslavement and kidnapping were still
crimes. Not to mention the fact that most of those girls are underage. Oh and aren’t you an accessory? I don’t even know how you manage to live with yourself,” I spat in disgust.

“Alright, alright.”

“Good. Meanwhile, I’m going to make a call about the recording equipment and meet my friend. Then I’ll meet you back here. Don’t forget to call Fantasia and set up at meeting with Gabe for later tonight. If we can get him as well, we’ll have more than enough proof about what he’s doing with the Ukrainians,” I stood to leave, “And by the way, you might want to clean this place up. My guy will be around later to set up.”

Jasmine nodded.

“Don’t screw this up,” I added, letting myself out.

I left the building and stepped back out into the rain wishing I had an umbrella. Maybe Jasmine was right. Maybe the video evidence wasn’t going to be enough to prove anything, maybe they wouldn't talk. But I was desperate. That was why we had to go back to Fantasia and find more proof. I reached into my bag for my phone. I thought about calling Reyes but I knew that if I did he’d carry on about police procedure and all that sort of crap. I needed to act now. I scrolled for Maurice’s number. I figured he’d have to know something about hidden recording equipment. He answered after just three rings.

“Maurice?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s me, Angel.”

“Isn’t this a nice surprise? What can I do for you?”

I could almost hear him beaming through the phone.

“Maurice, I have a favour to ask…..”
“Are you sure this will work?” I asked Maurice.

“Positive,” he replied, taping the last of the wires in place and moving the bookshelf across to hide his handywork.

Maurice had set up a simple visual and audio recording device that consisted of a tiny camera and microphone hidden in a soft toy on the bookshelf in Jasmine’s apartment. She’d even managed to tidy the place up and it smelled clean too.

“So how does this work?” Jasmine asked, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

She’d showered for the occasion and straightened her hair. Her eyes were no longer bloodshot and though she looked scared out of her wits, she seemed determined to go through with what I had asked her to do. Maurice had given her a pep talk, which might have helped. He promised to watch from a van parked down the street and if anything went wrong he was calling the cops. Now that there were two of us who knew her secret, she had no choice but to go through with it or we’d both go to the police on her.

“Okay, here’s the remote,” Maurice said, handing her a miniature remote with only a few buttons on it, “When you want to start recording, you hit the red button. It’s that simple.”

Jasmine nodded and deposited it in her jacket pocket.
“Don’t forget,” I said, “You have to get them to talk about Melody. With this evidence we’re going to get enough on them to go down for the people trafficking but I want evidence about Melody’s murder too. They need to pay.”

And I need to stay safe, I thought.

“Okay,” she said.

“Maurice, you and I had better get lost. They’ll be here in less than half an hour.”

We left Jasmine’s apartment. I gave her one final look of warning before I left and we headed downstairs.

“Are you sure about this?” Maurice asked.

“What other options do we have?” I shrugged.

“We could go to the police and let them deal with it. I still have contacts. I could call someone who will help.”

I shook my head, “All we’ll probably get them on is the girls. I started this to find out what happened to my sister and they’ll never admit to her murder. I need proof.”

Maurice fell silent as we stepped out onto the street. The rain had slowed to a fine sleet. The sun was beginning to set and the city was lighting up for the night. We walked about a block to the van and got inside. It was littered with take away wrappers and stunk of mothballs and dirty ashtrays. I was surprised at how well equipped it was. A small TV screen was set up next to a switchboard and two sets of headphones.

“Someone owed me a favour,” Maurice offered by way of explanation.

“Cool,” I said, sitting down to get comfortable and wait.

On the screen I could see Jasmine pacing, stopping occasionally to run her fingers through her hair. I didn’t envy her. In her shoes I’d be an absolute wreck. I was getting pretty good at this undercover stuff but after my run in with the Ukrainians last night, I had no wish to repeat my near-death experience. The truth was they scared the shit out of me. Suddenly Jasmine jumped.

“We have movement,” said Maurice, putting on the earphones and motioning for me to do the same.

Jasmine’s door buzzer must have rung because she quickly pressed record on the remote, smoothed her hair and took a deep breath before using the intercom to buzz her visitors in.

Two men and a young brunette with the palest skin I had ever seen entered just moments later. I recognized both men immediately. One of them was the man I’d seen
Jasmine with at the bar the day I followed her - Dimitri. He was big and bulky with thick dark hair that was shaved at the back. He was minus the sunnies this time and his eyes were deep set with dark circles beneath them. He wore a dark green bomber jacket and cargoes with army style boots. The second man was younger and better looking. He’d been at Maxy’s with Marat last night. He had short blonde hair that looked like he used a lot of product, tanned skin and an athletic build. Dressed in a tight black tee-shirt and black jeans, he held the girl roughly by the arm. She looked out of it – doped up no doubt, and swayed dangerously on her feet. She wore no make-up and couldn’t have been any older than 15. Dimitri barked something at her in Russian and she sat down on the couch compliantly. I licked my lips and realised my mouth was dry. I was scared for the girl.

Dimitri spoke in broken English to Jasmine, “Get her clean up and take her to Gabe. She give you any trouble, you give her this,” Dimitri ordered, passing a liquid-filled syringe to Jasmine.

She took it with shaking hands.

“What matter with you?” Dimitri boomed, “Something wrong, ah?”

“It’s nothing. I – I’m just worried,” Jasmine said, her eyes darting around nervously.

Shit. She was going to blow it. I just knew it.

“Worried? Worried about what?” Dimitri asked, grabbing her wrist and pulling her closer to him.

“It’s this thing with Madison,” Jasmine babbled, “It’s getting to me. I’m scared. I didn’t think anyone was going to k-k-kill her.”

“Kill? What? You think it was us, ah?” Dimitri slapped her hard across the face.

Jasmine cried out.

“You listen. Nobody kill that slut, ah? We just beat her a little, teach her mind own business. You think we risk go to jail over prostitute, ah? No one really believe her even if she go to police,” Dimitri said, giving Jasmine one final shake before releasing her.

She fell to a crumpled heap on the floor, one hand clutched to her cheek where he’d struck her. Then Blondie spoke up in perfect English.

“None of our crew had anything to do with that murder.”

“But I told you that she knew about the girls. Two days later she was dead,” Jasmine began to cry.
“Look,” the blonde man said, obviously taking pity on her, “We had nothing to do with that murder. We went around and gave her a bit of a touch up, that’s it. She got the message. When we left she was still alive. So you can stop blaming yourself and don’t worry about it.”

“Jason. We go,” Dimitri ordered, “Remember, when you get money, you give me call, I come pick up. Okay?”

Jasmine nodded and rubbed her eyes. The men left. The girl slumped further into the couch, her mouth falling slack.

“Shit!” I said, yanking open the van door, “She’s gonna O.D.”

I jumped out and into a puddle and ran down the block. I reached the apartment just as the two goons sped off into the night. I buzzed furiously on the door buzzer.

“C’mon, c’mon,” I said.

The door clicked and I raced up the stairs two at a time, not bothering to check if Maurice was following me. By the time I burst into the apartment, Jasmine was trying to wake the girl up.

“Hey, wake up!” she shouted, shaking her.

“Quick, get her on the floor and over onto her side,” I said, shrugging out of my jacket and preparing to do first aid.

We dragged her off the couch and rolled her on her side on the carpet. Her eyes were rolling back and white foam was starting to pour of her mouth. Suddenly she started convulsing.

“What do we do?” Jasmine yelled.

“Call an ambulance,” Maurice said, appearing from the doorway.

Within moments he was dialing 000 and talking to an operator. He began relaying instructions to us.

“Keep her on her side, the ambulance is on its way.”

We stared at the girl, willing her to stop. As soon as she did, Maurice instructed us to check her air ways. I scooped my fingers in her mouth. There was nothing there. I checked to see if she was breathing.

“I can’t tell if she’s breathing!” I panicked.

“Check her pulse,” Maurice said.
I remembered doing first aid as part of my staff training at Safeway. What was it again? Something about the recovery position and using two fingers to check the pulse in the neck.

“I feel a pulse!” I said.

Then we all heard sirens in the distance and breathed a sigh of relief.

Jasmine buzzed the ambulance officers in. I moved away from the girl as they knelt by her side.

“What’s she had?” one of them barked rudely.

“Smack, I think,” Jasmine replied.

The second paramedic undid what looked like some sort of kit and removed a syringe. He held it up to the light and tapped it a few times before jabbing it into the girl’s arm. Almost instantly she sat up and started freaking out. The paramedics didn’t even bat an eyelid.

“What about the rest of you? Any of you had anything?” the rude one asked angrily.

“No,” I said.

“Hmph,” he said, trying to calm the girl.

She began to babble in Russian, looking around wildly and clearly disorientated. Jasmine replied to her in the same language and she calmed a little. The rude paramedic frowned and shook his head at us.

“Don’t let her go to sleep for a couple of hours and don’t leave her alone,” he said, gathering his equipment and packing up.

“That’s it?” I asked, surprised that she wasn’t being taken to hospital.

“What did you expect?” he sneered, “If we took every junkie we found like this to hospital the system wouldn’t be able to cope. She’ll be fine. Just keep her awake and for God’s sake make sure she doesn’t have anything else tonight.”

“Yeah thanks,” I said, annoyed at his shitty, self righteous attitude.

The paramedics left and we were alone with the girl. She was frightened and shaking. Jasmine said something to her in Russian that sounded soothing. The girl replied, her eyes wide and untrusting. They had a conversation and I caught the word coffee somewhere near the end. The girl nodded. I grabbed a blanket from the bed and wrapped it around her then followed Jasmine to the little kitchenette.
“Her name’s Irina,” Jasmine said, screwing the lid off a jar of Nescafe and flicking on the switch for the kettle, “She was taken from her parents in a small town named Kyiv in the Ukraine. Her parents made an agreement with a woman who told them she was taking Irina to do a training course in Berlin to learn how to be a model. She was given a fake passport and taken to Germany. When she arrived they told her the training school was closed and she was sent on to Brussels in Belgium instead. Once she got there, they told her she owed them $10,000 US dollars and would have to work as a prostitute to pay back the money.”

The kettle finished boiling and clicked off. Jasmine poured water into a cup while I digested everything she was telling me.

“Her passport was confiscated and she was threatened, beaten and raped. When she didn’t earn enough money she was sold to another gang of Russian men who made arrangements to bring her to Australia. Dimitri and the others have been giving her heroin for the last two days to get her hooked and make her compliant. She’s not quite 16 years old.”

I felt like crying. This was something I thought only happened in the movies. I never thought I’d be witnessing it for real. It was one thing to choose to join the sex industry as a willing participant. But to be forced into it was something else altogether. We had to help Irina and try to put a stop to these men using her and others like her.

“We have to stop them!” I said.

“Raini, this is not our fight. You think she’s the only one? We were only supposed to be finding out if the Ukrainians were involved in Melody’s murder. They weren’t. So now we leave them alone and you keep looking elsewhere.”

“What? Are you crazy?” I yelled, “There’s a young girl in your apartment being exploited for sex and turned into a junkie and you don’t even care? What kind of person are you?”

“The kind of person who wants to stay alive,” Jasmine said, leaving the kitchen and taking a hot cup of coffee to Irina.

I was so angry I thought I might explode. I didn’t understand how Jasmine could be so nonchalant about this.

“You’re not actually still considering going through with taking Irina to Gabe, are you?” I asked.

“Like I said. I have no choice.”
“You monster!” I screamed, advancing on her.

“Ladies,” Maurice said, stepping between us, “This isn’t helping. Look at the poor kid. She’s terrified.”

I glanced down at Irina who had retreated to the corner, her knees drawn up to her chin protectively. The thought of what this poor girl had already suffered was enough to calm me down. I didn’t want to scare her any more than what she’d already been.

“Now let’s talk about this rationally. There must be some way we can help Irina without getting Jasmine into any more trouble with the Ukrainians,” Maurice said calmly.

I sat down on the couch and tried to think. I could feel my heart beating in my ears. Melody had wanted to help the girls. She’d want me to at least try. I didn’t believe that the Ukrainians weren’t involved in her murder. They had no reason to tell Jasmine the truth. And anyway, who would really admit to murdering someone? I might not be able to prove that the Ukrainians killed my sister but I was sure as hell going to make sure they went down for what they were doing to the girls.

“Okay,” I said, “We already have the Ukrainians on tape. Now we have to get Gabe too. He’s in on it. That makes him just as bad. If we only give the police evidence on the Ukrainians they won’t get Gabe. I don’t think they’re gonna talk. And Gabe will just keep getting illegal girls from somewhere else.”

“So what do you propose we do?” Maurice asked thoughtfully.

“The same thing we just did here tonight. We have to break into Fantasia and set up the same recording equipment to catch Gabe out.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” Jasmine cried, “When are you going to realise that this is bigger than you? That what you’re doing is dangerous to all of us?”

“I know it’s dangerous!” I snapped, “But that’s why we have to try and put a stop to all this. Don’t you see? If we don’t help Irina and other girls like her, then who will? Melody tried. She wanted to save them.”

“Yeah, and look where that got her,” Jasmine said bitterly.

I blinked back tears and fought the urge to slap Jasmine across the face, “We have to set Gabe up too. We have to get him on tape.”

“What, and you think he’s just going to start talking? That it’s going to be that easy?” Jasmine snorted derisively.

“No. I don’t know how you’re going to get him to talk, I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” I replied.
“Wait, how I’m going to get him to talk? What do you mean, how I’m going to get him to talk?” Jasmine asked.

“I have a suggestion,” Maurice interrupted, “But I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“Well at this point we don’t have a lot of options. What is it?” I asked.

“We need to use Irina as bait.”

“No. Absolutely not,” I said.

“It’s the only way,” Maurice implored, “Think about it – all Jasmine has to do is take Irina to Gabe and get him on tape admitting to what he’s about to do. By the time he gets around to trying to do it, the police will already be there. We’ll make sure of it.”

I mulled the idea over. I knew we had no other options. I hated the thought of putting Irina in any more danger but if we were watching her, surely she’d be okay.

“Okay,” I agreed finally, “But Maurice, you’ve done enough already. I can’t ask you to keep helping me.”

Maurice started to protest but I put a hand up to silence him.

“Please. Go home. I don’t want the police to think you were involved. Especially if I end up getting into trouble for breaking into Fantasia. I don’t care if I get myself into trouble but I do care about you.”

Maurice, who could obviously see that he’d be wasting his breath trying to change my mind, just shook his head in acquiescence.

“Okay, but I’ll be waiting for you to call me when you’re done,” he said solemnly.

“Jasmine, how long do we have until you’re supposed to meet Gabe?” I asked.

“He said to bring Irina to Fantasia at midnight. Usually Jonathan answers the door and hands me the money and then I leave. How am I supposed to get Gabe talking when I don’t even see him? Like I told you before, Gabe only deals directly with Jonathan.”

So Jonathan was in on it too. I knew I didn’t like him for a reason.

“You’re going to have to lie. Shouldn’t be too much of a stretch for you,” I said icily.

Jasmine rolled her eyes at me, “You’re so perfect, aren’t you?” she said sarcastically, “You think the world is perfect too? Wake up, Sweetheart. This is the real world and guess what? Perfect people don’t survive.”
“Ladies, please!” Maurice said, “If you don’t stop this fighting, you’re not going to be able to pull this off. You have to work together and trust each other if you want do this. Otherwise, forget it.”

Maurice was right. I nodded sheepishly.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“So what do you want me to do?” Jasmine asked.

“When Jonathan answers the door, tell him you have a message from Dimitri that only you can relay to Gabe – no one else. Tell him that Dimitri said no one else is to hear the message.”

“And then what?”

“And then you get Gabe into the room where the camera is set up and talk to him about Irina. Tell him that she’s just O.D’d and needs special care and that you need to stay with her. That way she doesn’t have to be alone and you can make sure she stays safe and no one touches her. Ask him what he’s going to do, what the movie is about – anything.”

“That’s your master plan?”

“Have you got a better one?” I asked.

She shook her head, no.

“Maurice, I’ll need to borrow the van to monitor what’s going on inside. I’ll drop you off on the way home.”

Maurice nodded. I could tell he wasn’t happy about having to leave us but I think self preservation won out in the end.

“So are we all agreed?” I asked, looking from Jasmine to Maurice and back to Jasmine again.

“I’ll try my best,” Jasmine promised.

“And don’t worry, as soon as we get him on tape saying incriminating stuff, I’ll call the police and they’ll be on their way.”

“I don’t like this,” Maurice muttered.

“You don’t have to,” I replied.
The ride to Fantasia seemed to take forever. It had taken Maurice less than an hour to show me how to install the recording equipment. All we had to do was break into Fantasia, hook it up and press ‘record’ before Gabe got there. If things went well, we’d have enough evidence to lock everyone away for life. If things went bad, I’d call the cops and we’d still have the evidence from Jasmine as well as whatever went down at Fantasia. Either way, they were going down big time. I had a nagging thought at the back of my mind telling me that this was possibly the stupidest idea I had ever had and we should go to the police but I pushed it away before I had a chance to chicken out. It was a quarter to eleven when we pulled into Sutherland Street. I parked at the end of the street and grabbed my back pack full of equipment before we doubled back on foot. It was dead quiet as we tried to creep inconspicuously up to the house. An upstairs light was on. I couldn’t see anyone else on the street. Was someone upstairs or had they just left a light on?

“Do you think someone’s there?” I whispered to Jasmine.

“I doubt it. Usually everyone’s gone by six. They hate to pay overtime.”

There was an upstairs balcony with two sliding doors that appeared to be the source of the light. The vertical blinds moved. I held my breath.

“Did you see that?” I nudged Jasmine.

“Yeah but I can’t see anyone. It must’ve been a breeze.”

“If we can climb up onto the balcony we should be able to see in,” I said.
We hid behind a tree and checked to see that we were still alone. A trellis covered in jasmine rested against the front of the house next to the entrance.

“See that trellis,” I said.

Jasmine nodded.

“If it’s sturdy enough to climb, we should be able to hoist ourselves up onto the balcony from the roof.”

No problem, right?

“You’re crazy. That thing’s not gonna hold us.”

“Only one way to find out.”

We sprinted across the front lawn and tested the strength of the trellis.

“It seems okay,” I said, “I’m going up.”

I stepped up and began ascending it like a ladder until I reached the guttering. I grabbed the edge just before a heard a crack. Shit! I swung a leg up and, using the strength in my arms, managed to pull myself up on to the roof. I breathed a sigh of relief and silently thanked Dallas for teaching me her pole tricks. I’d never have made it otherwise. The effort was enough to make me break out in a sweat. Or perhaps it was the adrenaline. I looked down and got a bit of vertigo. Cripes! I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm my nerves before crawling over to the balcony. Up and over the railing and ‘ta da’ – cat burglars eat your heart out. I felt safer now. Enough to take another look down. I checked the street to see if anyone might be witnessing me about to break and enter but it was still dead quiet.

I tip toed to the sliding doors and tried to peer through cracks in the vertical blinds. I couldn’t see any movement so I tried to open the door but it was locked. I moved further down to a window. The blinds were up and the window was cracked open a couple of centimetres. A movie played on a large plasma TV screen. It must have been an editing room of some sort because I could see switchboards and other equipment. But whoever was doing the editing was nowhere to be seen.

“Psst,” I called down to Jasmine.

I looked down. She was biting her nails and shuffling nervously from foot to foot.

“Come up,” I called.

My attention was drawn back to the window and to the movie that was playing. A woman wearing only a leather mask, bound at the feet and wrists, hung from the roof. What the hell? Oh man, this must be one of those B & D movies I’d seen in the porn
shop. I watched as a man moved towards the woman. He held something in his hand. Was that a hacksaw? Holy fuck! This was no ordinary bondage movie. I stood frozen to the spot as the man inched closer. I couldn’t see his face but he wore black leather pants and matching wristbands. The camera zoomed in on the woman. Dark red ribbons of what looked like dried blood clung to the woman’s face, neck and chest making her look grotesque. I felt sick. I didn’t know who she was but I noticed a tattoo on her right thigh. I’d seen it somewhere before. It took a minute to hit me but when it did I had to stop myself from puking on the spot. The woman was Jamie.

I turned back to the spot where Jasmine was waiting, or should I say supposed to be waiting. Where the hell was she? I turned back to the window and watched in horror as the saw bit into Jamie’s flesh and a familiar, musky scent wafted through the window and into my nostrils. I knew that scent. I’d know it anywhere. Trish was here. And then everything went black.
I came to with a throbbing head and attempted to open my eyes. Something was over my face and I couldn’t see. I tried to move but couldn’t. Realising I was bound and blindfolded, I began to panic. It felt like I was tied to a pole or a support beam of some kind with my hands tied above my head. The last thing I remembered was watching that awful film and the overpowering scent of perfume. Trish’s perfume! She was here somewhere.

“H-h-hello?” I called.

I heard movement.

“I-is s-somebody th-there?” I stammered, unable to stop the shivering that had set in.

I heard footsteps in the distance and a door opened and closed. The smell of perfume was making me sick. Trish had entered the room.

“Wh-what’s happening? Where am I?” I cried, my voice rising an octave or three. Tears pricked my eyes.

“Shut up!” a voice ordered.

It was Trish.

“P-please,” I begged.

“Too nosy for your own good,” the voice sneered, “Should’ve stayed away, minded your own business.”

“Trish, what’s going on? Please…”
“Well I suppose it doesn’t matter if you know now. Jonathan. Get the camera ready. We’ll start filming shortly.”

My head spun and I felt sick again.

“Trish, please! Why am I tied up? Let me go.”

“ Took me a while to figure out what you were up to but once I realised who you were the rest was easy.”

“You…you killed my sister!” I yelled, struggling against the binding, my fear replaced with pure, hot rage.

How could I have been so wrong? The Ukrainians had nothing to do with this at all. Whatever they had going on with the trafficking of underage girls had nothing to do with Melody. There was no Gabe. He was a front for Trish. Jasmine. I’d forgotten about her. Where was she?

“Yes. It was me. That bitch found out about the snuff films I’ve been making and was gonna go to the police.”

Snuff films? What the hell?

“Well I couldn’t have that now, could I? I have a nice little operation going. Girls come to work at Hollywood Girls and it’s easy to find out which ones have no family or friends who will miss them. Unfortunately though, there’s never enough of them. That’s why I started looking at other options. Foreign girls are so much easier to work with and easier to get. Then Abraham organizes everything at Fantasia with Jonathan. All my girls die stars,” I could ‘hear’ Trish smiling.

“You bitch. I’ll kill you!” I snarled, struggling harder.

Trish laughed, “Such a shame I had to lose Melody. She was a money-maker all right. But she was too smart for her own good. Somehow she managed to put everything together. I couldn’t have her expose me so I put a hit out on her.”

“Don’t you dare speak her name, you low life!” I screamed.

Trish ignored my insult and continued on as if she were telling me a bed-time story.

“It’s not like I set out to do this on purpose. The first one was an accident, you know,” her heels clip clopped across the floor to my right as she continued, “A bondage scene went wrong. Poor old Honey. She choked to death. Well when I realised how much money a real snuff film was worth, you can imagine my surprise. It’s a sick world we live in.”

“You’re the sick one you fucking psycho!” I spat, anger burning my throat.
“Hey. Can it. It’s not my fault there’s a market for this shit.”

I ground my teeth and struggled harder. The tape that bound my feet suddenly felt a little looser, perhaps from the film of sweat that seemed to cover my entire body.

“Jonathan, go see if Abraham’s ready.”

A door opened as he left the room.

“Jonathan? Jonathan you sneaky rat! You won’t get away with this. Wait, Abraham? What are you doing?”

“Abraham’s going to be the co-star in your little film debut. Pity it’ll be your last.”

“What? What do you mean debut?” I cried.

“Well I can’t let you live now, can I? You’ve brought all of this on yourself.”

I felt something tugging on my top and realised Trish was cutting my tee-shirt off with a pair of scissors.

“I tried to warn you, you know,” Trish’s voice was right next to my ear, “I had Abraham ransack Dallas’ place to try and scare you off. But noooo – you had to play amateur fucking detective, didn’t you? Well guess what? It’s all over for you!”

“Get away from me!”

I tried unsuccessfully to loosen a leg to kick her with. Every part of me screamed with rage. I wanted to kill her. I was scared of what I’d do if I managed to break free. My feet and hands worked overtime to loosen the tape some more.

“He’s ready,” I heard Jonathan announce.

“Good. Start filming. Have fun,” she trilled.

“Fuck you!” I shouted at her as she exited the room.

A hand touched me.

“Get your filthy hands off me,” I shrieked.

My sweaty feet were making the adhesive on the tape around my ankles slimy and I began twisting each foot around to try and loosen the tape as much as I could. I felt someone breathing on me and something cold and hard traced my collar bone, trailing towards my cleavage. My bra suddenly loosened, exposing my breasts to the cool air. I felt him behind me now, his hands reaching around to unbutton my jeans. My skin crawled with his touch and my stomach lurched. I was sweating and fighting back nausea, every molecule in my body screaming with frustration. If I could just get my legs free, I might be able to do a pole trick that I’d once seen Dallas do and use my body weight to loosen the tape that bound my wrists.
I kept working, my feet twisting and turning while my ankles burned in protest. The tape loosened just enough for me to maneuver one foot out and then the other. My legs now free, I lifted them off the ground and kicked out into some mid air splits. My weight was too much for the tape and suddenly, I triumphantly broke free. I aimed a sharp elbow directly behind me and heard a grunt. I’d taken him by surprise. I ripped the tape from my eyes, pulling half my eyebrows off with it but I didn’t care. I had bigger problems. Abraham had a knife. What happened next took place in no more than a few seconds but it felt like slow motion. Abraham advanced. I grabbed his wrist and head butted him in the face, sending myself flying backwards, my head throbbing like I’d been smacked in the face with a steel baseball bat. I heard a crunch as his nose broke and blood started to gush like a crimson waterfall. He screamed and dropped the knife, grabbing his nose. Then he lunged towards me as I tried to get my bearings.

“Police!”

The door crashed open and police swarmed into the little studio, guns pointed. Abraham backed up with his hands in the air.

“Raini?” a familiar voice called.

Reyes stumbled into the room, holstering his gun as he saw me and ran to my aid.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded my head, yes, sobbing with relief. Someone tossed him a blanket and he wrapped it around me as I watched a cop give Abraham a swift knee to the groin before handcuffing him.

“Don’t worry. You’re okay, you’re okay,” he said, rubbing my back.

Now that the tears were here, they wouldn’t stop. I cried with relief that the terror of the last few hours was over. I cried for the girls who had been killed because of Trish’s greed. But most of all I cried for my sister. The sister I’d loved and still loved. The sister I’d lost and would never see again.

Reyes walked me outside where a crowd had gathered to watch Trish, Abraham and Jonathan being loaded into divvy vans and driven away.

“Raini!” my parents called, pushing their way onto the front.

“I hope you don’t mind but I had someone contact your parents,” Reyes whispered in my ear.

Mum and Dad folded me onto a hug. They were crying.

“Raini?” a voice called.
“Jasmine?”
She ran towards me. I hugged her.
“Where were you?”
“I’m so sorry. I chickened out and hid behind that tree at the end of the driveway,” she pointed, “Then I saw someone grab you from behind.”
“You the one who made the call?” Reyes interrupted.
“Yeah. It was me,” Jasmine said.
“I’ll be talking to you about this later,” he warned.
“You called the police?”
Jasmine nodded sheepishly.
“It’s a long story,” she said to Reyes.
“Lucky for you I’ve got plenty of time to hear it,” Reyes said, leading her away.
“We’ll talk soon,” I called after her, “And thanks. I owe you one.”
Jasmine waved back at me. I looked at Mum and Dad.
“What was all that about?” Mum asked.
“Don’t worry. I’m gonna tell you guys everything…”
The dinner party was in full swing at Dallas’s place two weeks later. The insurance hadn’t come through yet, but Dallas and I had been shopping for some new furniture to replace the stuff that had been damaged during the break in and she’d decided to throw a party to celebrate. Not that Dallas needed an excuse to party, mind you. I looked at everyone having a good time and knew that things were going to be okay. Somehow the good guys had won this fight, though lord only knew how considering how many times I’d nearly gotten myself killed. The topic of conversation had revolved around my adventures all night.

“She did what?” Reyes laughed as Dallas told the story about my ‘date’ with Marcello.

“Yep. Whole place just about went up in flames. It was the most hilarious thing I’ve ever seen.”

The table erupted with laughter. I sipped my chardonnay completely embarrassed.

“Er, change of subject if you don’t mind please,” I said.

Paul winked at me from across the table.

“Hey,” Dad asked, “Whatever happened to that Jasmine girl, the one who called you guys,” he said, nodding in Reyes’ direction.

“She’s gonna do some time. She helped keep the girls prisoner and in doing that became an accessory to the crimes. She cut a deal with the Prosecution. She’ll give evidence against the Ukrainians in exchange for a lighter sentence,” Reyes explained.
“Thank God she called you that night,” Mum said, her hand fluttering to her chest.
“Ditto,” Maurice said, “And hopefully you’ve learnt your lesson about amateur undercover operations.”
I stuck my tongue out at him.
“So why did she call you guys? She didn’t have to,” I said to Reyes.
“Dunno. Wanted to come clean I guess. Got sick of being blackmailed by the Ukrainians I suspect,” Reyes shrugged.
“What about Trish? What will happen to her?” Dallas asked.
“She’ll be charged with a number of offences including murder, incitement, people trafficking, kidnapping, fraud – you name it. She’ll probably spend the rest of her life locked up,” Reyes answered.
“So what exactly did she have going on then?” Dad asked.
“From what we can tell, Trish and Abraham owned Hollywood Girls and Fantasia. They registered them under the name T & A Holdings. At first, Trish’s businesses were legit. Then during the filming of one of her porn flicks, a girl was accidentally strangled to death during an asphyxiation scene.”
“Poor Honey,” Dallas said quietly, “We all just thought she’d run off. We had no idea.”
“Trish sold that film to a private collector for almost a quarter of a million,” Reyes said.
“Quarter of a million? But who actually buys this stuff? What kind of sick person actually enjoys it?” Paul asked in disgust.
“Well, we’re also looking into that,” Reyes said in his best cop voice.
“So Trish started making these snuff films or whatever you call them on a regular basis then?” Dad asked.
“Yeah pretty much. It appears that she targeted young girls with no family ties at the strip club and enticed them into the film business. Eventually they all became victims in snuff films. But finding girls who fit that specific victim profile became harder for her and after a while she began to look at other options.”
“Like buying foreign girls,” I offered.
“Yes. And that’s where the Ukrainians come into it. They’re a global operation. They run a lot of the people trafficking syndicates. Australia is just one of the many
countries that they send girls and children to. We’ve passed what we know on to ASIO in
the hope that they can use the information to make more arrests overseas.”

“I can’t believe it,” Mum said incredulously, “So Trish started buying girls from the
Ukrainians for her snuff films?”

“Yes. Unfortunately the Ukrainians aren’t exactly fussy about what happens to the
girls once they’ve been sold. As long as their customers pay the right price that’s all they
care about.”

“What will happen to Irina, the young girl we met at Jasmine’s place?” Maurice
asked.

“We contacted the embassy and they took it from there. I believe she was being
returned to her parents in Kyiv. At least she’s one girl who got a happy ending,” Reyes
said.

“I’ll drink to that,” Maurice agreed.

“I can’t believe what you’ve been through, Raini, if only we’d known,” Mum said.

“Trust me,” I said, “You have no idea how hard it was to keep all this a secret from
you guys.”

With tears in her eyes Mum reached across the table and squeezed my hand, “If I
wasn’t so relieved and so proud of you, I’d put you over my knee and smack you.”

“Sorry,” I said meekly.

And I truly was sorry for what I’d put them through. But I’d never be sorry for
what I’d done to get justice for my sister.

I raised my glass, “To Melody.”

“To Melody,” everyone repeated.

We clinked glasses and drank to my sister, who in a way, had given her life to save
the lives of countless other girls that would have fallen prey to Trish’s evil plans. We still
had a way to go to see justice properly done. Trish and Abraham’s court cases could take
up to two years, Reyes had said. But at least everything I’d been through hadn’t all been
for nothing. My sister could finally rest in peace and I could move on with my life.

Reyes and I had finally talked, once I’d gotten over myself. We’d decided to stay
friends for now. I didn’t think I was ready for a relationship. Who knew what the future
held though?

Paul and I had worked things out. All had been forgiven. I’d found out that it
wasn’t Paul who had outed me to Mum and Dad. His stupid cousin had mentioned to
Paul’s Mum the following morning that they’d seen me in a strip club in all my glory and
Paul’s Mum had of course spoken to my Mum… anyway, I was glad to have my friend back
and it looked like he was getting along pretty well with Dallas.

Maurice and I had become good friends and I knew that I could count on him to
help me out if I ever needed him again. He’d been instrumental in helping bring down
Trish, Abraham and the Ukrainians and was damned pleased with himself. He was even
talking about coming out of retirement.

Things were better with Mum and Dad. They’d asked me to move home but I’d
decided to stay permanently with Dallas. I’d grown up a lot and somehow amongst all the
chaos I’d managed to find myself. Despite everything, I liked stripping, my new found
confidence and the friends I’d made. I didn’t want to give it all up. I had a new job at a
strip club just down the road from Hollywood Girls which had closed down. I had to
break it gently to my parents. I hoped they’d take it okay.

“Mum, Dad, since we’re being honest and everything, there’s something you guys
should know…”

THE END
Writing Snuff: An Exegesis on the Creation of a Crime Novel
Introduction

Writing the artefact, *Snuff*, was a personal journey that offered me a way of reflecting upon and analyzing many aspects of my former life. The exegesis, *Making Snuff: The Creation of a Crime Novel* is both a personal journey in itself and a reflection upon this broader journey. The exegesis documents the evolution of self, both personally and academically, and demonstrates that the creative act is not a process that occurs without challenges, enlightening moments and sometimes even dilemmas. I cannot imagine now that one can exist without the other. This process has transformed my life and the way I write. It has challenged everything I thought I knew about the sex industry. The artefact and exegesis invites all who read them to discover their own individual insights and to perhaps challenge their own perceptions about the sex industry and the women who participate in it.

Using practice-led research as the methodological framework for my exegesis, I reflect upon the creative process and enter into and extend the scholarly conversations that are relevant to my writing of *Snuff*. Regarded as a qualitative research methodology, practice-led research has only relatively recently been accepted as contributing to knowledge within the academy. Much has been written about practice-led research in the 21st century (Arnold 2007; Candy 2006; Smith & Dean 2009; Haseman & Mafe 2009, et al.) and its validity has been questioned and debated by those who challenge the ability of practice-led research to stand as real research (Arnold 2007; Haseman & Mafe 2009). However, practice-led research has a clearly articulated set of goals and:

> is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice...The primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice as an integral part of its method and often falls within the general area of action research (Candy 2006).
This debate about practice-led research and whether or not it is a valid research method arises due to the perception that it does not evolve from an identified research question and it does not attempt to use traditional academic research models as its basis. Rather, the practice leads to the research. Creative practitioners place practice “at the heart of the research process, and in ways which go beyond the conventional research strategies favoured by traditional quantitative and qualitative research” (Haseman & Mafe 2009, p.212). To me, the process is circular, for in my experience the practice of writing leads to the research of theory, which helps us to interpret it through an academic prism, and in turn flows back into the practice. From this we gain insights into our own work, and the work of others and their insights. The exegesis encourages the writer “to look even further than the initial creative act” (Arnold 2007, p.57). It draws together the practice and the research and “aims, through creativity and practice, to illuminate or bring about new knowledge and understanding” (UK Arts & Humanities Research Board 2003 cited in Sullivan 2009) about the journey of the writer.

As I indicate throughout, for me, some of the questions surrounding the validity of practice-led research were pertinent and I found that the drawing together of the practice and theory was not always easy. According to Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (2009), it is not unusual for creative practitioners to argue “that theorisation or documentation of the creative process risks subduing the creative fire” (Smith & Dean 2009, p.25) and I admit that initially, I was very resistant to the idea as I felt that analyzing and incorporating theory into my creative process would hinder my creativity. Indeed I believed that “analysis leads to paralysis” (Livingston 1989 cited in Mottram 2009, p.230). But what I eventually found was that the opposite of this happened and “a kind of knowledge-based dreaming” (Goodall 2009, p.204) enveloped me. I began to grow as a writer and developed a deeper understanding of my own work and my life.

In section one of the exegesis, *Why a Crime Novel in the Sex Industry?*, I look at the reasons why I chose to write a crime novel and why I situated the novel in the sex industry. I also discuss the inspiration behind the artefact and explore an ethical and moral dilemma that I experienced as a woman who has
committed a crime. I examine here how I worked through this dilemma and consider the moral responsibility of writing a crime novel from a victim of crime’s perspective. Calling upon the work of Brown (2003), Gregoriou (2007), James (2009) and others, I delve into the mysteries of why people enjoy reading crime fiction and discuss the cathartic benefits of writing and how I was challenged by it.

In section two, the *Scattered Pictures* section, I look at the creative and personal issues I faced as an incarcerated student. Here, I make reference to the observations of Eleanor Novek and Rebecca Sanford (2004) to discuss the concept of ‘keeping your head inside the walls’, and relate how I conducted research from a physically limited space and how I navigated the delimitation of incarceration. I go on to look at how being in prison influenced and affected my writing and draw on Ioan Davies’s (1990) “philosophy of incarceration” (p.21). I also investigate other writers’ methodologies and discuss autoethnographic research and the self as data. I discuss the issues of writing from memory and how “memory selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past” (Chang 2008, p.72) and how this was particularly pertinent to me as a prisoner. I also look here at voice. Calling upon the definitions of voice from Manfred Jahn (2005) and Laurie Henry (1995) as a starting point, I discuss the voice in the novel, the voice of self, and how the journey of the writer and the evolution of self affected the voice of the narrator.

In section three, the literature review section I investigate the hegemonic and counter hegemonic feminist perspectives on the sex industry and attempt to define my own experiences within it. Calling upon the arguments of Levy (2005), Walter (2010) and Kessler (2002), I further discuss raunch culture and the stigma associated with sex work. I ask how society has come to accept raunch culture and even a political party called the Australian Sex Party (Australian Sex Party Website 2010) at the 2010 Federal Elections but not sex work or sex workers. I also discuss Weitzer’s (2010) and Barton’s (2006) proposition of a third ‘polymorphous’ perspective on the sex industry situated between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic views. Finally, I situate my artefact within this third paradigm and explain how the artefact acted as a polymorphous vehicle of exploration.
In section four, *Making Snuff*, I examine the creative process involved in plot devices, dialogue and characterization. I also investigate how my scholarly research influenced my creative writing of the artefact. I go on to make connections between writing the novel and developing the academic debate in the exegesis. What I initially thought would be the simple process of writing a crime novel soon turned into a very personal and transformative experience that changed my life and the way I write. For example, I began this PhD with the certainty that I was not a feminist. Kari Kessler (2002) argues, that “many prostitutes do not identify with the feminist movement because they feel feminism is antagonistic towards their way of life” (Kessler 2002, p.219) and this was something I had certainly found to be true in my experiences as a sex worker. Needless to say, I did not identify with this feminist perspective and I did not realise that there were alternative feminist positions such as those held by Wendy Chapkis (1997), Jill Nagle (1997), R. Danielle Egan, Katherine Frank & Merri Lisa Johnson (2006) on this issue to explore. So I began this journey with some resistance and preconceived notions about feminism. What I soon discovered, however, was that I was able to use the novel to explore these issues and each of my female characters was influenced by my research. Through practice-led research I discovered that indeed I am a feminist and this simple, enlightening realisation changed the way I saw myself, my writing and my former life.
Why a Crime Novel in the Sex Industry?

In this section I examine the reasons why I chose to write a crime novel and why I situated the novel in the sex industry. Here I also discuss the inspiration behind the artefact and ask the question: why is crime fiction popular? I also discuss a unique ethical and moral dilemma that I experienced as an incarcerated PhD student and how I resolved this.

Turning Fact into Fiction

Inspiration for fiction can arise from just about anything. From the mundane, to the exciting or just plain weird, we, as writers, are inspired everyday by life and by people. Or, as author Kerry Greenwood describes us:

*Writers are vultures, eavesdroppers, exploiters of other people’s pains and pleasures. We steal our characters and situations from life as brazenly and automatically as a crow picks out a lamb’s eyes. And we use ourselves just as shamelessly* (Greenwood 1996, p.32).

Certainly for me, taking inspiration from my life and the lives of those around me led to the creation of a crime novel.

I was inspired to write *Snuff* by the murder of a friend’s brother, Shane Chartres-Abbot, in 2003 whilst I was in prison. Dubbed ‘The Vampire Slaying’ (Silvester 2006) the murder was committed outside the victim’s family home just moments before he was due to face court over an alleged rape. Newspapers linked Chartres-Abbot’s murder to vampirism, snuff films, police corruption and male prostitution (AAP 2003). The details of this case were fascinating and I had a unique interest because the victim’s sister was a friend. In the telephone conversations with my friend that ensued, we became obsessed, and as a way of dealing with her grief, my friend expressed constantly that she wished she had a way of finding out what had really happened to her brother and bringing the killers to justice. It was those conversations and our subsequent
speculation about the sinister elements surrounding the murder that inspired a fictional account of the story from a sibling’s perspective. This became my novel *Snuff*.

Using real-life crimes as the basis for crime fiction is not unusual. Author Sandra Harvey discusses newspapers as being one of the richest sources of ideas and information available to writers (Harvey 1996, pp.18-19) and other writers also report being “stimulated by a newspaper article that reports something unusual or intriguing” (Wallace in Grafton 1992, p.17). Bestselling author Tom Clancy gives credit to a newspaper article as being the inspiration behind *The Hunt for Red October*:

*He had read a most unusual news item. Members of the crew of the Soviet frigate Storozhevoy had decided to defect to Sweden, though most of them were killed in the mutiny. Because the story was so out of the ordinary it stuck in Tom’s memory. In time, his imagination converted the frigate in a submarine and the plot for The Hunt for Red October began to take shape* (Joseph 1997, p.184).

I attempted the same technique with *Snuff*. Such an unusual story presented me with endless possibilities for plots. Having by now learnt most of the facts surrounding the Chartres-Abbot case, I decided to change certain details so that it would become ‘my’ story and also so that my audience could relate more easily to my characters.

I changed the male victim (Chartres-Abbot) to a female (Melody Mitchell). There were a number of reasons why I did this. Firstly, I think that females seem to get more sympathy and acknowledgement from readers than males, particularly when it comes to the sex trade (Dennis 2008). While I realise that scholarly discussions about men and boys within the sex trade is important, it is not within the scope of this exegesis. Secondly, I had already decided that the siblings would share a relationship that closely resembles the relationship I have with my own sister. I felt that I would be able to slip more easily into my character’s role if I wrote about my own, real life sister and how I would feel if I was experiencing what my character was subjected to. In order to achieve this,
the victim had to become a woman. Thirdly, as a woman, the experiences of dancers who were female more closely resembled my own and I was therefore able to use this to my advantage. This demonstrates how we, as writers, are able to ‘brazenly steal’ from our own lives.

The next decision I made was to change the victim’s occupation from a prostitute to a stripper. I did this because I was very aware that the topic of prostitution is a controversial one. I still wanted to situate the novel in the sex industry but I chose stripping as a ‘softer’ alternative. I go on to show that opinions range from prostitution being exploitative, oppressive and demeaning to all women (Itzin 1992) to the belief that it is an empowering, mutually beneficial economic exchange (Frank 2006). Carol Pateman, for example, believes that “men gain public acknowledgement as women’s sexual masters” from prostitution which reinforces the idea of male supremacy (Pateman cited in Kessler 2002, p.228). Even some former prostitutes believe that prostitution is nothing more than “sexual slavery” (Summer cited in Overall 1992, p.711). On the other hand, there are those who argue that sex work is not so different from marriage which in itself is “a form of prostitution in which women received poor recompense for their work, were more vulnerable to violence (from their husbands), and had less control over their daily lives than sex workers” (Scutt in Caine & Pringle 1995, p.185). Some sex workers who claim that they feel empowered believe that “sex work is the vehicle through which we can gain power and control through an increased sense of connection with our bodies” (Dudash in Nagle 1997, pp.106-7). In my experience, there is a fine line between prostitution and stripping. However, I have found that people seem to be more accepting of a stripper’s past than a prostitute’s one.

As a former sex worker, it is difficult for me to agree or disagree completely with one side of the argument or the other. My experiences in the industry were a little of both and sat somewhere in the middle. I don’t view my past as something to be ashamed of and, despite the fact that some believe that the sex industry is becoming more acceptable to today’s consumer (Walter 2010, pp.3-4), I remain skeptical because of the stigma attached to having been a sex worker.
Even today when I speak about my past I am still met with reactions ranging from mild distaste to complete hostility. Kari Kessler, an academic and former prostitute, believes that the problem of prostitution is not the work itself, but the stigma attached to prostitution (Kessler 2002) and I couldn’t agree more. In my experience, women who admit to being sex workers are often treated with disdain, or worse, subjected to violence because the perpetrator of the violence believes that the sex worker deserves it due to the nature of her work. R. Danielle Egan, a former exotic dancer and assistant professor of sociology at St. Lawrence University in the United States, believes that those who view sex workers as subhuman treat them as such because “women who fall outside of prescribed sexual norms are given little cultural protection and support (and are) perceived as cold and calculating”. She goes on to claim that “sex workers are seen as duplicitous, abhorrent, and deviant” (Egan in Egan, Frank & Johnson 2006, p.26).

I believe that if this stigma was removed, then sex workers themselves would be treated differently and with more respect, and their work would be more culturally valued. However, despite my own beliefs, I needed to make the story, and the victim, more palatable to my readers who do not necessarily share my beliefs. If my audience couldn’t identify with my protagonist, chances were they might not like or even finish the novel.

This led me to consider who my ideal reader might be. Milan Kundera (1988) says that “the reader’s imagination automatically completes the writer’s” (p.34). With this in mind, the ideal reader of Snuff is someone who can complete my imagination by immersing herself in the narrative, opening her mind and enjoying a metaphorical walk in Raini Mitchell’s stilettos. I say this with the knowledge that every reader reads differently because they “bring their individual life experiences into their readings of a given book” (Zangen 2003, p.288), which is why my ideal reader does not necessarily have to share my personal beliefs about the sex industry. But as Eco (2006) reminds us, “Not even the most naïve of readers can pass through the meshes of the text without entertaining the suspicion that sometimes (or often) it refers to something beyond itself” (Eco 2006, p.234). For me this means that if the reader can scratch beneath the surface of Snuff, then they may open their minds to the
possibility that the sex industry and the women who participate in it are not inherently 'bad' and perhaps develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a sex worker and why we do it. In this way, the reader will see that Snuff is referring to something beyond itself.

With this in mind, I also chose to omit two major details concerned with the real-life case of Chartres-Abbot's murder. These were the rape allegation and the claims of vampirism. I wanted my audience to sympathize with my characters, and, knowing that an accused rapist would not elicit empathy or sympathy, I chose not to use it. I also wanted my story to seem as 'real' as possible and I knew that by including the vampire element I was in danger of crossing over from crime fiction into the fantasy genre. There are authors who have had success with this type of crime fiction. For example, Laurell. K. Hamilton, the bestselling author of the Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter novels and Tanya Huff with the Blood Ties series. However, I knew that it would be difficult for me to sustain a fantasy storyline because it is not a genre I am familiar with as a writer, so I decided to stay firmly within the realms of crime fiction.

**Art Imitates Life**

I chose to situate my novel within the sex industry for two reasons. Firstly, I have unique insight into the industry because I spent a number of years in my late teens and early twenties as a sex worker. Secondly, the sex industry provided an interesting backdrop for a crime novel and its controversial nature provides instant narrative tension for the story.

Being a willing participant in the sex industry for a number of years and now writing about it also became a way for me to re-evaluate and make sense of my experiences and analyse why I was attracted to them. I gained confidence in the idea of writing about the world that I have lived in when I read Roland Barthes Writing Zero Degree. Writing, he argues, “arises from a confrontation of the writer with the society of his time” (Barthes 1953/1978, p.16). While I did not find sex work confrontational, many others did. I was occupying a space that society vilified and still does. I’d been fascinated by how the exotic dance industry had been fetishized by the emergence of pole
dancing classes (O'Brien 2010, p.15) and made reputable by the current
popularization of burlesque performers such as The Suicide Girls and Dita Von
Teese. To me, this highlighted the confrontation Barthes was talking about. On
one hand, the public saw sexualized dance as immoral, and on the other, it had
been elevated to the status of art and theatre when it was relabeled ‘burlesque’.
I began to question this contradiction and it seemed to me that perhaps it was
time for society to renegotiate the terms of its objection to exotic dance. By
writing about the sex industry, I was able to confront people’s misperceptions
about it. Writer P. D James has said that often, crime fiction “gives us access to
a secret esoteric and cloistered world, making us privileged participants in its
mysteries” (James 2009, p.13). By writing about my former world, I was
allowing readers an ‘inside look’ at this “secret esoteric and cloistered” industry
through the eyes of my characters in Snuff.

I was further encouraged when reading ‘Killing Women’ by Delys Bird. It
states that:

*The facts you put into a fiction reflect your opinion. Especially in a genre
where the moral of the tale supports both writer’s and reader’s sense of
self virtue. One must be aware of what philosophy of life one is

I was inspired by this assertion because there is a general perception that most
sex workers are drug addicts or sex abuse victims. Some researchers, such as
Nova Sweet and Richard Tewksbury have conducted interviews with exotic
dancers and then portray the dancer as a victim, saying that there are “specific
characteristics associated with women who pursue stripping as an occupation”
(Sweet & Tewksbury 2000, p.341). According to Sweet and Tewksbury, these
characteristics “that influence and facilitate a woman’s decision to become a
stripper” include: an early entry into puberty and early sexual experiences,
breadiness of the father, early independence from or in the home, an average
level of education, previous behaviour that indicated a penchant for
exhibitionism, an athletic or entertainment background, childhood abuse, and
finally, ‘the ugly duckling syndrome’ (Sweet & Tewksbury 2000, p.341).
For me, this was a stereotypical representation of an exotic dancer/sex worker and I felt angered by it. I felt that these same characteristics could just as easily be applied to women in prison, women in the entertainment industry and in fact, women in general. To say that these characteristics ultimately lead a woman to the stage is inaccurate and I can say with absolute certainty that my decision to enter the sex industry was not due to an absent father or a penchant for exhibitionism and everything to do with wanting a fun and interesting way to make quick money. Understanding that “the facts you put into a fiction reflect your opinion” (Moorhead in Bird, p.106) resonated with me because I wanted to challenge Sweet & Tewksbury’s belief about sex workers and I realised that in writing Snuff I could achieve this by showing the human side of the dancers from my personal experience and perspective, thus enabling readers to rethink everything they thought they knew about strippers and why they enter the sex industry.

This approach of writing and exploring the disconnection between life and the morals of society has worked well for Melbourne crime novelist, Leigh Redhead. Redhead is a former exotic dancer who has used her own experiences in the adult entertainment industry as the backdrop for three crime novels, Peepshow, Rubdown and Cherry Pie. In a candid interview posted on the Allen & Unwin website Redhead says:

I’d been working as a stripper and I really wanted to write about that world because it was so often misrepresented in books, movies and on TV. It seemed that strippers were always being portrayed as victims and bimbos, and that wasn’t my experience at all (Allen & Unwin Website 2008, p.426).

In these novels, the Simone Kirsch series, her protagonist is a stripper/private detective who moves through and participates in the strip club world while solving crimes. Although initially disappointed that Redhead’s work was so similar to mine, I was also encouraged in my own writing of Snuff because I realised that, like Redhead, I too could challenge the same misrepresentation and misperceptions as she did. R. Danielle Egan, Katherine Frank & Merri Lisa
Johnson (2006) ask “how feminist theories of power, sexuality, and the body might change if they were more substantially informed by the embodied knowledge of sex workers and patrons of the sex industry” (p.xiii). With this in mind, I hoped that my fictionalized account of some of my experiences would contribute not only to feminism but also to a greater understanding by society in general.

Secondly, the sex industry provided an interesting backdrop for a crime novel. The rise of ‘raunch culture’ (Levy 2005) and burlesque in popular culture has seen performers such as Dita von Teese and Suicide Girls becoming household names. Pole dancing has been featured on reality TV series So You Think You Can Dance (Freeman-Greene 2008), classes are held at community centres and stripping is the ‘new black’. In 2008 The Age, a Melbourne newspaper, reported a 469% increase in requests for pole and lap dancing outlets in the UK (Topping 2008). Stripping has become more acceptable to today’s consumer and everyone wants to know what goes on behind the scenes. In the recent past, the sex industry hid this.

Like many other industries, there is a seedy side to stripping which it is easy to get caught up in if dancers aren’t careful. Murphy (2003) refers to a type of exotic dancer that she calls the ‘party dancer’ who “uses the club as an outlet to enact a lifestyle of alcohol and drug consumption” (p.322). During my time as a dancer I encountered a number of ‘party dancers’, some of whom did get caught up in this lifestyle. Therefore, I also wanted to include in my artefact a minor reference to this and I have done so in Chapter 9 where Jamie and Dallas take ecstasy and introduce the protagonist to the Melbourne party scene.

Through my own experiences, I know that the sex industry also has close connections to the underworld (Jeffreys 2008, p.157), and I realised that I could use these elements to my advantage in my novel. In the television series, The Sopranos, a strip club named ‘The Bada Bing’ works as an interesting backdrop, where “red lights and silicone tits add glitz to the show” (Johnson in Egan, Frank & Johnson 2006, p.171). Having lived and worked in this world I had met and been involved with a cast of colourful characters that I could use as inspiration to create my own characters. As a former sex worker I was exposed to the criminal underworld on an almost daily basis. In my experience,
strip clubs, brothels and nightclubs are frequented by many underworld identities and as a result most sex workers get to know these people quite well and sometimes friendships develop and continue outside of work. Subsequently, I was given access to their world in which I learned a great deal about a number of criminal enterprises such as drug manufacturing and trafficking, car rebirthing and extortion.

‘True crime’ books have become very popular (Rawlings 1998) and I was able to exploit my knowledge of these criminal elements as interesting subplots that contributed to the plot as a whole. The *Underbelly* series, and other made-for-TV Australian movies written about real Australian crime, has contributed to the rise in interest in the criminal underworld (Gregg & Wilson 2010) and I knew that by adding my own unique understanding of this world I could write a novel that would be both interesting and insightful. According to Philip Rawlings (1998), “popular literature derives its popularity in no small part from its ability to engage with contemporary issues” (Rawlings 1998). Evidence of this can be seen in the huge amount of interest in the first TV *Underbelly* series that depicted the now infamous chain of revenge murders known as the 'Melbourne Gangland Wars', which indeed engaged the nation in a contemporary issue, the effects of which are still ongoing in 2010. With this much interest in crime and the criminal underworld, I simply could not resist the opportunity to include an underworld element in my artefact.

Specifically, I used my knowledge of the crime when creating my criminal characters. The underworld is represented mainly by two characters in my artefact. Marcello, the victim’s boyfriend and a suspect in Melody’s murder, is a drug dealer and small time gangster who is an amalgamation of a number of criminal identities I encountered in my life. Marat, a Ukrainian crime lord who features in a small scene in a Ukrainian restaurant, represents organised crime at a much higher level. His personality (and criminality) is also 'borrowed' from someone I once knew, demonstrating once again that “writers are vultures” (Greenwood 1996) and that “the characters in fiction come from the world around us and from within” (Burns 1992, p.54).

While the criminal element is not a main player in the overall plot of my artefact, it still serves as an interesting glimpse into ‘the other side’. Rawlings
(1998) writes that books about the underworld “tend to depict [underworld criminals] as a separate social class” (Rawlings 1998) and in a way, I believe they are. In my experience, the criminal underworld functions in a way that is completely incomprehensible to the non-criminal community. In the criminal underworld, perpetrating a crime or having a crime perpetrated against you is simply a way of life. Sometimes you are the perpetrator, sometimes the victim. It is just the way it is. A career criminal friend of mine once told me that in his world, it was ‘kill or be killed’. When he was forced to choose, he ‘chose to stay alive’. And while this type of psychology may be unfathomable to most, it does not decrease the interest that people have in reading about it (Reiner n.d; Katz 1987; Rawlings 1998; Lowry et al 2003; Seltzer 2008; Gregg & Wilson 2010). It is not within the scope of this exegesis to discuss the criminal underworld in further detail. However, it is significant because my artefact deals with crime and the criminal underworld.

**Ethical and Moral Dilemmas**

In this exegesis, one aspect of my original and significant contribution to knowledge is the following section on the ethical and moral dilemma I experienced as a convicted criminal writing crime fiction. In March of 2010 I was challenged in regards to my novel *Snuff*. My release from prison on parole for a further six years was pending and I faced some hard-hitting questions from the Adult Parole Board. One of the questions that they asked me pertained to my PhD and in particular, my novel. They wanted to know whether or not I had stopped to consider the family of the victim in my crime and how they might perceive my novel and the fact that I had written it from a victim of crime’s perspective. How, they wondered, could I possibly imagine myself in the shoes of a victim rather than a perpetrator? They also raised some concerns about how the media might portray such a novel and whether or not there would be any backlash over it if *Snuff* was indeed published. In other words, would the Parole Board or Corrections Victoria receive any negative publicity if my novel were to be published?
Admittedly, I had not considered this particular aspect at all. Certainly, I had thought about what had led me to prison. I have committed a crime. I am serving my time and trying to move on with my life. But in doing so, I had not thought about how any of this was related to my novel until now. So I asked myself, am I doing the wrong thing? Does the fact that I have committed a crime mean that I cannot write about crime? Do I have a right to write from a victim's perspective and should I be doing it? Does being a perpetrator of a crime mean that I cannot be empathetic towards a victim of crime? I didn’t have any immediate answers, so as a way of dealing with and sorting through my dilemma, I began to think about crime fiction in general. Writers would not write about crime if no one wanted to read about it. Why is crime fiction so popular? What is this fascination that people have with crime? What are the issues surrounding the reading and writing of crime and violence?

Why is Crime Fiction Popular?
My ideal reader is complemented by the general popularity of crime fiction, which I consider in this section. The length of a crime novel varies, however one of the conventions of crime novels is that they are approximately 80,000 words in length. My artefact is approximately 60,000 words in length and initially, I sought to extend it a further 20,000 words. However, it struck me that if I were to do this I would be sacrificing the integrity of the novel as I would simply be adding words for the sake of volume. The other alternative was to add new subplots as a way of lengthening the novel but I feared these would detract from the overall plot and may confuse the reader. Given these adverse effects, I felt the novel would work best in its original, shorter form. There are many examples of shorter crime novels, such as Kerry Greenwood’s *Murder on the Ballarat Train* (Greenwood 2005).

Crime fiction has become so mainstream that in 2010 Peter Temple, a well known Australian crime writer, won the 2010 Miles Franklin Literary award (Steger 2010, p.17) for his crime novel, *Truth*. The Miles Franklin Literary Award:
celebrates Australian character and creativity and nurtures the continuing life of literature about Australia. It is awarded for the novel of the year which is of the highest literary merit and presents Australian life in many of its phases (The Trust Company 2010).

Temple’s win made history as “it is the first time that a so-called genre writer has won the award” (Steger 2010, p.17). The fact that a crime novel about:

_Bodies in Housing Commission flats, in low brown brick-veneer units, in puked alleys, stained driveways, car boots, the dead stuffed into culverts, drains, sunk in dams, rivers, creeks, canals, buried under houses, thrown down mineshafts, entombed in walls, embalmed in concrete, people shot, stabbed, strangled, brained, crushed, poisoned, drowned, electrocuted, asphyxiated, starved, skewered, hacked, pushed from buildings, tossed from bridges_ (Temple 2009, p.29)

has been recognized for its literary merit, points to a shift in attitude about crime writing in general and further demonstrates just how popular crime fiction has become.

According to Christiana Gregoriou, different readers derive different pleasures from reading crime fiction depending upon which readerly community they belong to (Gregoriou 2007, p.49). She suggests that some readers derive pleasure such as escapism, relaxation or experiencing a suspensefulness that involves “a form of participation that is rather different from that of looking at a painting or listening to music” (Gregoriou 2007, p.50). She also claims that reading crime fiction can become an addiction. Here, she draws upon the argument of W. H. Auden, who believed that “the reading of detective stories is very much like one’s addiction to tobacco or alcohol” (Gregoriou 2007, p.51). But unlike unhealthy addictions, she says, crime fiction addiction is not destructive; it is simply a distraction “from the intolerable drudgery of daily life” (Mandel cited in Gregoriou 2007, p.51). Readers are able to “experience without danger all the passion, excitement and desirousness which must be suppressed in a humanitarian ordering of society” (Gregoriou 2007, p.52). Criminology lecturer Sheila Brown agrees. She believes that people’s
fascination with crime fiction comes from a desire that they have to be able to “enjoy fearfulness” (Brown 2003, p.79). Crime fiction, she says, “offers a unique way of experiencing crime, enabling both the pleasures and the pains to be vicariously pursued” (Brown 2003, p.90). It allows its readers to participate in and observe crime from a safe distance. We are horrified by real life murders but we are intrigued with finding out who did it, how they did it and why.

The issue of ‘who, how and why’, or ‘whodunit’, is also a fundamental part of why some people enjoy reading crime fiction (Suits 1985; James 2009). P.D. James says that the importance of solving the mystery is different for each reader and that “some follow the clues assiduously and at the end feel the same small triumph that they do after a successful game of chess” (James 2009, p.140) and Bernard Suits describes the detective story as “a game to be played by the reader because it is simply a puzzle to be solved” (Suits 1985, p.201). Upon solving the puzzle and figuring out whodunit before the novel ends, readers derive a certain sense of satisfaction at having beaten the game.

Dr. Leopold Bellak, psychologist and author of On the Psychology of Detective Stories and Related Problems (1945), has a slightly different view. He says that we read crime fiction because “the criminal and aggressive proceedings permit a phantasy gratification of Id impulses” (Bellak cited in Symons 1972, p.19), or in other words, it allows the reader “to identify with the criminal” (Symons 1972, p.19). We can do this safely, he says, without feeling immoral, firstly, because the story is fictitious and secondly because detection and punishment soon follow. Perhaps there is some truth in this assertion. As previously noted, the huge success of the Underbelly series in 2009 and 2010 captured Australian television audiences with its glamorization of the Australian underworld. We see notorious career criminals such as Alphonse Gangitano and Carl Williams come to life on the screen like modern day bad-boy heroes and many of us do actually identify with them because, like most of us, they start out as ordinary people from the suburbs whose circumstances lead them to crime. Gregg and Wilson (2010) even go so far as to suggest that because criminals such as Carl Williams are depicted as being so ‘ordinary’ and their stories are situated in the suburbs, “Underbelly suggests that ruthless, murderous competition may not be incompatible with the Australian dream”
The criminal underworld is portrayed as being sophisticated and glamorous and we vicariously enjoy watching these real-life events unfold from the safety of our lounge rooms. We are permitted to do this safely, just as Bellak suggests, because detection and punishment do eventually follow, and law and order is restored. Rawlings (1998) attributes this restoration of order as the main reason why readers enjoy reading about and watching popular criminology. He says that the restoration of order assures the audience of its protection against such disorder (Rawlings 1998) and they derive satisfaction out of watching these events unfold.

I then considered why I like to read crime fiction. I decided it was a combination of elements. Firstly, I like to solve the puzzle. Trying to piece together all the clues and solve the crime before the book ends gives me a certain sense of triumph. Secondly, it is interesting to take a glimpse at another way of life. For example, I enjoyed reading Angela Savage’s *Behind the Night Bazaar* because I learned a great deal about Thai culture. The restoration of order is a tricky issue for me because although I like to solve the puzzle, the restoration of order is not something that I take as a given because the reality of real life crime is more complex. Unlike books or television series like *Underbelly*, real crime does not simply end with the perpetrators punished and incarcerated and the victims moving on with their lives in a ‘happily ever after’ denouement. I can speak from experience when I say that real life crime is nowhere near as interesting or exciting to read about as crime fiction. As I mentioned before, the criminal underworld is glamorized and sensationalized in the *Underbelly* series “to generate viewers’ interest” (Gregg & Wilson 2010, p.420). Audiences seem content to watch this series and at its conclusion they feel secure in the knowledge that the criminals are punished for their crimes and the story ends. But unfortunately, real-life is much more complicated. The often devastating after-effects of crime continue to be experienced by all who are touched by them, whether victim, perpetrator or the families of either. The Parole Board had emphasized this reality for me and now the question was, as a perpetrator of a crime, should I really be writing crime fiction?
Do I Have a Write?

So my confrontation in 2010 with the Adult Parole Board had left me in doubt as to whether or not I was doing the right thing by writing Snuff from a victim of crime’s perspective and whether or not I should actually be writing about crime at all. I felt that perhaps I was doing something immoral. The Parole Board certainly seemed to think so. I understand that it is their task to challenge prisoners seeking parole to serve out their sentences in the community and that they are taking on a specific perspective and whilst I take this into account here, I also look at the general community of crime fiction readers. Their perspectives will of course be very different.

P.D. James was able to provide me with some clues. She asks whether anyone who has had a tragic experience of something should write an artificial account of it and argues that:

> it is possible to deal with the intellectual side of the detection while portraying with compassion and realism the emotional trauma of all the characters touched by this ultimate crime, whether as suspect, innocent bystander or indeed the perpetrator (James 2009, p.134).

At this point, I think it is important to mention that I am not writing about the crime for which I am incarcerated. Nor am I writing about the crimes of anyone else I have encountered in prison. So it is not an account, artificial or otherwise, about my crime. It is, however, a fictional account of a crime. So had I really captured in Snuff what P. D. James had argued? Had I portrayed “with compassion and realism the emotional trauma of all the characters touched by this ultimate crime” (James 2009, p.134)? In Chapter 2, I wrote about my protagonist attending the funeral of her sister who had been murdered.

> “It was four days later that we buried Melody at the Fawkner Cemetery. The cloying smell of damp earth invaded my nostrils as I watched my sister’s coffin descend into the ground. Dad squeezed my hand. God, how I wanted to jump in after her. It wasn’t fair. Why Melody?
My face was puffy, swollen and stinging like I’d been exfoliated with sandpaper. I rubbed at my watery eyes determined to tune out the sounds of sobbing and sniffing coming from the sea of cousins, aunts and uncles behind me. I couldn’t stop crying. Salty tears burned my face and the sun was making it worse. Mum passed me a hankie. I swabbed at my eyes and blew my nose.

I stared at Melody’s coffin and tried to block out the memories. The way her face lit up when she laughed, the lectures she used to give me about my lack of style, the way she smelled of cinnamon and apples, the Christmas fights we had every year, without fail. I thought of all the things I loved about Melody and the fact that I’d never see her again. I was losing it, drowning in my own tears. I couldn’t breathe. I needed to get out of here.” (Morgan 2010, p.14)

It was both difficult and easy to write these passages. It was easy because it was not hard to imagine myself in the place of my protagonist. I simply put myself in her shoes and imagined what it would be like if I were to lose my own sister and wrote about it. It was difficult, however, because in doing this, I was experiencing an empathy that was all too real and it forced me to think about the victim of my own crime’s family and how they must have felt. It has been suggested that writing can “provide a mechanism for psychological insight” (Hunt cited in Wright & Chung 2001, p.278) and while I am not suggesting that I experienced anywhere near the same trauma as my victim’s family, writing about this was a cathartic experience for me personally and was something that I needed to experience in order to gain such psychological insights and possibly move on from what I had done.

Deena Rymhs suggests that writing in prison “becomes an outlet for these authors to explore their innocence or their guilt” (Rymhs 2009, p.110). Continuing on this line of thought, Tristine Rainer, the author of *The New Diary*, says that “the voice of guilt has the capacity to perform constructively as a voice of responsibility” (Rainer 1990, p.133), and Wright & Chung (2001) say that writing therapy is “a valuable vehicle for self-exploration and change” (p.288). For me this was undeniably accurate. By writing a fictional account of the after-
effects of a serious crime, I was exploring the guilt, horror and sadness that I felt about my crime and learning to take responsibility for what I had done. Rainer goes on to say that “great literature has often served as a purgation for the writer” (Rainer 1990, p.53) and this was also true for me. Thus, at times, *Snuff* served as a therapeutic tool for me, albeit a confronting one. Helene Cixous writes that, “Writing the worst is an exercise that requires us to be stronger than ourselves” (Cixous 1993, p.42) and while this may be true, the cathartic benefits of doing so far outweighs the difficulty of the process. But even though I felt that my writing was rehabilitative, I still didn’t know if, morally, I was doing the right thing.

It was while reading an article named *The Fortunes of Mary: Authenticity, Notoriety and the Crime Writing Life* by Lucy Sussex that I began to resolve some of my inner turmoil. This article examines the life of Mary Fortune, the first Australian woman crime writer in the late 1800’s, whose writing “was informed by bitter personal experience” (Sussex 2007, p.449). According to this article, as well as being a writer, Mary Fortune, although never convicted, was a petty criminal and it was precisely her knowledge of crime and a life lived amongst “the disreputable poor” (Sussex 2007, p.455) that “gave her the authority to write crime” (Sussex 2007, p.449). So I began to wonder, did the same sentiment apply to me? By all accounts, Mary Fortune does not appear to have been what her society of that era would deem a respectable woman. In fact Sussex describes her as “an example of transgressive femininity” (Sussex 2007, p.449). Yet Fortune’s writing was extraordinary and widely appreciated. I believe that I am definitely an example of this transgressive femininity that Sussex writes about for two reasons. Firstly, I am a former sex worker. And secondly, I am a woman in prison who has committed a crime and thus I am a criminal. So do these two ‘transgressions’ qualify me to write about them? I was beginning to think that perhaps they did.

**Anne Perry: Criminal and Crime Novelist**

My research led me to Anne Perry, an author of murder mystery novels whose writing career began in 1979. An “international bestselling historical novelist”
Perry, whose former name is Juliet Hulme, was convicted of the murder of her friend’s mother in 1954 in Christchurch, New Zealand when she was just 16 years old. She served five years before being released in 1959 and went on to publish her first novel, *The Cater Street Hangman*, 20 years later under the name of Anne Perry. Since that time she has published 47 novels, and several collections of short stories and won the Edgar Award for Best Short Story in 2001 (Anne Perry: The Official Website 2007). For many years, Anne Perry’s true identity was unknown and “it came as a great shock for all to discover that Juliet Hulme is now Anne Perry, the best selling murder mystery writer” (Wen 2004). But does Perry’s past as a convicted killer mean that she is immoral for writing about murder?

On her official website *Anne Perry: The Official Website* (2007), she writes that she began the Monk series of books “to explore a different, darker character, and to raise questions about responsibility” (Anne Perry: The Official Website 2007). To me this indicates that Perry also uses her fiction writing as “a mechanism for psychological insight” (Hunt cited in Wright & Chung 2001, p.278) and I began to feel that perhaps I did have a ‘write’ after all. And if those insights led to a personal form of redemption and rehabilitation then not only did I have a right, I had a responsibility.

While my confrontation with the Adult Parole Board had initially left me conflicted, I soon discovered that it was possible to turn what I thought had been a negative experience into a positive one. This led to much reflection upon myself, my crime and the issues of personal redemption and moral responsibility. At the time of writing this exegesis I still experience doubts from time to time and wonder how my artefact might be received. But my reflections, as well as my research to date, have led me to overcome these uncertainties. I have learnt to use the doubt and the ethical and moral dilemmas that plague me to my advantage by investigating them and learning to understand where they come from and why. In doing so, I have learnt many valuable lessons and developed deeper insights into myself, my work and my creative process.

In this section I have discussed the inspiration behind crime fiction writing and what inspired me to write *Snuff*. I also discussed the controversial nature of the sex industry, the ideal reader and my desire to challenge misperceptions
about the sex industry and sex workers. I have also looked at the connection between sex work and the criminal underworld and discussed the popularity of the true crime genre and why I chose to incorporate a criminal element into my novel. Finally, I have explored a very personal ethical and moral dilemma as a convicted criminal writing crime fiction and looked at why crime fiction is such a popular genre. My research indicates that many people enjoy reading crime fiction for many different reasons. I am positive that the novels written by Anne Perry are no less enjoyed by her avid readers simply because it emerged that she had a violent criminal past. Through my personal contacts, I also know that fans of Underbelly still continued to send fan mail to Carl Williams up until his murder in prison in April 2010 which indicates that despite his violent criminal past he still had numerous supporters. The work of Mary Fortune is also highly regarded despite her past as a petty criminal. So by these accounts, my doubts may perhaps be assuaged by the knowledge that regardless of my own criminal and sexually stigmatized past, I do have a ‘write’ and my work is just as valuable and enjoyable as that of a non-criminal writer.

Why a crime novel in the sex industry? Why not a crime novel in the sex industry? From my desire to say something about the feminist response to the sex industry to my need to challenge the dominant stereotypes of stripper representations, I had something to say. Snuff gave me the opportunity to do this.
Scattered Pictures

In this section I look at the creative and personal challenges I faced as an incarcerated student. I investigate other writers’ and academics’ methodologies and discuss the key aspects of autoethnographic research and autoethnography as research method. I also discuss the issues of writing from memory, how I conducted research from a physically limited space and how I navigated the delimitation of incarceration.

Back to Basics
Being an incarcerated student presents unique challenges. When I first began my MA (Writing) with Swinburne University of Technology in 2004 I had no computer access at all. Computers were available for use 5 days per week in the prison Education Centre however, at the time I was in a segregated section of the prison and was unable to access the education building. Swinburne University then provided its students with computers to be used in our cells, which were given to us on loan from the prison education centre. This was an entirely new concept and a progressive move. Since the government took over the running of the maximum security women’s prison from a private company in 2000, women prisoners had not been allowed computers at all let alone computers on loan. During this time I was not allowed a printer in my cell so I would save my work on to a floppy disk and request a prison peer worker attend my unit to print it for me. Then in 2009 when I was two years into my PhD, as part of the PhD candidate’s allowance, Swinburne University generously provided the funds for me to purchase my own computer and printer. This was a momentous occasion for me and for the prison itself as I was the first female prisoner to apply for and be granted permission to have a computer and printer in my cell. As a result of this success, there are now a number of women who have in-cell computers.

Another significant challenge was the fact that I usually had to rely on memory and imagination alone during the writing process. Many writers, such as Janet Evanovich (2006), Di Morrissey (2005) and Sandra Harvey (1996)
speak of visiting locations, interviewing people in person or over the phone, visiting the library or using the Internet to research their novels. So how, I wondered, was I going to write an entire novel without any of these methods at my disposal?

As a prisoner, I have no direct access to libraries or the Internet. I am allowed to telephone a total of 10 people, all of whom must be pre-approved by prison security and must then give their permission for me to call. These people are placed onto a telephone list and I can only call these 10 people for a duration of 12 minutes at a time. Prisoners are not permitted to use the phone during working hours, which are 9am – 4.15pm and as there are a limited number of telephones in the prison, most women only get to use the phone once per day. I am not permitted to leave the prison unless it is a medical emergency or I have special permission to participate in a Community Corrections Permit Program (prison day leaves) for the purposes of reintegration, family ties or education (Corrections Act 1986, Sections 57-58D). I am only permitted to do this if I meet certain eligibility criteria (Corrections Administration Permits, Rehabilitation and Transition Permits and Interstate Leave of Absence Operational Guidelines 2007). This includes being in the final 12-24 months of my sentence, a record of good behaviour throughout the duration of my sentence and the ability to demonstrate ‘exceptional circumstances’ as to why I require the leaves. Due to these restrictions, conducting research for my novel proved to be extremely challenging. So how did I do it?

**Autoethnography and Research Methodology**

In the 21st Century, personal stories and emotions have become validated as contributing to academic knowledge (Cotterill n.d; Whyte 1989; Rambo-Ronai 1992; Foss & Foss 1994; Hausbeck & Brents 2004; Ezzy 2010). This significant and new contribution to knowledge resides within narratology, anecdotal theory, autoethnography and feminist poetics. What interested me is the potential for autoethnography to enrich my thinking. Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography as:
A form of self narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text... (and) can be done by either an anthropologist who is doing 'home' or 'native' ethnography or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer. It can also be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs (Reed-Danahay cited in Humphreys 2005, p.841).

In autoethnography, the self is the primary source of data for academic, anthropological inquiries (Holt 2003; Chang 2008). Although my artefact is not an autobiography or an academic inquiry, I did, however, use many of the techniques common to autoethnography and specifically used myself as data to create a work of fiction. I also use myself as data in a different way for the exegesis.

Although my artefact is a work of fiction, it does contain some of the elements of autobiography, such as the creation of a story from memory (Bird 2001), and is strongly infused with many of my own experiences in the sex industry. Hence, to a degree, much of my research for my artefact is autoethnographic in nature as I go on to discuss here.

When I first began writing Snuff the ideas translated easily onto the page. I was using memory and pure imagination. I was writing about crime and the sex industry – two subjects of which I have intimate knowledge. Some academics (Foss & Foss 1994; Holt 2003; Hausbeck & Brents 2004; Humphreys 2005; Anderson 2006; Kovarsky 2008; Ezzy 2010) also recognize:

reflexive personal narratives, or autoethnographic vignettes as analytical tools which offer a useful epistemological perspective on feminist methods generally, and sex industry research particularly (Hausbeck & Brents 2004, p.3).

They argue that these vignettes or stories help them to make sense of what they have observed and experienced and also assists their audience in understanding their work and their positions. In Snuff I often used personal narratives or vignettes by making them the experiences of my characters. In
this way I assist my audience to understand the work of a sex worker and challenge misperceptions about this type of work.

Heewon Chang (2008) articulates that autoethnographic research consists of a combination of four different types of data. They are: 1) personal memory data; 2) self-observational data; 3) self-reflective data; and 4) external data. She states that “autoethnography is self-centric” and that all types of data “are heavily anchored on your lived experience” (p.103). Cynthia Lietz, Carol Langer and Rich Furman (2006) also discuss these different types of data. However, they refer to personal memory data and self-reflective data as “the use of reflexivity” (p.446); self observational data as “the use of audit trail” (p.449); and external data as “the use of triangulation and peer debriefing” (p.450). In considering how this applied to me, I make the connection between autoethnography and the practice-led research PhD thus: the journal, the exegesis and the artefact as a whole constitute an autoethnographic account. It would seem that the journal acts as a tool to collect self-observational data of the present creative process and self-reflective data from the past. The exegesis works as a vehicle to present a combination of self-reflective and external data, and the artefact is a combination of personal memory and external data. In this way, as a combined whole, the practice-led research PhD is an autoethnographic inquiry. I thus situate my work within the autoethnographic field as the data I use for this PhD is a combination of all four types of data and is also ‘self-centric’.

I use myself as data both in the artefact and the exegesis for different purposes. In the artefact I call upon personal memory data, which Chang describes as “a building block of autoethnography” (Chang 2008, p.71), where my life experiences become those of my characters. In the exegesis I demonstrate self observational and self reflective data “that come from your present as well as your past” (Chang 2008, p.89) when I examine my creative process, the conditions under which this process takes place, and the steps I take to complete the artefact and the exegesis.

Chang defines external data as “data from external sources – other individuals, visual artifacts, documents, and literature”. She explains that this external data provides “additional perspectives and contextual information to
help you investigate and examine your subjectivity” (Chang 2008, p.103). For both the artifact and the exegesis I used two different types of external data. One form of external data was books and academic articles that I collected and analyzed. The second form of external data was provided when I asked for assistance from others or by accidental research. For example, sometimes I would ask family members or the prison Education Manager to look things up on the Internet for me if they were just general research needs, such as information about the Chartres-Abbot case. However, they were unable to assist with scholarly research due to our mutual lack of knowledge about how one might go about this process and how I might find relevant material.

Although I instituted my research needs and queries, the job of assisting my research by following my requests became that of my academic supervisors and the Swinburne University Research Librarian. All of these women were instrumental in assisting me with all of my scholarly research as well as general research relating to my novel. As I identified needs, I would discuss them with my supervisors who would liaise with the librarian and then bring books and online material into the prison for me. It was then up to me to decide what I could use and do so accordingly. As I requested and was provided with a substantial amount of material, I read wider than I would have otherwise and this extended my bibliography considerably. This is not the ideal arrangement for any writer, however, when you are in a position of having no other available options, it becomes necessary and my supervisors were like a life-line between myself and both the outside and the cyber world. This process worked well for me and I found that I was provided with all the necessary research as I required it.

There were other types of accidental research that occurred for me. Some of the other women I was incarcerated with heard about my novel and exegesis and offered me books, newspaper and magazine articles, and personal anecdotes. For example, one woman, who overheard me discussing my exegesis with my supervisor at the Education Centre, later approached me and in hushed tones relayed to me that her mother owned a Melbourne Brothel. She offered to have some Resourcing Health & Education in the Sex Industry (RhEDSi) literature sent in to me. I politely declined because I didn’t want her to
feel obligated to do so and also because it is not unusual for women in prison to make promises that they very rarely keep. I didn’t want to rely on this woman as much as I didn’t want her to feel obligated to me.

What Do Other Writers Do?
Writers generally are interested in reflecting upon the process of writing. This has become a fascination of the late 20th and early 21st century (Grafton 1992; Woolfe & Grenville 1993; Beinhardt 1996; Day 1996; Joseph 1997; Edgerton 2003; Phelan 2005; Evanovich 2006; Eco 2006). For example, in his book *Literati* (2005), James Phelan has researched and written about other Australian writers’ habits. In these original interviews, many of the authors claim that a good novel is all about impeccable research. Bestselling author Matthew Reilly says it is important not to cheat your readers or they will “take you to task over it” (Reilly in Phelan 2005). Writer Louise Zaetta agrees. She says that you must respect your readers. “You have to really respect them enough to do your homework, and that even goes for imagery…don’t just rely on memory” (Zaetta in Phelan 2005, p.279). But what does this ‘homework’ include? All writers have different methodology for researching a subject. So how do they do it?

Bestselling crime fiction writer Janet Evanovich, author of the *Stephanie Plum* series, says that she interviews people, makes phone calls, talks to cops and has even walked around with a gun in her pants in the name of research. (Evanovich 2006, pp.26-30) In fact some writers, such as Sandra Harvey, suggest visiting the “scene of your crimes” (Harvey in Day 1996, p.21) to get a feel for the location that you are writing about. She says that, “If you can’t picture every tiny, precious detail of the scene, your readers won’t have a hope” (Harvey in Day 1996, p.21). Author, Di Morrissey (2005), takes it one step further. “I start with a place. I go and live there. Then a theme emerges…so after several weeks or months, I come home armed with tons of notes, photos, videos and impressions and memories in my head and heart” (Morrissey in Phelan 2005, pp.174-5). Umberto Eco (2006) also describes being pedantic to the point of obsession in his fiction writing. He uses drawings, maps and visits
locations for specific details. He even physically travels from location to location to work out the exact timing in between them (Eco 2006, pp.314-316). These research techniques were all excellent pieces of advice, however, being incarcerated meant that I had none of these options available to me. So I wondered if other writers had different methods.

I discovered that there are many other authors who claim that a writer should write what he or she already knows (Connelly 1998 in Gregoriou 2007; Cookson in Joseph 1997; Herbert in Joseph 1997; Cartland in Joseph 1997 et al) and that simply living is research. Writer Dora Saint says that about 95 percent of the material she writes comes from her memories. If she comes across something technical that she doesn’t understand, she seeks help. However, generally she writes about what she knows (Saint in Joseph 1997, p.166). Similarly, bestselling author and vet, James Herriot, admits to seldom having to do any research. All of the books that he is best known for are based on personal experience as a practising vet and most of the stories are written exactly as they happened (Joseph 1997, p.70). But just how far can writing what you already know take you? Larry Beinhart says that writing what you know can only get you so far:

In first novels, even in the first several novels, this (research) may not be too important if you’ve picked a story for which you can draw on the life you’ve already lived and its accidental research…But several books down the line, it may be many, it may be few, the well begins to run dry (Beinhart 1996, p.157).

He does, however, go on to say that:

There are very successful writers who do little or no research. If you can write your books without research, you will write them faster. If research will not improve your books in a way that will make them sell more, then research is a waste of time, adversely affecting your earnings-to-effort ratio” (Beinhart 1996, p.158).
Thus, not all writers employ a single methodology. As I have discussed previously, reflecting upon my own methods of writing is an essential aspect of practice-led research.

**Accidental Research: My Life Experience & How I Navigated Delimitation**

There were still times that I required other research to fill in details. The location of my novel is Melbourne and what Zaetta (2005) had said about respecting your readers and doing your homework had stuck in my mind. Chances were that some of my readers would be familiar with Melbourne so the location details had to be exact. For example, in Chapter 17 when I was writing about catching a train to Elsternwick, I couldn’t remember the name of the train line that you catch to get there.

‘I arrived on Platform 7 and boarded the ? Line train. The carriage was almost empty except for me and another woman who looked about the same age as me. Her iPod was so loud I could hear Timbaland from 10 seats down.’ (Morgan 2010, p.122)

I didn’t have an immediate solution – I couldn’t simply pick up the phone and call the train station or go online to look it up. So I added a question mark and continued forward. Author Larry Beinhart agrees that it is important to keep going. He says that if it is not critical to the plot then “slug it” by leaving a gap and noting the page number in a separate file of things to research later (Beinhart, 1996, p.160). This approach worked well for me. It wouldn’t be until much later that I filled this blank in and I was able to do so completely by accident when a friend who critiqued my manuscript told me that she knew that the train line was Sandringham because she caught that particular line all the time.

The other point of interest in this passage relates to modern technology. In two different scenes in the novel, Chapter 18 (Morgan 2010, p.130) and Chapter 20 (Morgan 2010, p.141) there are characters listening to iPods. Originally, the two characters had been listening to walkmans. However, the
same friend politely pointed out to me that walkmans are practically antique these days and that these characters would most likely be listening to iPods, something that had not even been invented before my incarceration. It is small details like this that I had to pay particular attention to. And this became more apparent as the novel progressed.

In Chapter 17, Raini is ‘Googling’ to find out about a porn company that produced a DVD that her sister was in. I had a vague idea about Google and how it worked but at that particular point in time I had never actually been on the Internet so the idea of this was entirely new to me. I wondered what else Raini could do on the Internet to help her solve her sister’s murder. However, I was unable to explore this possibility at the time because my knowledge of the Internet was limited and I was not able to go online to find out because I had no access to the Internet in prison. It also led me to wonder what other new technology had been invented since I have been in prison and would it be apparent to my readers that I might be a little ‘behind the times’.

Creating a fictional world for my characters became more difficult as time progressed. The longer I remained in prison, the dimmer my memories of the outside world became. I found myself struggling to describe simple things, like houses or the noises one might hear whilst walking down a suburban street. It became frustrating and sometimes depressing. I struggled with this issue. For example, during the writing of the scene in Chapter 16 where Raini enters the adult book shop I could not remember what the shop smelled like. This was perhaps the first time that it really struck me that I was remembering less and less and I was surprised to find myself crying. I now consider this a minor issue, but at the time it was not only about not remembering the smell. If I was forgetting details like this, what else would I forget or had I forgotten? And more importantly, how would I eventually overcome this issue? I considered two strategies for overcoming this. One was to ‘make it up’. The second was to explore the greater emotional problem of not remembering or ‘not wanting to remember’.

Making it up is the relatively easy part. As writers, it is what we do. We can all imagine what something looks like and how it works. Kundera (1988) describes the novel as “a place where imagination can explode as in a dream”
We ask ourselves, the ‘what ifs’ and we write about them, explore them, create them. For example, in Chapter 16, when I couldn’t remember how the adult book shop smelt, I *imagined* what it would smell like.

‘I followed the woman’s directions and found myself in a large book and video shop that smelled like disinfectant and old gym socks. A young dude wearing a beanie and an Iron Maiden tee-shirt with an earring through his bottom lip stood behind the counter playing air drums to a song only he could hear on his iPod.’ (Morgan 2010, p.113)

There was, however, a larger problem. There were a number of minor details that I honestly could not remember. These included smells, locations, décor etc. But I also had to ask myself, did I really want to remember? Iona Davies believes that, “It is important to recognize the existence of a philosophy of incarceration which is specifically located in the experience of having been in prison” (Davies 1990, p.21). I believe that part of this ‘philosophy’, which is unique to prison culture, is learning to ‘keep our heads inside the walls’. This is a prison term that long term prisoners can often be heard referring to which means that in order to survive a lengthy sentence we stop thinking about the outside world and focus only on what is happening in the prison. Novek and Sanford write about their observations of this phenomenon while teaching a writing program at a U.S women’s prison, saying that, “women with longer sentences seem to have a more ‘inside’ focus; they know the prison will be their home for a long time to come and so they are more concerned with internal issues” (Novek & Sanford 2004, p.16). To me, this observation appeared to be acutely accurate. As prisoners, we learn to compartmentalize and it is not something consciously done, it occurs naturally over time and is essential to your mental and emotional preservation. You allow yourself certain times to think about your family and your former life, usually when on the phone to them or during a visit, but you do so from a safe emotional distance so that it doesn’t affect you. Afterwards you immediately cease thinking about them and return to prison life as though nothing has happened. After a while, you actually begin to forget about things in the ‘outside’ world. Every so often I find myself involved
in a conversation with someone and they mention something, such as a type of food I haven’t eaten in nine years, and it’s an odd feeling to realise that because I haven’t seen it in so long, I had forgotten that it even existed.

There were also times during the writing process that I had to remember experiences that I had had before I came to prison in order for my characters to experience them. These experiences included my life as a stripper and my relationship with my family. So by remembering details from my past, I was essentially forcing myself to recall times, places and people that I had not thought about in years and doing this was at times very painful. Tristine Rainer believes that, “In the case of traumatic or painful periods of time, you may have to work hard against your natural resistance to remember” (Rainer 1990, p.232). This was certainly true for me and perhaps the most difficult recollections were those that involved my own family. In the following passage, I was writing about Raini’s relationship with her Mum, Dad and sister.

‘I never could stay in a bad mood with Mum. We were too close. Both of my parents were amazing. I’d always been closer to Mum and Dad than Melody. Even before she started stripping. We’d always shared a special closeness and after Melody left our bond had only grown stronger. Dad became more protective. The freedom that Melody had enjoyed was not an option for me. There were no trips to the city with friends or hanging out at the Plaza at night. It was like they’d been determined not to make the same mistakes with me that they’d made with Melody but it wasn’t that they’d done anything wrong. Melody and I were just different people with different goals and aspirations.’ (Morgan 2010, p.44)

By writing this passage I was recalling my sister and her relationship with my parents. And in the following I was describing my Dad.

‘He was a man’s man, no bullshit kind of guy. I’d always been more like my Dad. We had the same stubborn streak and straight up attitude and I’d always felt a special affinity with him. He was pretty intuitive and could usually spot a bull shitter from a mile away.’ (Morgan 2010, p.45)
Writing these paragraphs forced me to think about my family and how much I missed them. Once I began this train of thought, it was difficult to stop. Therefore it made me reluctant to want to put myself through it again.

The prison experience changes the process of writing for the prisoner, which brings me back to the argument that being in prison presents unique challenges. But incarceration did not have to mean that the quality of my work suffered – I simply had to 'look outside the square' or navigate delimitation when it came to finding research for my novel. I acknowledged the philosophy of incarceration that Davies (1990) wrote about and instead of allowing it to hinder my creative process, I learned to use it to my advantage. What I soon realised was that the physical limitations of my imprisonment did not affect my creativity. In fact I could use my imagination more vividly than I would have if I had access to tools such as the Internet. I was in a position of having to invent things that I might not have otherwise. Katherine Frank (2000) acknowledges that "when factual representation obscures possible alternative interpretations, the explicit use of fiction might be appropriate and provocative" (p.482). For example, I had relatively no knowledge about snuff films. My only exposure to the idea had been while watching the Nicholas Cage movie 8mm. If I'd had access to the Internet I would have researched everything I could on this subject. However, with no choice in the matter, I was forced to use my imagination.

Writer Belinda Alexandra says that creating something from your imagination allows for more flexibility (Alexandra in Phelan 2005, p.12). I considered this and realised that this was indeed the case as I was free from the constraints of research and I didn’t feel like I had to mould the snuff film element to fit in with the research. This reminded me of something that Alan Attwood had said in an interview. He believes that "a lot of writers can get too bogged in research" and that "at the end of the day…it’s fiction not non-fiction" (Attwood in Phelan 2005, p.35). So instead of asking my sister to Google snuff films (which is what I was originally going to do), I thought about who might make and consume this type of film and I incorporated these musings into my work through my characters. Eventually I linked the snuff films with people
trafficking and victim profiling. Perhaps the outcome would have been different if I had researched snuff films and as a result the plotline may not have been as cohesive with the other subplots in my artefact. Similarly, when Raini was searching for a way to find an address for a porn film production company, she had to use her imagination when it came to figuring out a way of acquiring an address instead of searching for information on the Internet. I believe now that using my imagination enriched my writing as it forced me to be more creative because I often found alternative solutions to different problems that my characters faced. I believe this made the plot more interesting and entertaining.

**A Leave of Absence**

In July 2010, after a lengthy and complicated process, I was granted permission to participate in the Community Corrections Permit Program. This meant that I was given permission to leave the prison for three ‘day leaves’ to Swinburne University of Technology in Lilydale. Getting the permission for this was not easy and if not for the support of Swinburne, the prison General Manager and the Acting Assistant Commissioner, these day leaves would not have been possible. It was a surprise to everyone, including myself, that these leaves were approved as, to my knowledge, I am the first woman in a Victorian maximum security prison serving a lengthy sentence who has had educational day leaves granted in over 10 years.

These day leaves meant that I would be attending Swinburne University in the company of a custodial officer once a month over three months for a period of approximately eight hours (inclusive of travel time). This enabled me to utilize the Library and online academic websites and Google by myself for the first time. I was most excited about this as it had been something I had been looking forward to doing for some time. I was amazed at how easily I was able to find the relevant research and wished that I had daily access to this very valuable tool. This did, however, require some training on my part as I had never had to physically search out the identified requirements of scholarly research before and I learned valuable research techniques from the very knowledgeable Librarian. I was also able to attend scholarly presentations and
attended a lecture in a lecture theatre for the very first time. However, although
this was a monumental breakthrough in helping me to navigate the delimitation
that I had experienced up until this point, it wasn’t an instant solution as I was
now in a position of having to learn how to adjust and reacquaint myself with the
‘outside’ world and this was not as easy as one might assume.

At the time of my first leave in July, I had been in prison for exactly nine
and a half years. I had worn prison blues every day, had spent most of my time
with other prisoners or prison officers and learned how to survive within the
confines of the walls that surrounded me, ensuring that my head was inside the
walls at all times. This “marginalising personal and social experience” (Minogue
2010, p.2) had contributed to a prison mentality that had erased many of my
social skills and dehumanized me to the point that I felt like an alien amongst
anyone who wasn’t a prisoner. In addition to this was the apprehension I felt
about being around people in general due to a number of years that I had spent
in isolation, as well as a general fear of the unknown and paranoia about how
‘normal’ people might perceive a prisoner. Craig Minogue attributes such
difficulties in reintegrating back into the community as a direct result of “the
institutionally instilled dichotomy of ‘us and them’” (Minogue 2010, p.8) that
begins the moment the prisoner enters the prison gates. Talking to the ‘screws’
goes against prison culture and is frowned upon by fellow inmates, hence the
majority of prisoners refuse to engage with prison officers for fear of being seen
as a ‘dog’, which is someone who informs on others. Minogue goes on to
articulate that it is this mentality, or ‘institutionally instilled dichotomy’ that
contributes to the paranoia and apprehension that prisoners feel after exiting
prison, particularly after a lengthy sentence. So although the day leaves were
fantastic and instrumental in assisting me with my work, for me, it is not a
process that was without personal struggles.

One of the things that stand out for me from my first day leave was
during a walk around Lilydale Lake after lunch with one of my academic
supervisors and the escorting officer. I spotted a woman walking her dog. I
made a comment to my supervisor about the dog looking friendly and how
much I would like to pat it. To my surprise, she asked the woman if I could pat
her dog and the woman replied that yes, I could. I knelt down in front of the
dog, whose name was Toby, and extended my hand for him to sniff. He was a lovely charcoal grey colour with a shaggy coat. He excitedly licked my hand and I gave him a gentle scratch on his head. His fur was soft with a crimped texture and I will never forget the feeling of joy I experienced as I patted Toby. I had not patted a dog in nine and a half years and in that moment I realised how much I had missed an animal companion.

During my third leave, I participated in a Student Colloquium. This was perhaps my most daunting task yet and I arrived more nervous than I had been when I faced the Parole Board. But my confidence had increased with each leave and when I stood up to give my presentation I knew that I would be okay. Afterwards, the level of support that I received from the other students and staff members was outstanding and I felt a surge of pride as I realised just how far I had come both academically and personally. My participation in the colloquium was a pivotal moment in my PhD candidacy as for the first time I was truly able to understand the significance of what I was doing and what I had achieved. I also realised the importance of interacting with other doctoral students (see Keller & Ward 1993; Wood-Harper et al 1999; Pilbeam & Denyer 2009), which was something I had not been able to experience due to my incarceration.

The Voice
During the second draft stage of *Snuff* I realised that since beginning the artefact something had changed. The voice of my protagonist, who is also the narrator, had changed about two thirds of the way through and I had to ask myself, how and why had this happened?

In narratology, voice is defined as “a characteristic vocal or tonal quality projected through a text” (Jahn 2005). Laurie Henry extends this definition, referring to voice as “an author’s style, his distinctive way of combining words, rhythm and diction that makes his manner of writing unique” (Henry 1995, p.309). But he also says that voice has another meaning. He says that “voice is synonymous with persona, the characteristic speech and thought patterns of any first person narrator, or of the implied author who tells a story” (Henry 1995, p.309) and it is this definition that I am concerned with.
In the case of my artefact, the first person narrator is my protagonist, Raini Mitchell. She is what Rimmon-Kenan (1983/2002) and Jahn (2005), among others, refer to as a homodiegetic narrator, which is “a narrator who is present as a character in the story” (Jahn 2005). However, Raini’s degree of participation in the story makes her an “auto-diegetic narrator” because she narrates her own story (Rimmon-Kenan 1983/2002, p.97) and in doing so, her voice is central to the narrative. For me this indicated a responsibility as a writer to ensure that the voice of my auto-diegetic narrator remained consistent throughout the entirety of narrative. So when I realised that the voice had changed, I felt that this concern needed to be addressed and possibly rectified.

The first point I needed to consider was why the voice had changed, or what specifically about the voice had changed and why. Charlotte Doyle (1998) reminds us that “the voice is not only a style of speech, it is a stance toward the world” (p.32). The elements that contribute to the make-up of voice are tone, vocabulary, imagery and rhythm (Edgerton 2003). So my next step was to figure out which of these elements had changed. I didn’t think it was the vocabulary as I felt I had chosen my words well, the dialogue was realistic and I felt comfortable with it. I didn’t think it was the rhythm either because my pacing seemed to be right and there was a good balance of long and short sentences that slowed down or sped up the pace in the appropriate places. So I concluded that the problem must be in the tone and imagery elements.

Writer Les Edgerton describes tone as “another way of describing the mood of a piece” (Edgerton 2003, p.103), adding that “in works of quality, the same tone will prevail throughout, in most cases” (Edgerton 2003, p.111). I tried to discern what the tone of my artefact was. This was not as easy as it seemed because there seemed to be a variety of tones depending on the action that was taking place at the time. For example, during the funeral scene the mood is sorrowful, during the scene at the homicide squad office it is angry and so on and so forth. With so many different tones throughout I found it difficult to choose one that best suited the entire narrative but I narrowed it down to a combination of humorous and inquisitive naiveté.

Next, I looked at the imagery. There are multiple aspects to this such as how imagery moves the themes forward or helps to describe characters.
Edgerton says that imagery “has to do with the various images you use in your writing. The metaphors and similes and other techniques with which we describe the world of our stories and articles” (Edgerton 2003, p.118). Going back over my artefact, I noticed that in the beginning, the imagery is strong. I described the environment and what my protagonist saw and thought vividly using original similes and realistic dialogue and internal monologue. I have also used my character’s obsession with food, and junk food in particular, as a way of conveying her insecurities about herself – she eats due to stress or sadness. It is her ‘drug’ of choice. There are many examples of the use of food imagery in literature (see King 1983) but it is not within the scope of this exegesis to discuss food imagery in further detail. After going back over my artefact, looking specifically at the imagery I had employed, what I noticed was that from Chapter 19 onwards, it was as though I had lost my way. The narrative seemed to lack the colour and intensity of the preceding chapters and I knew I needed to correct it. Understanding the importance of imagery in my work, however, did not prevent an onset of ‘writer’s block’ (Rose 1980).

What I realised was that from around Chapter 19 onwards, the narration had changed in both tone and imagery. I had lost some of the humour in my tone and my imagery lacked colour. I felt that the narrative was less emotive in general and I wondered if this was because I, as a writer, had emotionally distanced myself from the writing. How and why I had done this was a mystery to me. I considered the reasons why. Could it have been because I was in a hurry to finish writing the artefact? Was I no longer emotionally invested in the artefact because I had lost the passion for it? Was it because I had experienced a lengthy period of ‘writer’s block’ somewhere around the middle and had therefore lost my original enthusiasm? And where should I go from here?

Edgerton (2003) says that if you find yourself losing your original voice, you should stop and “go back to the point where you began to break away from that voice and start over at that place” (Edgerton 2003, p.152). For me, this meant that I needed to go back to Chapter 19 and rewrite the same scenes, improving my tone and re-colouring the imagery I employed along the way.
After I had done this, I read through the artefact again. This time, the voice was consistent but I still noticed a difference.

What I ultimately realised was that the change had occurred for two reasons. Firstly, I had experienced writer’s block, “that frustrating, self defeating inability to generate the next line, the right phrase, the sentenced that will release the flow of words once again” (Rose 1980, p.389), at Chapter 18. During this time I decided to focus on scholarly research and other writers’ methods as a way of motivating myself and trying to figure a way out of the writer’s block. I hoped that by turning to the literary experts for advice I would eventually regain my momentum and my writer’s block would disappear. Writer Janet Evanovich says that she doesn’t believe in writer’s block. Instead she believes in sitting at her computer and forcing herself to write even if it is only a sentence each day (Evanovich 2006, pp.198-199). So I tried this. But by the third day no words had appeared on my blank screen so I gave up and looked for more advice. Tristine Rainer suggests practising free intuitive writing, saying that this kind of writing “comes from a deeper place in the psyche” and is an “intuitive language, a message from the inner consciousness” (Rainer 1990, p.61). But how could I find this intuitive language and how could it help me solve my writer’s block? According to Rainer (1990) I had to empty my mind, close my eyes and write down freehand whatever came into my mind (Rainer 1990, p.62). This wasn’t exactly the approach I was looking for but I tried it anyway. Again, nothing appeared as I did not seem to be able to empty my mind as she had suggested.

Mike Rose studied ten UCLA undergraduate students, five of whom experienced writer’s block and five who didn’t. What he discovered was that:

*The five students who experienced blocking were all operating either with writing rules or with planning strategies that impeded rather than enhanced the composing process. The five students who were not hampered by writer’s block also utilized rules, but they were less rigid ones, and thus more appropriate to a complex process like writing…the plans these non-blockers brought to the writing process were more*
I considered Rose’s discovery. Then I considered my writing plan for *Snuff*. What I eventually realised was that I needed a new plan. I had planned how the artefact would begin and end but had not prepared adequately for the middle. I was experiencing what I call ‘S.M.S’ – saggy middle syndrome. A saggy middle or “second-act sag” is common in script writing (Aronson 2000, p.76). This problem was not unfamiliar to me as I had experienced it before in writing an earlier novel. Once I had identified the problem I was able to move forward. I began by researching the sex industry in more detail as a way of (hopefully) bringing about fresh ideas for the artefact. Then I developed a point by point plot plan for the middle chapters. I then began writing until I eventually had a smooth and coherent piece of work from start to finish.

My research had produced a change in the way I was thinking in general. I realised my thoughts were becoming more sophisticated as a direct result of my research. Smith & Dean (2009) suggest that the fusion of practice and theory can be a valuable combination (Smith & Dean 2009, p.25) and I found this to be surprisingly accurate. By engaging with feminist and literary theory, I was developing deeper insights into myself, my writing and the world I had created in my artefact. I discovered that despite my initial reaction to the hegemonic feminist position (see Dworkin 1989; Itzin 1992; Shameem 1993; Russell 1998; Stark & Whisnant 2004; Jeffrey 2008 et al) to the sex industry, I was a feminist. By this I mean that I found that entering into the academic debate about sex work had allowed me to understand why people might be opposed to it and I no longer felt angered by their opposition. I simply learned to accept that they had these opinions for good reasons and rather than trying to prove them wrong, I sought to educate others by bringing my own experience to the discussion.

I had also learned a great deal about the power of the narrative and in particular, characterization and how to effectively achieve this (Culler 1975; Rimmon-Kenan 2002; Jahn 2005; Margolin 2007) which I discuss further in another section of this exegesis. I realised that characters in a novel serve
many functions and I could employ them to get certain but subtle messages across to my readers. These messages are what Kundera refers to as “the novel’s eternal truth” in that it “says to the reader, ‘things are not as simple as you think’” (Kundera 1988) and forces the reader to rethink their own assumptions and any preconceived notions that they might have about the subject matter.

Thus, in taking into account all of these things that I had learned I realised that the writer who began the novel was not the writer who finished the novel. My voice was changing because as I was evolving, so was my narrator. Les Edgerton writes that “we have many voices within us and each of those voices evolve over time” (Edgerton 2003, p.103) and far from being a negative factor, the evolution of both myself and my protagonist were a natural progression that worked in the narrative.

I also considered the journey of the hero/heroine. There is much written by writers and academics about this (Vogler 1992; Beinhardt 1996 et al). For example, Kathryn Fox said during an interview that “each character, and most importantly the main character, has to go through a character arc and has to be irrevocably changed by the end of that book” (Phelan 2005, p.97). For me this indicated that, because of the events that take place in a novel, which are usually quite dramatic, the character changes. In the case of my artefact, my protagonist is forever changed by a number of events, including her sister’s murder, her entry into the sex industry, her introduction to the criminal underworld, numerous fearful situations she ended up in and two near death experiences of her own. By the end of the novel her naiveté is lost and she has matured. This mirrored my own writerly journey because I had also grown and matured as a writer as a result of new knowledge that I had acquired during the research process. It is important to record this change as this PhD contributes new knowledge about the journey of the writer. Finding my voice as both a writer and an academic was a challenge and at times I found it difficult to switch between the two. However, becoming an academic ultimately enriched my creative writing.

In this section I have discussed the unique challenges I face as an incarcerated student, writing from memory and how I navigated delimitation. I
explain how incarceration affects memory and explore the “philosophy of incarceration” (Davies 1990) and the emotional problem of not wanting to remember that stems from this experience. I have also looked at my research methodology and the methodologies of other writers and what worked for me. I have also explored autoethnography and the self as data and drawn a connection between autoethnographic research and the practice-led research PhD. Finally, I have discussed the voice of the artefact and explored the journey of the writer and how this affected my creative writing.
Stripping it Bare: Empowerment vs. Exploitation

In this section I investigate more closely the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic feminist perspectives on the sex industry and attempt to define my own experiences within it. I also discuss raunch culture and the stigma associated with sex work, and discuss Weitzer’s (2010) proposal of a third ‘polymorphous’ perspective on the sex industry situated between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic views. Finally, I situate my artefact within this third paradigm and explain how the artefact acted as a polymorphous vehicle of exploration.

The Bare Facts
Writing Snuff inevitably led me to research the sex industry and enter into and extend the current academic debates surrounding this controversial profession. As a former sex worker, I found myself particularly interested in the tension between the feminist hegemonic and feminist counter-hegemonic perspectives because acknowledging this tension raised questions for me about my own experience in the sex industry and whether it had been empowering or oppressive. This affected my artefact because it made me re-evaluate how I was portraying the sex industry and the women who participate in it.

The radical feminist hegemonic view is that it is an exploitative industry which upholds the patriarchal capitalist system (Stark & Whisnant 2004 et al). Women are little more than bodies on display, objects of vision “to sexually excite men” (Jeffreys 2008, p.151). The sex industry is depicted as exploitative, oppressive, harmful and degrading to all women (Kappeler 1986; Dworkin 1989; Itzin 1992; Jeffreys 2008) and the women who participate in it as ‘bad girls’, whores and anti-feminists. Stripping is a form of sex work (Sloan, Bell & Strickling 1998; Weitzer 2010; Farley & Kelly 2000 et al) and sex work “involves the exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation” including activities of direct physical contact such as prostitution.
and lap dancing, and indirect sexual stimulation such as pornography, stripping, telephone sex, live sex shows and online performances (Weitzer 2010, p.1). Feminists who oppose all forms of sex work argue that it is “an institution of male supremacy” (Cole cited in Overall 1992) and “a profound sale of self” (Sullivan 1995, p.189). For me this indicates that a large number of women, both feminist and non-feminist, feel degraded by pornography and therefore this viewpoint cannot and should not be ignored. I think that these arguments against pornography are very valid and I wanted to interrogate how I had represented these perspectives throughout my artefact.

The counter-hegemonic view is that women are empowered by the sex industry. They have economic independence, control over their working hours and conditions and are free to express themselves sexually. These feminists “place greater emphasis on issues of sexual freedom and view legal restrictions on pornography as new forms of sexual oppression” (Chancer 1998, p.9). Catherine Lumby argues that, "Feminism is becoming complicit with an ideology that wants to deny women the right to control their own bodies" (Lumby 1997, p.18). For me this means that, rather than seeing pornography as oppressive, these feminists believe that women’s sexuality, which has been historically oppressed, is liberated and empowered by the sex industry which encourages sexual expression. These feminists see critics of prostitution and pornography and their attempts to ban them as being the oppressive force and strongly support sex workers rights to perform “erotic labour” (Chapkis 1997).

During my research I discovered that much has been written about these two opposing views, and it can become confusing. I would often find my own opinion jumping from one side of the debate to the other. I began to question my own experiences in the sex industry and wondered if I was doing the right thing by writing about it. If I was to accept the anti-pornography side of the debate, by writing about the sex industry and its participants in a positive light, perhaps I was harming the women’s cause in general and possibly romanticizing stripping. A contributor to Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography identifying as D. A. Clarke believes that prostitution is romanticized in literature and the media (Clarke in Stark & Whisnant 2004, p.151) and Rebecca Whisnant asks, “what are the costs to
women in general” (Whisnant in Stark & Whisnant 2004, p.24)? So I had to ask myself if writing *Snuff* was harming women by romanticizing stripping and encouraging it as a profession and therefore perpetuating exploitation.

On the other hand, I felt compelled to write about the positive aspects of the industry as though I had to prove the point that sex work could indeed be an empowering experience for some women, despite what feminists who oppose it believe. The empowering experiences of feminists such as R. Danielle Egan who writes about a poignant encounter with a blind customer in which she “shared a pleasurable sensual moment” that gave her “a sense of freedom” (Egan, Frank & Johnson 2006, pp.22-23) or Nina Hartley, a hard-core stripper and video performer who says that her “life is richer and more rewarding for having chosen a sexually oriented occupation” (Hartley 1997, p.58) cannot be disregarded, nor can many of the positive experiences I had myself.

I also toyed with the idea of omitting the snuff film angle from my artefact because I didn’t want to perpetuate the belief that the sex industry is “a deviant enterprise run by shady people and promoting immoral or perverted behaviour” (Weitzer 2010, p.2). In the end, however, I left this in because I realised that I didn’t need to concern myself about this as there is a very clear distinction between snuff films and the sex industry in general. Snuff films are illegal and occupy a tiny space in the sphere of the sex industry that can hardly be compared to mainstream pornography. In fact many people question the existence of bona fide snuff films, claiming that they are an urban myth (Kerekes & Slater in Brown 2003, p.130) or relegating them to perverted variants of the horror film genre (Williams 1989) and while I would like to discuss this more, having acknowledged that this is an important topic that requires more research, it is not within the scope of this exegesis.

**Raunch Culture & Stigmatization**

In recent years there has been a surge in interest in the writing of sex workers and sex worker feminists (Delacoste & Alexander 1987; Nagle 1997; Lee 1999; Burana 2001; Jameson & Strauss 2004; Holden 2005; Diablo 2006; Egan, Frank & Johnson 2006; Perkins & Lovejoy 2007) so I felt that my novel was well
situated. Some commentators, such as Ariel Levy (2005) and Natasha Walter (2010), believe that this interest is a result of the emergence of a hypersexual “raunch culture” (Levy 2005). Walter argues that this new highly sexualized culture “rests on the illusion of equality…but if we look more clearly at the current situation, we can see how shaky this illusion really is” (Walter 2010, p.119). This argument is not so different from what Ariel Levy suggested. She believes that women have been duped by the patriarchy into believing that being sexy and flaunting our bodies is empowering. She coins the term ‘female chauvinist pig’ explaining that this is “the new ‘empowered woman’ who wears the Playboy bunny as a talisman, pursues casual sex as if it were a sport, and takes off her bra to win favour from the boys” (Levy 2005) and poses the question, is this true empowerment or a sign of “how far we haven’t come” (Jong cited in Levy 2005, p.76)? For me, this is an interesting point of contention. I am fascinated by the contradiction of society’s acceptance of raunch culture and yet its continuing exclusion and even condemnation of sex workers, the ones who according to Walter define the terms of female sexuality (Walter 2010, p.3). I cannot understand how Walter (2010) has come to the conclusion that “the sex industry has become more generally acceptable” (Walter 2010, p.4) when, in my experience, the stigma surrounding sex work and sex workers still exists. As I discuss elsewhere in this exegesis, experience as evidence in academic work has become more validated (Hausbeck & Brents 2004) so I felt that my challenging of Walter’s argument was well-founded. This challenge then led me to the question: in this age of Girls Gone Wild, pole dancing classes, ‘sexting” and “porno-chic” (McKee, Albury & Lumby 2008, p.101), if the sex industry has become so acceptable then why are stripping and prostitution still not considered to be a legitimate career choice and a valuable economic exchange?

In fact Walter (2010) herself demonstrates contempt for sex work as a career choice by frowning upon the aspirations that some women have to become glamour models and referring to exotic dancers as “slender exhibitionists with large breasts gyrating around poles in their underwear” (Walter 2010, p.3). There seems to be no question that she finds little or no value in sex work and I find this to be contradictory to her assertion that the sex
industry has become more acceptable. For me, her comment indicates a double standard. On the one hand she condemns the rise of this hypersexual culture saying that “it is not proof that we have reached full equality” but “rather it has reflected and exaggerated the deeper imbalances of power in our society” (Walter 2010, p.8) and then makes what I can only conclude is an anti-feminist statement by objectifying exotic dancers herself. Kari Kessler (2002) made a similar critique of Carol Pateman’s (1988) argument against prostitution. In her critique, Kessler says that Pateman’s argument focuses “solely on the body, with no attention to the skills and services a prostitute brings to the encounter” (Kessler 2002, p.229). Kessler contends that “prostitutes are not simply ‘bodies’” and states that she finds it “highly ironic that a feminist analysis of prostitution should objectify women in this way” (Kessler 2002, p.229).

However, what Kessler found does not surprise me. Many of the academic as well as culturally based arguments against sex work appear to echo Pateman’s rhetoric (Overall 1992; Satz 1995 cited in Kessler 2002; Stark & Whisnant 2004 et al) and it seems to me that indeed many feminists fall into the trap of themselves objectifying the women they claim they are trying to defend. This is not to say that some of the arguments against sex work are not valid but Kessler’s observation is certainly food for thought about this apparent contradiction.

This debate about raunch culture seems to me to indicate a new wave in feminist thinking. Alan McKee, Catharine Lumby and Katherine Albury, authors of The Porn Report, believe that it is precisely because of feminist politics that this hypersexual culture exists, arguing that “raunch culture is in fact a product of feminism” and Girls Gone Wild is actually “evidence of the success of feminism rather than its failure” (McKee, Albury & Lumby 2008). Whether one views raunch culture and Girls Gone Wild as a success or failure is debatable. Women and feminists of the 1970’s fought for “greater sexual freedom” (Van Krieken 2000, p.671). So it is interesting and provocative to ask here then, if rather than blaming the sex industry for the rise of raunch culture, should we perhaps be holding feminism responsible?

It is perhaps helpful here to look again at Natasha Walter and her perspective. In her book, Living Dolls, she re-examines every belief she used to
have about women, freedom and sexual liberty stating that she now believes that she was completely wrong. Arguing that while it was: “indeed the aim of the women’s liberation movement of the 1970’s that women should be released from conventional morality around sex which had confined them to idealized chastity on the one hand or contemptible promiscuity on the other” (Walter 2010, p.5) she considers how baffling it is “that all aspects of the current hypersexual culture are often now seen as proof of women’s growing freedom and power” (Walter 2010, p.5). To me this seems a valid argument but I would ask again, how is it that our society has supposedly become so accepting of this hypersexual culture when they do not accept or approve of the women who participate in this industry? And why is the sex industry to blame here?

Part of Walter’s argument rests on the belief that the sex industry has become more acceptable in today’s society which is why this hypersexual stripper image is something that more and more young women are aspiring to. I would argue that this is not the case. As I briefly discussed in an earlier section of this exegesis, Why a Crime Novel in the Sex Industry?, my former occupation is still a point of contention amongst those with whom I choose to share this knowledge so if what Walter says is true and the sex industry has become more acceptable, why do I experience this?

Weitzer (2010) offers some enlightenment. While he agrees that some sectors of the sex industry have been mainstreamed to a point, he argues that “it would be premature to conclude that sex for sale has now become normalized as some claim” citing high percentages from American polls which report that most Americans still believe that pornography and prostitution is deviant, sinful behaviour (Weitzer 2010, p.2). He goes on to say that what he sees here is “a paradox” because the sex industry, which is extremely lucrative and “employs a significant number of workers and attracts many customers but is regarded by many people as deviant and in need of stricter control, if not banned outright…continues to be stigmatized, even when it is legal” (Weitzer 2010, p.3). Or in other words, if the sex industry is accepted, as Walter claims, why does the stigma still exist?

I touch on this issue of stigmatization in my artefact. Stigma is defined as “a social attribute that is deeply discrediting and reduces the bearer from a
whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one” (Goffman 1963 cited in Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips & Benoit 2006, p.268). Historically, sex work and violence are thought to be inextricably linked (Johnson 2006, pp.177-178) and sex workers are believed to be “sluts…and druggies” (Sweet & Tewksbury 2000, p.325) so when a violent crime against a sex worker occurs, the attitude that ‘it was inevitable’ or ‘she deserved it because she’s a slut’ (Johnson 2006, p.177) persists. The murder victim in *Snuff* is a sex worker named Melody Mitchell. Aware of the stigmatization surrounding sex workers, it seems to Melody’s sister Raini, that while the police routinely investigate Melody’s murder, she is little more than a statistic to the police and therefore not important. It is this that propels Raini into going undercover in the sex industry to find out what happens to her sister and in the process she dispels many of the myths that people, including herself, believe to be true about strippers.

Frank (2000) writes about the use of fiction as a way of conveying ethnographic representation. She speaks of writing about an encounter between two fictional characters in a strip club:

> to include detail that would help readers who were unfamiliar with this kind of venue or relationship discern some of the multiple meanings of such an encounter to the participants and the intricate nuances of the performances involved for both parties (Frank 2000, p.481).

I attempted to use the same technique in *Snuff*. Through Raini’s journey these women are humanized not only to her but also to the reader who begins to understand that a woman working in the sex industry is not defined by what she does but rather, who she is.

**Polymorphism and the Möbius Strip: A Non-binary Approach to Understanding the Sex Industry**

The idea of a third paradigm began to occur to me during my research, but I had not yet found a way to explain what I was thinking. I discuss in the section, *Making Snuff* how I struggled with the idea of empowerment versus exploitation and how I thought that neither of these discourses fit my experiences as a sex
worker. I began to speculate about whether there was another way to describe and explain these experiences and wondered what that might be. I was therefore excited to discover that I wasn’t the only one thinking about this.

It was Ronald Weitzer (2010) who crystallized this for me with his essay *Sex Work: Paradigms and Policies* in his book *Sex for Sale*. Here, he expresses the view that “the oppression and empowerment perspectives are one dimensional and essentialist” (Weitzer 2010, p.6) and introduces the idea of a third paradigm which he calls ‘the polymorphous paradigm’. This new polymorphous paradigm “holds that there is a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences” and “unlike the other two perspectives, polymorphism is sensitive to complexities and to the structural conditions shaping the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and worker’s control” (Weitzer 2010, p.6). For me this offered an innovative approach to understanding sex work and my own experiences. It meant that I no longer had to take an either/or perspective on sex work and I was excited by the possibilities it presented. Weitzer goes on to explain that there is “substantial variation in how sex work is organised and experienced by workers, clients and managers” and says that studies of these experiences “undermine some deep rooted myths about prostitution and present a challenge to those…who embrace monolithic paradigms” (Weitzer 2010, p.6). He believes that:

*victimization, exploitation, choice, job satisfaction, self esteem, and other dimensions should be treated as variables (not constants) that differ between types of sex work, geographical locations, and other structural and organizational conditions* (Weitzer, pp.6-7).

In my own experience, this was certainly accurate, and as this is an autoethnographic narrative, the data of self is a unique and important contribution to knowledge (Foss & Foss 1994) that extends the scholarly conversation.

The experiences of sex workers I had met were as diverse as the costumes they wore and very much depended on the context in which the work
took place. For example, women I met who worked as prostitutes on the street had very different experiences from women who worked in legal brothels. And for me, exotic dancing in Auckland, New Zealand in 1994 was a very different experience from exotic dancing in Melbourne, Australia in 1996. For one thing, New Zealand didn’t offer the up close and personal experience of lap dancing. A show in Auckland comprised of a stage show in which I would strip and men would tip me when I danced near them rather than a one-on-one situation in which I virtually ‘danced’ on their laps.

Weitzer’s argument is not so different from what Bernadette Barton encountered in her research. In her book, *Stripped: Inside the Life of Exotic Dancers*, she holds the view that stripping “cannot be neatly broken down into an either/or experience of empowerment or oppression” concluding that it is instead, “a mixture of the two, an unexplored theoretical terrain” (Barton 2006, pp.21-22). It is here that she refers to stripping as “a Möbius strip’ of rapidly changing feelings and events” (Barton 2006, pp.21-22). A Möbius strip is a “one-sided surface formed by joining the ends of a narrow rectangle after twisting one end through 180º” (The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary 1996, p.687). It is a single continuous loop that appears to be two-sided, but is actually one-sided. In this context however, Barton (2006) is implying that because the surface and the underside of the Möbius strip are one and the same, “dancers delicately traverse a spiral of customer reactions in which each emotion or behaviour may become its opposite in an instant” (Barton 2006, p.71). She concludes that “the early-career dancer often finds…that the surface or daily tasks of her job are inseparable from the underside of the sex industry and it is impossible for her not to be part of both sides” (Barton 2006, p.72). For me, this further reinforced the idea of the polymorphous paradigm and I was encouraged to further explore this idea within the artefact.

Like Barton (2006) and Weitzer (2010), Wendy Chapkis (1997) believes that “a woman’s experience performing erotic labour is highly determined by the conditions under which the work is performed” (Chapkis 1997, p.131). In *Snuff* the Möbius strip is most represented by Raini’s experience and whether these experiences are positive or negative very much depend on her mood, the atmosphere in the club and how the customers have treated her. For example,
in Chapter 8, Raini is feeling depressed after a particularly grueling night in which she feels somewhat humiliated. But on a different night in Chapter 18, she feels empowered by her newfound powers of seduction. In this way *Snuff* demonstrates the “Möbius strip of rapidly changing feelings and events” (Barton 2006, pp.21-22) that Barton proposes. Barton argues that:

> to fully understand exotic dancing, it is important to understand the actual work the dancers do and the environment they do it in and, only then (can you determine) whether or not aspects of the work can be considered empowering or exploitative or something else altogether (Barton 2006, pp.41-42).

This opinion was further supported by Lacy Sloan, Holly Bell and Chris Strickling (1998). They advocate for “the adoption of a stance that acknowledges the variety of experiences that women may have as sex workers” saying that it would be more prudent to understand “the factors that influence women’s experiences rather than trying to enforce a single feminist hegemony on the topic” as this “may bring about needed changes that will help all women” (Sloan, Bell & Strickling 1998, p.360). For me this signaled a change in the way some researchers were beginning to evaluate their findings and led me to believe that these academics in particular were undertaking their research with an open mind rather than trying to make their research fit in with their own beliefs. But what does this mean for sex work? Could this be the beginning of a revolutionary way of reading and writing about those who perform erotic labour?

P.D James (2009) argues that contemporary detective fiction writers “set out not only to provide an exciting and credible mystery, but to examine and criticize the world which their characters inhabit” (James 2009, p.23) and this approach was certainly a consideration for me during the creative process. My artefact examines the sex industry that is the world of my characters and contributes to a polymorphous approach by representing all perspectives both positive and negative. In this way, the artefact and the exegesis extend the scholarly conversation about sex work. I am reminded here, of Kundera (1988)
who believes that the “eternal truth” of the novel is to convey to the reader that “things are not as simple as you think” (Kundera 1988, p.18) and this was certainly a ‘truth’ that I kept in mind when I was writing Snuff. I saw it as an opportunity to change misperceptions about the sex industry by presenting my own ideas and beliefs as well as a way to explore the possibilities of the Möbius strip and polymorphous paradigms.

The Artefact: A Polymorphous Vehicle of Exploration
After doing this research I went back to my novel, demonstrating once more the “symbiosis between research and creative practice” (Smith & Dean 2009, p.11) that is a fundamental aspect of practice-led research. I realised that my artefact, Snuff, could be a way to engage readers in the debate about the sex industry and introduce them to the idea of the third polymorphous paradigm that Weitzer describes. In this way, the artefact became a vehicle of exploration in which I presented a diverse range of experiences of women in the sex industry, some of which were empowering, others that were exploitative and some that were both or neither. These experiences were presented through various characters and scenes throughout Snuff, some of which I will examine here.

The main character, Raini Mitchell, describes for us in Chapter 2 how she always knew “something bad would happen to Melody" as a direct result of her stripping. Here, Raini is voicing what many people believe to be true about stripping – that it is bad (Sweet & Tewksbury 2000) and dangerous and will ultimately lead to a woman’s demise (Johnson in Egan, Frank & Johnson 2006, pp.171-172). This sets the scene for me to dispel this belief by demonstrating that Melody’s murder is not in fact because of her stripping but because of the knowledge she possesses about the antagonist, Trish. Many feminists believe that women in the sex industry are more at risk of experiencing violence (Sanders & Campbell 2007; Shannon et al 2008; Ratinthorn, Meleis & Sindhu 2009 et al). However, I would argue that while this may indeed be the case for women who are forced into sex work, it is not necessarily true for women who choose this type of work and whose working conditions are safe, such as within a strip club or brothel environment where there are security guards. Also, as
Roberta Perkins (1991) has demonstrated in her research, this factor may not be present in the Australian context at all (Sullivan 1995, p.185). I think that what should also be taken into account here is the fact that women are at risk in many other workplaces. Other feminists (Overall 1992, Kessler 2002 et al) have made this point arguing that “women can be and are subjected to disease, injury, and psychological abuse inflicted by men in offices, factories, and even their own homes” (Overall 1992, p.711) and some sex workers themselves say that they are “safer at clubs than in my home” (Reed 1997, p.186). Therefore this issue is not a factor that is present only in sex work.

In Chapter 6 we are introduced to a regular customer named Maurice who eventually becomes a friend and ally of the protagonist. Contrary to what many people believe to be true, not all customers or consumers of porn are “sad, dirty old men…unable to have a proper relationship with a woman” (McKee, Albury & Lumby 2008, p.25) and I tried to demonstrate this with Maurice. Much has been written about and by strip club patrons (see Egan, Frank & Johnson 2006, Rambo-Ronai & Ellis 1989, Sijuwade 1995, Nagle 1997 et al) which demonstrate that “clients are strikingly normal” (Reed 1997, p.185), sometimes describing them as thoughtful, generous and good conversationists (Frank in Egan, Frank & Johnson 2006, p.112) or “normal people engaged in an activity more explicit but not different in underlying structure from much of the activity of our daily lives” (Funari 1997, p.26). I am not dismissing the fact that there are sometimes customers who are rude and vulgar (Ronai-Rambo 1992 et al) and I have in fact represented these types of customers in my artefact, specifically in Chapter 8. However, as a polymorphous vehicle my artefact wasn’t about condemning or defending these customers. Instead it is representative of a cross-section of customers who might patronise strip clubs and I believe I have achieved this by including both representations.

As I discussed at the beginning of this section, some feminist critics of sex work believe that strip clubs encourage and perpetuate sexist behaviour (Chancer et al 1998). However as a former sex worker I believe this to be false. When I was dancing I found that I was harassed more outside the strip club than I was while I was in it. Many of these experiences became those of my protagonist as we see in Chapter 8, when an unknown assailant “cops a
feel” of Raini’s backside uninvited and again in Chapter 12 when Raini is verbally harassed on the bus by a group of youths. Other former sex workers report similar experiences, saying that they “encountered less harassment from men in gentlemen’s clubs than anywhere else” (Funari 1997, p.186). Sexist behaviour then, can be seen as a problem in general rather than a problem created or perpetuated by the strip club and this is something I wanted to address in the artefact.

In the Making Snuff section of this exegesis I raise the issue of demonstrating diverse experiences of different women in the sex industry through my stripper characters Melody, Dallas, Jamie, Trish, Alabama and Irina. Using the polymorphous paradigm as a theoretical prism, I would like to discuss further how theory influenced practice when I returned to the novel to write the second draft. To get a complete, multi-dimensional view of the sex industry it was important for me to represent all aspects of the industry: positive and negative, empowering and oppressive. Some character experiences, such as Dallas, Trish and Alabama fit the empowerment paradigm which “is potentially validating or empowering for workers” (Weitzer 2010, pp.5-6), others, such as Irina’s, fit into the oppression paradigm in which “exploitation, subjugation and violence against women are intrinsic to and eradicable from sex work” (Weitzer 2010, pp.5-6) and some, like Jamie, Melody and Raini herself, overlap into both, demonstrating that “sex work involves moments of empowerment, intimacy, and gratification alongside moments of degradation, alienation, or disenchantment” (Frank 2000, p.483). Irina is an extreme example of a woman who is being exploited and forced into the sex industry against her will (Reinhardt n.d; Jeffreys 2008; Bickford 2009; Hughes 2000; Hughes & Denisova 2003). She is subjected to rape and violence and involuntarily injected with drugs to make her compliant. Though abhorrent, this oppressive experience contributes to the artefact as a whole and to the polymorphous view contained within it.

Melody is an example of a dancer whose experience is both empowering and oppressive depending on which perspective you view it from. She enjoyed her work and found it empowering because it was lucrative and gave her economic independence. However, as we see in Chapter 28, her boss, Trish, refers to her as little more than a money maker. So is she being exploited even
though she doesn’t realise it, or is she truly empowered? The artefact acknowledges the paradox of Melody’s experiences and her experience is in itself polymorphous. From this we learn that it is inaccurate to define Melody’s experience as either exploitative or oppressive and we begin to understand that defining it in these terms is not conducive to reaching a comprehensive understanding of sex work.

Jamie’s experience also includes both exploitative and empowering aspects. She enters the sex industry for economic reasons but falls victim to Trish who in the end exploits her sexually and also exploits her death for profit. But rather than forming an opinion based on one character’s experience, it is more useful to study all of these experiences combined because they offer a polymorphous view of what it is like to be a sex worker.

In this section I have discussed a non-binary view of sex work and its implications for my artefact and exegesis based on my personal experience, creative writing and academic research. I am inclined to agree with Kari Kessler (2002) that one of the main problems of prostitution is not the work itself but the stigma attached to it. I find it highly ironic that society is saturated with raunch culture but still refuses to accept genuine sex workers. I also find it somewhat hypocritical that the women who want to emulate strippers are scornful of the very women they emulate. This stigmatisation is not something that will change overnight but it is my hope that in the future, rather than viewing sex workers with disdain, society might come to accept and understand that the service sex workers provide is just as valuable as any other type of service.

During my research I also came to understand that the issue of consent and voluntary/involuntary participation in the sex industry is a crucial one. As Sloan, Bell and Strickling argue, “for some women, exploitation is about not having choices” (Sloan, Bell & Strickling 1998, p.360) I cannot ignore the oppressive experiences of sex industry ‘survivors’ such as Taylor Lee (2004) or women who are sold and trafficked into sex work (Hughes 2000; Hughes & Denisova 2003; Miko 2003; Scott 2006), just as I cannot ignore the empowering experiences of sex industry veterans such as Nina Hartley (1997) and Amber Cooke (1987). What may be empowering for one woman is not necessarily empowering in a different context in which a woman is being forced to perform
sex work. Thus it is my belief that the polymorphous paradigm becomes even more significant as the most practical approach in developing an understanding of these complexities within sex work and of sex workers themselves.

In *Snuff* I attempted to capture these complex issues, and convey them to my audience in a way that was both compelling and entertaining. Kundera (1988) describes the novel as "a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters" (p.83). Just as my research had generated my ‘meditation on existence’ resulting in a greater understanding of the very work I had engaged in, I also hoped that the same would be true for the reader.
Making Snuff

In this chapter I will examine the creative process involved in planning plot devices, enacting dialogue and characterization. I also investigate how my scholarly research influenced the creative process that generated the artefact. I go on to bridge the gap between writing the novel and developing the academic debate in the exegesis.

Character
My main character, Raini, appeared to me at 3am as I was lying in bed. In my mind, I saw a pretty, round faced brunette girl stocking supermarket shelves. It would be here, I decided, that she would receive the news that would change her life. But at this point she was still just “a seminal idea that was little more than an image” (Eco 2006, p.308). She had no substance. I needed to give her a personality. But how was I going to do this? Reading about narrative theory in the production of my working journal enabled me to make the connections between making Snuff and entering into the scholarly conversation about practice as knowledge.

Professor Uri Margolin, an expert in the field of narrative studies, defines character as, “Any entity, individual or collective – normally human or human-like – introduced in a work of narrative fiction” (Margolin 2007, p.67). This idea was useful but too broad. I realised I needed something more specific. Here, the importance and usefulness of the journal was emphasized as it provided the link between the artefact and the exegesis. How does one create such entities, I mused? How would I create my cast of characters?

The sex industry, and indeed my life, provided me with a substantial ‘collective’ of interesting and unusual people that I could draw from. In her memoir, A Better Woman, Susan Johnson suggests a writer should use an amalgamation of the people she has encountered in order to fashion characters (Johnson 1999, p.8). Similarly, Harold Love says that, “Many novelists speak in interviews of jotting down real-life conversations in notebooks and of cannibalizing their friends for characters” (Love cited in Arnold 2006, p.9). With
this in mind, I used the journal to write a character profile for my protagonist, Raini Mitchell. Writer Larry Beinhart discusses character profiles as being particularly helpful for creating characters. He even suggests using a psychiatrist’s questionnaire to create an extensive and well-rounded character biography (Beinhart 1996, pp.87-93). Although I didn’t write a lengthy or extensive biography, I did write a two page character profile. This process was particularly helpful because I was able to figure out what made Raini tick, how she might act and what her response to different situations and people might be. I would also be able to refer back to this at a later date if I needed to. Keeping a writer’s journal, then, provided a vital link between practice and theory.

So with Love’s (2006) and Johnson’s (1999) suggestions fresh in my mind, I gave Raini many of my younger sister’s characteristics. My sister is what I would consider to be ‘mega straight’ in that she is from what those in stripping (and criminal) circles call the ‘straight’ world – she has a respectable job and lives a normal life by society’s standards. I wondered what would happen to this character if she were to enter my world. How would she respond to it? What experiences would she have? And so Raini is, in essence, a younger version of my sister as I remember her. She has her insecurities, her independence, her loner nature and her fierce loyalty to her sister.

The importance of secondary characters cannot be underestimated because they “help in the dynamic process of character evolution through what they can reveal” (Walters 1996, p.69). In writing Snuff I found this to be especially true because without the assistance of secondary characters, my protagonist would not be able to solve the crime of her sister’s murder. The secondary characters I employed in Snuff moved the story forward by providing information to the protagonist and assisting her in situations that she could not perform alone. My protagonist is ultimately an accidental amateur detective who often needed assistance and it would have been unrealistic to cast her as a crime fighting extraordinaire who did everything alone.

Janet Evanovich says that it is important to pay attention to your supporting cast of characters “no matter how minor their roles” (Evanovich 2006, p.16). With this in mind, I also wrote brief profiles for Raini’s parents as
well as her sister Melody, the victim. I modeled much of Melody on myself. This was a logical decision because I have worked as an exotic dancer and could use many aspects and experiences from my own life to create this character, making her as ‘real’ as possible. Rex Burns (1992) says that “the characters in fiction come from the world around us and from within” (Burns 1992, p.54) and for me this was true because most of my secondary characters appeared on the page with little or no effort. Trish, the strip club manager is based on the Manager from my days at The Penthouse. Maurice is a hybrid of all the nice customers I ever encountered with the potential to become obsessive. Marcello is all of my ex-boyfriends combined. Cheetah – the bitchy stripper that exists in every strip club. And Dallas, the one good friend you make on the job. So I had the characters. The next step was how to make them come alive.

**Breathing Life into Characters**

It is easy enough to create a character but I was challenged to ask, how does a writer make each one believable? How did I breathe life into my characters?

Jonathan Culler gives a clue when he says, “The most successful and ‘living’ characters are richly delineated autonomous wholes, clearly distinguished from others by physical and psychological characteristics” (Culler 1975, p.230). From this, I interpreted that I needed to ‘delineate’ or define their characteristics, motivations and personalities through narrative, while also ensuring that each character is individual and unique.

There are multiple complex views regarding the creation of characters (Abbot 2002; Jahn 2005; Herman 2007). I am considering the view here of narrative theorist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. According to her there are two techniques for presenting characters. She refers to direct definition and indirect presentation (Rimmon-Kenan 1983/2002, p.59). Direct definition is naming of the character traits by the narrator. Indirect presentation, on the other hand, exemplifies character through action, speech, external appearance, environment and reinforcement by analogy. So which type of presentation would I use?
I experimented with both techniques to decide which approach would best suit my novel. What I found was that it was impossible to limit myself to using just one type of presentation. In order to achieve believability, writers must present characters in a variety of ways. Readers need more than a physical description to discern what a character is like. Their personalities must be evident in their speech, the clothes they wear and even their surroundings. As Amanda Boulter reminds us,

"the reader ‘reads’ the character, trying to decide upon their hidden traits and motivations…we need to focus on particular details, the subtle nuances that make the character unique" (Boulter 2007, pp.138-139).

So I used both direct definition and indirect presentation in *Snuff*. The following is an example of direct definition.

She had flawless, milky white skin and pouty, red painted lips. The kind guys fantasise about. With such smooth skin she was either about the same age as me or a walking advertisement for Botox. I couldn’t see her eyebrows so I wasn’t too sure. She had shoulder length, platinum blonde hair that was fashionably styled - long windswept fringe and layered ‘flicky’ bits. But it was her nails that finally clued me in. Long, diamante studded, glossy red and definitely false. Just like Melody’s. (Morgan 2010, p.17)

I used indirect presentation by making each character completely different either in physical appearance, speech or the way they reacted to certain situations. For example in Chapter 13, the restaurant scene, I put Raini and Dallas in the same situation and showed how each one reacted differently depending on their personalities. Raini is horrified whereas Dallas thinks it’s funny.

Waiters came running from every direction, one carrying a fire extinguisher. He blasted Marcello, knocking him backwards. We all watched in horror as
Marcello fell, smacking his head into a chair before he hit the deck and lay there motionless, covered in white powder.

“Somebody call an ambulance,” a woman called out.

I groaned and reached for my mobile.

“Now that was cool,” Dallas breathed. (Morgan 2010, p.95)

I also looked to other crime fiction writers for inspiration. How, I wondered, have they achieved lively characters? I decided to examine one of my favourite crime fiction writers, Janet Evanovich, to see how she had created her crime fighting, bounty hunter character, Stephanie Plum, and how she had achieved believability.

The bestselling author of the *Stephanie Plum* crime novels, Evanovich says that it is imperative that characters be memorable, worth caring about and evoke emotions in readers. Well-developed characters are multidimensional and the protagonist must be motivated by something that they want. What defines characters are the choices that they make throughout the novel in an effort to overcome obstacles and ultimately achieve what they want (Evanovich 2006, p.3). Rex Burns, author of the *Gabe Wagner* and *Devlin Kirk* novels, also sheds light on this issue, saying that, “Voice is character” (Burns 1992, p.52). From this I interpreted that I needed to convey character through the voice of the narrator as well as the voice of the characters. This would require a combination of narrative voice, action, internal monologue and dialogue. I discuss voice further in the *Scattered Pictures* section of this exegesis.

Uri Margolin writes about the importance of differentiating characters from one another saying that “any two coexisting characters must differ in at least one property” (Margolin 2007, p.74). I tried this by using a number of different techniques, including physical appearance, different personality traits and by giving most of my main characters distinguishable speech patterns or sayings that were unique to them. For example, Marcello always calls Raini ‘Princess’, and Raini’s internal monologue which is full of explanations that begin with ‘I mean…’. In this way their voices become unique to them. Raini is also the narrator, so it was essential that I conveyed Raini’s voice with
conviction and consistency, a point that I will discuss at greater length in another section of this exegesis.

I will now consider the relationship of the academic research to my creative act. In searching for answers about character creation I used the working journal to experiment with different techniques and then applied the ones that I found most useful to my novel. The journal provided a conceptual space where I was free to explore and experiment with ideas, and to expand my creativity (Rainer 1990) in a way that was enlightening and uninhibited. I have discussed previously how the journal acts as a tool to collect self-observational data of the present creative process and self-reflective data from the past, how it provided a link between practice and theory, and also how I used it to create character profiles. This is another example of the way in which the journal facilitated my thinking and the practice.

Characterization that was Influenced by my Research
My study of feminist theory particularly engaged me. As a former sex worker, I had strong opinions about the sex industry. I was convinced that it had been an empowering experience for me but the self-referential became challenged by academic insights. The more research I did, the less convinced I became that my experiences were as positive and empowering as I remembered them. I began to question my experiences as a sex worker. It was while reading a collection of essays in Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography (Stark & Whisnant 2004) that I began to feel conflicted. All of the essays are anti-pornography. The more I read, the more I began to question myself and my experiences - was I a victim after all? I'd certainly never thought of myself that way and I've vehemently defended my choices all of my adult life. In his essay, How Prostitution Works, Joe Parker discusses the pimps and the clients of sex workers (Parker 2004, p.10). He says that pimps are power trippers who target specific victim profiles in order to trick and then trap women and children into the sex trade. As I cast my mind back to my introduction to the Industry, I wondered if, at the tender age of 16, this had in fact happened to me. And if it had, what did that mean to my sense of self?
By this stage, I had the first draft in outline for my novel *Snuff*. So as I allowed these thoughts about my sense of self to sink in I wondered, what was to become of my novel now that I'd had to step back and reassess my experiences? Did it change things for my protagonist, Raini? Did I have a point to prove and should I change some of the narrative to put a positive spin on the Industry? And in doing this was I being true to myself and, more importantly, to the story? This reminded me of something I had read and recorded in my journal. Kundera (1988) says that, a character is “an experimental self” (Kundera 1988, p.34). I realised that through my protagonist I could explore all of these questions, both about the sex industry and my own life. In this way, my character was an experimental self because I was using her as a tool to discover things about myself and my past that I had not stopped to consider before. Charles Taylor (1989) believes that “in order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become and where we are going” and it is through the use of narrative (and therefore characters within the narrative) that we understand ourselves (Taylor 1989 cited in Kreiswirth 2000, p.310). This notion led me to the belief that the uncertainty I was feeling about my sense of self and the experiences I had in the sex industry that I was beginning to question, might be resolved upon the completion of my artefact.

I decided I have something to say about the sex industry and the women who work in it. It was going to be honest and personal. The more I reflected on my time spent in the industry, the more I realised it was not empowering at all. Nor was it exploitative. In fact the word ‘empowerment’ was something I had learnt during my research. My research was validated by my reading of autoethnographic methodology. Chang (2008) articulates that “studying and writing of self-narratives is an extremely valuable activity in understanding self and others connected to self” (p.33). Thus, through my writing of *Snuff*, I hoped that I might begin to make sense of my experiences and come to understand myself and what had led me to the sex industry.

I attempt to illustrate my own personal experiences in *Snuff*. I realise that rather than having to prove anything, I only need to present the experiences through my various characters. My novel isn't about proving one side of the debate or the other wrong. It is about telling a story that takes place
within the sex industry and just like any other industry it has both positive and negative aspects to it. Narrative for some is recognized as “the quintessential form of customary knowledge” (Lyotard 1977 cited in Kreiswirth 2000, p.301) and I sought to impart my own knowledge through the artefact, using it as “an analytic or methodological instrument” (Kreiswirth 2000, p.300) to explore these positive and negative aspects. In this way, Snuff became a polymorphous vehicle for me to present and explore them in an honest and sometimes humorous manner, a point which I discuss in another section of this exegesis. Whether my readers found it empowering, exploitative or none of the above was entirely up to them. I deal with this concept of the ideal reader in a later section.

The experiences of my characters reflected my own experiences, and the experiences of many of the women I worked with. Through my characters in Snuff, I was able to demonstrate different perspectives and experiences, and explore each one in a way that was both entertaining and educational for my audience. Uri Margolin describes character as an artifice, or a clever device that is “constructed by an author for some purpose” (Margolin 2007, p.66). To this end, the characters that I constructed serve the purpose of representing a diverse range of women participating in the sex industry that I believe is reflective of the reality of many dancers’ lives. But they were not simply constructed to make a statement from the beginning. These ideas of representation were layered in during second and third drafts as a result of my research, thus demonstrating the “symbiosis between research and creative practice in which each feeds on the other” (Smith & Dean 2009, p.11) of practice-led research. However, I had to be careful not to resort to stereotypes and I avoided this by creating round, imperfect characters that the reader could relate to. A round character, also known as a dynamic character, is “a three dimensional figure characterized by many, often conflicting properties” that “tends to develop in the course of the action and is not reducible to a type” (Jahn 2005). Take, for example, in Snuff, the gangster character, Marcello. At the beginning we see him as a sleazy drug dealer but as the story progresses we learn that he enjoys classic literature, is capable of love and is supportive of Raini when she needs him. I also avoided stereotypes by conveying the experiences and ideas in often subtle ways through action and dialogue rather
than using the narrator to make a statement. An example of this is the character Alabama who Raini encounters amid a pile of text books in Chapter 19. She asks Alabama what she is studying but does not make a big deal of it. In this way the character representation is subtle but it is still clear.

In order to map out how each character might represent a particular point of view or discourse, I created the following list:

**Dallas**

This character is representative of the rebellious, intelligent and adventurous woman who has chosen stripping as one of many employment options. Dallas has a University Degree and challenges the stereotype of what many people believe to be true about exotic dancers.

My heels clacked on the newly polished floorboards and I admired some Aboriginal artwork that adorned the plum coloured walls. Two paintings down, was a framed Master of Arts in Languages Degree.

“Wow. Impressive.”

“Surprised?”

“Kind of…”

“Hey,” Dallas joked, “We’re not all drug addicts or abuse victims who do it because we have no other options, y’know.” (Morgan 2010, p.88)

This character is a feminist who enjoys having complete control over her body and rebelling against society’s expectations. Some feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin, might describe this character as a privileged woman who chose this profession in a misguided attempt to gain empowerment but in doing so, is harming the woman’s cause in general (Dworkin in Stark & Whisnant 2004). However, I think Dallas exemplifies the modern woman who has the right to enjoy or create pornography as a personal choice. Lacey Sloan and Stephanie Wahab (2004) define this type of dancer as a “non-conformist” and a “rebel” who is usually “white, middle or upper socioeconomic status, college educated” and has “the privilege and resources to enter a stigmatized profession” and leave when she tires of it (Sloan & Wahab 2004, pp.26-27).
This character was definitely influenced by my research of the feminist debate about sex work. There seems to be a dominant belief that all strippers are uneducated drug addicts and/or childhood abuse victims with limited employment prospects (Russell 1993; Sweet & Tewksbury 2000 et al). I know this to be false based on my personal experience as well as what I had discovered during my research. So I want Dallas to be a representation of the middle class, well educated women who choose to strip, for various reasons, despite having other options available to them. Academics who identify themselves as such include Jill Nagle (1997), R. Danielle Egan (2006), Katherine Frank (2006) and Merri-Lisa Johnson (2006). The character of Dallas was indeed inspired by Jill Nagle who wrote in her introduction to *Whores and Other Feminists*: “Like many of the contributors to this volume, my racial and economic privileges afforded me the opportunity to choose participation in the sex industry from among many other options” (Nagle 1997, p.2). This indicates that there are women who freely choose sex work.

This character also served another purpose and is what Manfred Jahn describes as a “functionally determined character” in the form of a “confidant (sic)” that is a character that “the protagonist can speak to, exchange views with, confide in – usually a close friend” (Jahn 2005). This type of character is not unusual in crime fiction. Janet Evanovich uses the same technique in her *Stephanie Plum* series with her character, Lula. She says that, “In action fiction, if you leave a character alone for too long, no matter what the character is doing, it gets boring. So I thought Stephanie could use a side kick like Lula” (Evanovich 2006, p.19). While I did not deliberately set out to use Dallas as Raini’s side kick, I soon realised that Evanovich was right. As an amateur detective, Raini needs a lot of help as well as someone to bounce ideas off of. Dallas was the perfect choice for this role because she was able to provide Raini with quite a bit of useful information and assist her in difficult situations that often added more humour or entertainment to the plot. She also provided opportunities to give information to the reader indirectly, which helped to move the story forward at various points. An example is in Chapter 6 when Dallas tells Raini about Cheetah’s rivalry with Melody. This was vital in establishing Cheetah as a suspect in Melody’s murder.
**Alabama**

This character is a student studying Environmental Science. It is not unusual for students to enter the sex industry “as a pragmatic response to increasing education costs” (Lantz 2005, p.385). The Alabama character is representative of many of the women I worked with in the sex industry who were working to pay their university fees. She will not remain in the industry forever. For this woman, sex work is a means to an end. This character was created to debunk the myth that all strippers are “uneducated or stupid” (Sweet & Tewksbury 2000, p.327).

**Jamie**

This character is a teenage runaway. She exemplifies the ‘victim’ and ‘victim profiling’ that Parker (2004) wrote about in his essay *How Prostitution Works*, (Parker 2004). She is from a poor socioeconomic background, appears to come from a broken home and works as a dancer because she has limited employment options. One of the feminist arguments against prostitution points to a larger problem – that of women facing poverty who are being exploited due to limited employment options (Lee 2004; Short 2004; Itzin 1992; Abbot 2010; Farley & Kelly 2000; Overall 1992 et al). They argue that “the economic hardships experienced by women are particularly attractive to sex industry businesses. In fact the poverty of women is a necessary condition for the establishment and survival of the sex industry (Short 2004, p.307). While I don’t agree that poverty is a necessary condition, and my experience and research has shown that not all women enter the sex industry only due to poverty, I cannot argue that this is certainly the case in many instances, and seems particularly relevant in the United States. The reason why is something I would like to have investigated, however it is not within the scope of this exegesis. So with these points in mind, I wanted to represent such women and so I invented Jamie. With no family or friends outside of the industry, she is an easy target for pimps such as Trish, who ultimately has her killed in a snuff film.
Cheetah
The career stripper, this character is older than most of the other dancers. She is an ex-glamour model who spent her younger days as a centrefold in men’s magazines and now makes a living as a dancer. This character is representative of exotic dancers who Murphy calls career dancers “whose motivation for stripping is (solely) to make money” (Murphy 2003, p.322). In my experience these dancers usually remain in the industry until they are either no longer making money or end up in a management role (such as Trish).

Trish
This character is also a career stripper but more importantly she is the story’s villain. In the beginning I had not decided who the killer would actually be. Beinhardt (1996) says that “villains are constructed with a purpose in mind” (Beinhart 1996, p.110) but what if you don’t know who the villain will be? I knew that the victim (Melody) had been killed because she had threatened to expose someone for making snuff films but I had no idea who that ‘someone’ would be. I looked at what other writers had to say about villains. Kathryn Fox (2005) says that “the villain has to be very clever, and they have to be a wonderful match so it’s a great victory to beat this villain” (Phelan 2005, p.97). Similarly, Christopher Vogler (1992), who also refers to the villain as the shadow archetype, says that:

> the function of the shadow in drama is to challenge the hero and give her a worthy opponent in the struggle. Shadows create conflict and bring out the best in the hero by putting her in a life-threatening situation. It is often been said that a story is only as god as its villain, because a strong enemy forces a hero to rise to the challenge (Vogler 1992, p.72).

With this in mind, I knew that I had to create a worthy opponent for Raini. This had to be someone with the intelligence to outwit not only the protagonist but also the reader. That was when another idea occurred to me.
Catherine McNab (1993) asks us to “consider the thought that women write about murder and read about murder because they are more successful in accomplishing this most anti-social of crimes” (McNab in Bird 1993, p.66). As an incarcerated woman serving time in a maximum security prison, I found this to be entirely accurate, so I deliberately chose to make the killer a woman to challenge the notion that violence and murder are “part of the male psyche” (Moorhead in Bird 1993) and is therefore not a feminine trait but a masculine one. I then chose to make Trish the killer/villain, because she would not be the most obvious suspect. In our cultural discourse, women are generally considered to be nurturers and thus murder goes against their nature. Like Kate Fillion (1996), this is not a belief that I share. Fillion says that “it is important to acknowledge that violence is not something that is programmed into male genes and aggression is not uniquely male” (Fillion 1996, p.239) and I find it irritating that people seem to be in denial about the capacity that women have to commit violence and murder. Perhaps it is because I am in prison and therefore exposed to violence and violent women, and women who have either been directly or indirectly involved in murder. At the time of writing this exegesis, almost 10% of women prisoners in Victoria, Australia are incarcerated for murder and a further 15% (approximately) are incarcerated for other violent offences such as assault, armed robbery and sexual offences (Sentencing Advisory Council 2010).

I also considered women throughout history who did not fit this stereotype and wrote extensively about this in my journal. As one purpose of the journal is to bridge the gap between practice and theory, I utilized these reflections to connect the two elements of artefact and exegesis so that they “talk to each other” (Arnold 2007, p.8).

Jan Stradling (2008) examines women in history considered to be ‘bad’ and looks at the motivations behind their crimes and behaviour. She determined their motivations as being: to ignore or shatter sexual conventions, the desire to escape poverty, to achieve position and power, the result of responsibilities that often accompany leadership, to take revenge, or acute mental illness (Stradling 2008, p.6). A chapter about the Roman Empress, Messalina c.AD22-48 captured my attention. Stradling writes that “unlike the
idealized Roman woman...Messalina practiced none of the virtues that this patriarchal society demanded (and) instead, she exploited the power of her position to acquire lovers and stock her personal coffers” (Stradling 2008, p.27) and I found that Trish could certainly fit this description. As a former sex worker and manager/owner of a strip club, she also ‘practiced none of the virtues that his patriarchal society demanded’ and she committed her crimes out of greed. But Stradling’s work had led me to wonder, if women throughout history had exhibited violent behaviour how had it become known as a masculine trait?

I considered the evidence I found in my readings about women and violence (Fillion 1996; Stradling 2008; Sentencing Advisory Council 2010) and wondered if there was any psychological evidence to suggest the contrary. I discovered that Pearson (1997) believes that “aggression is not innately masculine, but that evidence lies within the eye of the beholder” (Pearson 1997, p.11). She goes on to explain that one of the reasons that primatologists continue to assume males are the sole aggressors is because the violence that females carry out doesn’t actually look like violence. In other words, feminine violence is often indirect and not physically confrontational, such as poisoning or commissioning of ‘hitmen’. Finnish psychologist, Kaj Bjorkqvist, defines indirect aggression as “a kind of social manipulation: the aggressor manipulates others to attack the victim, or, by other means, makes use of the social structure in order to harm the target person, without being personally involved in the attack” (Bjorkqvist cited in Pearson 1997, p.17). As a prisoner in a maximum security women’s prison, this was something I was already familiar with so I used this knowledge to create the murderous aspects of Trish’s personality. She is a prime example of a woman who perpetrates violence indirectly by ordering others to do the killing for her. She is involved in every aspect of the murders she orders except for the physical act of committing the murder.

I then realised that the misperception that violence and aggression is essentially a masculine trait could be used to my advantage in my novel. I hoped that it would operate as a red herring. I am relying on the reader to assume that the killer is a male as a way to throw them off the scent of the real killer who is of course a female.
**Melody**

Although not as well-educated as Dallas, this character has also chosen to work in the sex industry, despite having other options. She is beautiful and chooses to make money using her body instead of her brains. In my experience this is not unusual. As an 18 year old attractive woman, I too chose to exploit my attractiveness, which I believed was a relatively easier alternative than working 12 hour shifts at a supermarket for minimal wage. Catherine Itzin (1992) says that this is not uncommon and women are sometimes “drawn to exploit the natural gift of their looks” because “society values and rewards a certain kind of female attractiveness” so therefore “it is understandable that women take advantage of the opportunities these provide for male approval and employment” (Itzin 1992, p.66). This idea of beauty as a currency is nothing new. Naomi Wolf says that “women do earn more from selling their bodies than their skills” adding that Catherine Mackinnon “cites evidence that, in contrast to the salaries of ‘respectable’ women” sex workers “earn twice as much” and a third study “shows that fashion modeling and prostitution are the only professions in which women consistently earn more than men” (Wolf 1995, p.50). So why wouldn’t women want to cash in on their looks and their bodies, or as Barton says, “the question, then, could easily be, why don’t more women start stripping” (Barton 2006, p.25)? Melody’s reasons for being in the industry are purely economic, although she does enjoy her work most of the time. She is typical of a number of women I encountered in the industry. These women usually ‘retire’ by their mid thirties and use the money they have acquired to pursue other ventures. One such dancer who is an example of this is Christi Lake, a former American sex worker who appeared in 227 adult films and directed seven (IMDb 2010). Christi Lake has since launched her own production house with the money she made during her time in the industry (McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008, p.170).

**Irina**

This character was influenced by a case study that I read about in an article entitled *The "Natasha" Trade - The Transnational Shadow Market of Trafficking in Women* by Donna M. Hughes (2000) and is the ultimate representation of a
woman being exploited in the worst way, although she was not created for that reason. The Ukrainian trafficking subplot was something I included in a later draft of the artefact because my research had led me to it. Durham (2008) says that “according to the United Nations, sex trafficking is the fastest-growing area of organized crime” (Durham in Egan & Hawkes 2008, p.296) so as a contemporary issue it was something I thought would an interesting to explore. While the human trafficking issue is not within the scope of this exegesis, I realised that in the artefact I could link this idea with the gangster element that already existed within Snuff and that this would tie in well with the idea of snuff films.

Much has been written by academics about sex trafficking and how women are being sexually exploited and sold into slavery (Reinhardt n.d; Hughes 2000; Miko 2003; Bickford 2009 et al) and I felt that having a character that represented this would be an illuminating juxtaposition that highlighted the differences between the Australian context of sex work and the global problem of the trafficking of women and children. My research led me to consider the issue of voluntary and involuntary participation in the sex industry, an issue that in my opinion was not properly considered by many of the anti-pornography feminists whose work I had read early on. I believe that choice is an essential element in determining whether a woman is exploited in the sex industry though many feminists would disagree (Whisnant in Stark & Whisnant 2004 et al). They argue that “pornography’s broader social harms of gender subordination, commodified sexuality, and eroticized dominance do not depend on whether persons depicted are participating voluntarily” (Whisnant in Stark & Whisnant 2004, pp.24-25) and in fact the issue of consent is irrelevant. Therefore, the Irina character served to demonstrate the difference between a woman who is being forced into the sex industry and those who freely choose it.

In this section I have looked at character creation, the importance of secondary characters and how to create believable characters. Character construction is considered in both writers’ reflections (Day 1996; Burns 1992; Evanovich 2006) and the scholarly conversation (Kundera 1988; Rimmon-Kenan 1983/2002; Eco 2006; Margolin 2007). I have also looked at the influence of the journal and how it facilitated my thinking and practice and how it
provided the link between the artefact and the exegesis. I have discussed how practice-led research is a two way street by demonstrating the relationship of academic research to my creative act. Finally, I look at each sex worker character in more detail and discuss how each character is a representation of a particular discourse. Creating the perfect characters for *Snuff* was an exploration of multiple ‘experimental selves’ (Kundera 1988) that involved a lot of soul-searching and reflection upon my former life as a sex worker. What began as a seminal image of one character soon evolved into an array of complex characters, each of whom were just as important to the story as each other. Creating these characters allowed me to explore many different aspects of the sex industry, both positive and negative, and in doing so, led to deeper insights both on a personal level and a theoretical one.
Conclusion: Journey’s End

The decision to write a crime novel set in the sex industry was, for me, a desire to explore a real life mystery that had captured my imagination and to tell a story that incorporated many of my own life experiences. As a convicted criminal and a former sex worker, crime and the sex industry are two subject matters that are key aspects of my former life and the fusion of these two elements in my writing seemed like a perfectly natural process. I soon discovered that both the novel and the exegesis for my PhD enabled me to reflect upon my time in the sex industry as well as the circumstances that had led me to prison. The implications of this resulted in two significant considerations.

Firstly, what I hadn’t anticipated was a confrontation with the Adult Parole Board that left me confused and in doubt about my own ethical and moral responsibilities both as a writer and a perpetrator of a crime. I journeyed into the unexplored and intensely personal terrain of the ethical and moral responsibility of a convicted criminal writing crime fiction by exploring a personal dilemma and confrontation with the Adult Parole Board. This experience led me to delve into repressed emotions that I had resisted confronting for many years which was extremely beneficial both psychologically and emotionally. Dealing with repressed emotions related to my criminal offending was perhaps one of the most significant moments in my candidacy and I am extremely grateful to have had this opportunity and to have been able to record this journey in the exegesis. I now realise that regardless of my own criminal and sexually stigmatized past, I do have a ‘write’ and my work is just as valuable as that of a non-criminal writer.

Secondly, I considered and analysed my former life as a sex worker and what had attracted me to the sex industry. I then entered into and extended the scholarly conversation concerning various aspects of the sex industry. From feminist theory I learned that there were multiple feminist perspectives on sex work and discovered a non-binary, polymorphous view of sex work. The implications of this for my artefact and exegesis were significant and to my
surprise I found that I was a feminist and felt passionately about women’s issues that I had taken for granted in the past. Like Kessler (2002) I also concluded that one of the main problems of prostitution is not the work itself but the stigma attached to it. I find it highly ironic that society is saturated with raunch culture but still refuses to accept genuine sex workers and somewhat hypocritical that the women who want to emulate strippers are scornful of the very women they emulate. This stigmatisation is not something that will change overnight but by challenging misperceptions about sex work and using the polymorphous paradigm as a theoretical framework, perhaps in the future, rather than viewing sex workers with disdain, society might come to accept and understand that the service sex workers provide is just as valuable as any other type of service.

In writing this exegesis I learned that practice-led research (Candy 2006; Arnold 2007; Smith & Dean et al 2009) is indeed a valuable and “dynamic way to knowledge” (Arnold 2007) because it you never know where it will take you. I also learned that practice-led research “can dig deep into the imaginative process” (Goodall 2009, p.204) which pleasantly surprised me. Writing Snuff led me to research areas that I had not investigated before such as narrative theory, feminism, and autoethnography and I came to embrace theory where before I had been resistant and convinced that it hindered my creative process. From narrative theory (Chatman 1978; Henry 1995; Abbott 2002; Rimmon-Kenan 2002; Jahn 2005; Herman 2007) I learned that characters were more than just paper people who existed in the story world to simply drive the plot. They were ‘experimental selves’ (Kundera 1988) and ‘artifices’ (Margolin 2007) that could inspire readers to look beyond the text and realise that it ‘refers to something beyond itself’ (Eco 2006). From autoethnography I realise the value of the self as data and learned to use my own experiences to analyse and interpret theory and the experiences of others.

For me as a writer contemplating my own writing processes, creating the perfect characters for Snuff was an exploration of multiple ‘experimental selves’ (Kundera 1988) that involved a lot of soul-searching and reflection upon my former life as a sex worker. While Snuff began with a seminal image of one character at three in the morning, that image soon evolved into an entire story
world with a cast of complex characters, each of whom brought something that was different but important to the plot. Creating these characters allowed me to explore many different aspects of the sex industry, both positive and negative, and in doing so, led to deeper insights both on a personal level and a theoretical one.

Everything that I learned during my research influenced the creative act and translated onto the pages of the artefact. In this way the artefact and the exegesis ‘talk’ to one another in a circular process that creates endless possibilities and avenues of research. This led me to the question: when is the novel really finished? The more I learned through research, the more I changed or wanted to change the artefact to reflect my newfound knowledge and I realised that the revisions could be neverending. However, the purpose of the exegesis is to explore how I created the artefact and I realised that instead of making constant changes to the novel I could use the exegesis to discuss these issues in a more direct and practical manner.

The process of writing the exegesis was transformative and the writer who began the novel was not the writer who finished the novel, the prisoner who began the exegesis was not the prisoner who finished the exegesis, and the woman who undertook this journey was not the woman who completed this journey. My life is fuller and more enriched for having this experience and I look upon my writing, my life and the world with new eyes and an open mind.
i Sexting is the sending of sexually explicit text messaging. This is an issue that has received quite a lot of media attention in 2010 due to it being an activity that school children have reportedly been engaging in.

ii RhEDS is an acronym for Resourcing Health & Education in the Sex Industry. Formerly known as the Victorian Prostitutes Collective, RhEDS offers support and assistance to Victorian sex workers and actively promotes sex workers rights (Resourcing Health & Education in the Sex Industry (RhED) Website 2003).

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