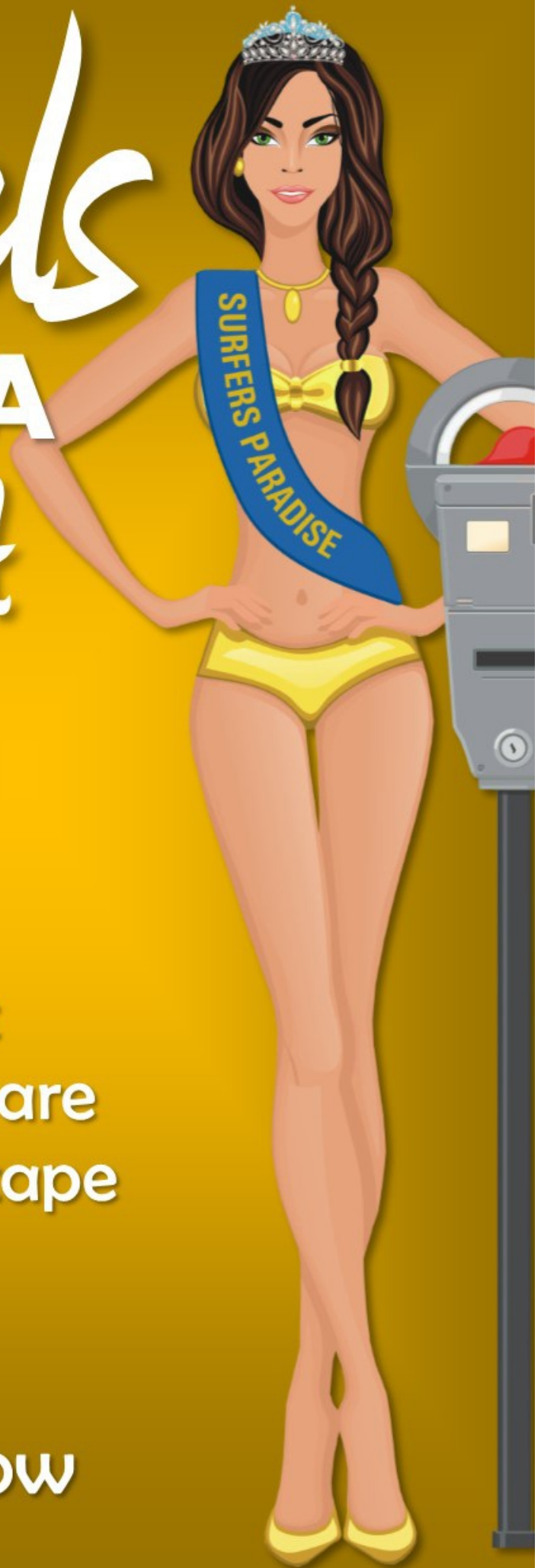


Heels AND A TIARA



It'll take a lot
more than spare
change to escape
this mess.

Andrene Low

HEELS AND A TIARA
THAT SEVENTIES SERIES – PREQUEL

Andrene Low



Originally titled Smashed Nuts

CHAPTER 1



BRENDA CAN'T WORK OUT what hurts more, her feet or her pride. She's been tottering backwards and forwards out front of the Gold Coast's newest hotel for hours in shoes never designed to cover this many miles. All she's got to show for her efforts are a crop of blisters and fewer coins than she had at the beginning of her shift.

On the upside, being a Surfers Paradise Meter Maid is better than being stuck in a cruddy office job at the beck and call of some middle manager with an ego a whole lot bigger than his dick.

Sneaking behind one of the pillars that props up the hotel's front veranda, Brenda rearranges the bottom half of her gold lamé bikini. This along with a tiara, blue sash and coin purse make up her 'uniform'. But the synthetic nature of the cossie combined with temperatures in the low-thirties, has sweat trickling between her butt cheeks. It's not a pleasant sensation and certainly not one she can attend to in public.

The 'Surfers Paradise Progress Association', had known what they were about when in 1965 they'd come up with the genius idea of bikini-clad women topping up expired parking meters. And so there's no doubt who the benefactor is, once she's topped up the meter, she pops a small card under the windscreen wiper.

You have just been saved from a parking fine by the Surfers Paradise Meter Maids.

Thirteen years on and all Brenda wants is for someone to save her

from being a meter maid, but short of settling for the dreaded office job or sleeping in her car, she needs the money coming in to cover her rent on the glorified beach shack she's taken over from Chloe, a meter maid who'd hit the big time by snagging herself a local car dealer. It had taken the girl hundreds of return trips in front of his high-end dealership to the point she worried the number of kilometres on her clock was going to affect her resale value. But the way she told it, the risk had been worth it.

Brenda's home is rough and ready and only suitable for the weekends away that its Brisbane owners had originally built it for. But, when the Gold Coast took off and rental properties became scarce, they'd decided there was a tidy profit to be made from their little explosion in a salvage yard.

Nothing in the place matches, with all of it having been scabbed from buildings that were either being ripped down or close to falling down. It's a roughly assembled pile of cast offs that still somehow manages to be charming.

And the view isn't half bad either.

Miles of white sand beach that are swept clean with each surfer-worthy wave coming in to land from far out in the Pacific Ocean. It was this 20-mile asset that had turned the Gold Coast from a chain-store necklace of small, sleepy towns into the 18 carat piece of jewellery it is today.

While marriage or modelling seems to be the aim of most of the meter maids Brenda works with, she's angling for something far more lucrative and a lot less permanent.

She's already selected the car; it's just a matter of getting her timing right.

A couple of hours later Brenda staggers into the shack, briefly stopping to wipe her feet free of sand on the mat at the back door.

The second best thing about the place is its close proximity to the main drag, a short hop, skip and a jump along the beach. Not a bad way to finish a shift, with the massaging qualities of the wet sand being equal to the pain inflicted by her gold platforms. The salt water had dealt to more than a few infected blisters, too.

Her shoes are dropped just inside the door along with her regulation-issue purse of loose change. By rights this should have been returned to the office at the end of her shift but the idea of walking a couple of blocks in the opposite direction to home hadn't borne thinking about.

On her way to the shower, she peels off her sash and hangs it over the door to her minuscule bedroom. Her tiara is placed carefully on the bedside table. It's not that it's the real deal that she's so careful, but more that it isn't. Easier to treat it gently than constantly be gluing the bloody rhinestones back on.

The gold lamé bikini stays on for her shower, because if she doesn't wash the sweat out, it'll be crusty by the end of the week.

Free of crud and any remaining sand, she settles into the couch with a bottle of beer, not even minding the condensation dripping onto her bare stomach. Following her shower she changed into her white crochet bikini, with its softness and familiarity having her feeling positively off-duty after the scratchy, sweaty work one. She might go for a swim before dinner. If she can even be bothered with dinner.

Damn it, she's still pissed off about being dumped by Dennis, her last meal ticket. It wasn't that she'd done anything wrong, but more

that he couldn't cope with the embarrassment of his poor performance. Maybe if he hadn't drunk so much beer it wouldn't have been a problem. Maybe if she hadn't sighed that one time when he couldn't get it up she'd now be having dinner at one of the nice restaurants dotted around the area and not facing toast and peanut butter.

Again.

She'd tried to mend the rift but the conditions Dennis had put on them resuming their relationship placed too much power in his hands, so now the main barrier to her again living in the lap of luxury is that damned Mercedes. So close she can touch it and yet she can't seal the deal.

Only when it's fully dark does she turn on the squat lamp sitting on the upturned soda crate next to the couch. It takes a moment for her eyes to adjust to the relative brightness of the room, but it's enough that she can see something on the floor next to the unused front door.

That's weird; she doesn't remember seeing it before.

Putting her empty beer bottle down, she hauls herself out of the couch, waits for the head spins to stop and walks over to check out what it is. Probably another reminder about the phone bill being overdue.

Examining the envelope on her way back to the couch doesn't throw any light on the sender. It's not a window envelope, which is a good thing. That it's generally addressed to the tenant is not. Throwing herself back onto the couch, she flips the envelope over in her hand. There's no return address.

Five minutes of looking at the scuffed and dirty envelope have her

no closer to a decision. Maybe it's the single beer or lack of food, but it takes longer than it should for her to see what's missing.

There aren't any stamps or Post Office marks.

Loathe as she is to do so, Brenda turns it over one last time and wiggles her finger under the flap. Even a quick glance is enough to show the letter has been typed. Not good. Not good at all.

A skim is all it takes to have the beer bubbling up into her throat, scalding it with stomach acid. Not bothering to read further, she drops the letter, staggers to her feet and only just makes it through to the toilet before beer hits porcelain.

The beer dispensed with, she washes her face with cold water and brushes her teeth. Damn it all, why should she be surprised that life has kicked her while she's down? She should be used to it by now.

One thing's for sure, with the rent going up as much as it is, she's going to have to work double shifts. At least until she can suss out how to get her hands on that Mercedes.

Her feet bandaged like a racehorse, Brenda trawls backwards and forwards in front of the Iluka Motor Inn. It might not be the flashiest place in Surfer's Paradise, but it's the one favoured by the owner of that gleaming silver sedan sitting tantalisingly out front.

To hell with anyone stupid enough to overstay their welcome in any of the streets she's supposed to be patrolling and she's lost count of how many shortened circuits she's completed before she spots her opportunity.

The footpath is deserted.

Except for her quarry, now opening the driver's door of the Mercedes.

Damn, she would have to be at the turning point of her lap and as far from him as possible. Defying the ankle-breaking physics of her shoes, she moves quickly in his direction, coming close to jogging in her desperation to get there in time.

Her boobs fight to escape her lamé bikini top, but she doesn't care. In two weeks of parading backwards and forwards, this is the first time she's spotted the bloke so there's no way she's not nabbing him while she's got the chance.

Her timing is spot on, the conditions perfect.

She falls against the parking meter beside the car, fumbles a coin into the slot and turns the handle, forcing the nasty red flag back into the hole it'd crawled out of. Her placing the small card under the Mercedes' windscreen wiper is a piece of pure theatre that has her squashed so hard against the windscreen that if he starts the wipers, she's going to lose a nipple.

Peering at him through the glass lets her know that one of them must be loose. He's the possum to her headlights and even more so when she straightens and makes a show of tucking everything back inside her bikini top.

Very slowly.

And that, folks, is how we seal the deal.

The guy is out of his car and next to her on the footpath a lot faster than should be possible for someone sporting such a large beer gut. Damn it, she'd been so busy racing for the car she hadn't had a chance to check him out properly first as she would have liked. Now, she's not sure what to do.

Dating older guys is her preference because they're easier to keep in line, but that's not to say she doesn't like them to be attractive, too.

But if his triplet-sized gut is all that sits between her, a decent meal and room upgrade, she's going to have to re-evaluate her standards.

He stands close enough that his stomach touches hers meaning he's either a pushy sod or spatially unaware of his size.

"So, you're the sweetheart who's been topping me up."

It takes a conscious effort to pull her gaze away from his belly and look him in the eye. If she can ignore his double chin, the bloke isn't too bad looking. But handsome enough that she won't need to get hammered to bed him?

CHAPTER 2



THE SUN COURT MOTOR LODGE is nowhere near as ritzy as the name would imply with the sun, sea and sand having been cruel in their treatment of the old girl since her birth in the sixties. It's this tatty, faded exterior that let's Brenda know exactly what Hilton, the owner of the silver Mercedes, has planned for the afternoon.

The pool is token in size, with the concrete looking to be in bad enough shape that'd you'd be topping the damned thing up daily, if not hourly. A quick scan of the large paved slab next to this glorified bathtub and Brenda spots a couple of sun loungers going spare although she doubts they'll stay that way for long if the family of inbreeds coming in through the gate from the beach have anything to do with it.

When not hampered by sky-high footwear, Brenda can put on quite the turn of speed even in her thongs, and she swiftly slip-slaps her way to the loungers, throwing herself onto one and her handbag onto the other. The filthy look she gets from the mother of the ferals lets her know she's been right to hurry.

With a lift of her shoulders she both dismisses them and rids herself of her white muslin shirt. She's settled in before the mother finally gives up on the evil glaring and shepherds her brood for parts unknown.

"Are you really going to sit there?"

This primly voiced question comes from the other direction to that

of the beach and it takes Brenda a moment to realise it's been directed at her.

Considering the question too asinine to waste breath on, she tips her head to the side, slides her sunglasses down and simply looks at the women, hoping her expression is enough to have her sodding off and minding her own bloody business.

Why the woman is as huffy as she is becomes apparent when her other half rocks up with cocktails that are sporting enough fruit salad, and geegaws to take your eye out. Seeing Brenda, the drinks are soon forgotten in his hands and it's only quick action by his missus that stops them being dropped. He takes the opportunity of being unencumbered to thrust his hand in Brenda's direction. "Barry Evans, from Tassie. Call me Bazzar."

Ignoring Bazzar's outstretched paw, Brenda slides her sunnies back into place, hoping Hilton isn't too far off.

"We're here on holiday," says Barry, stating the bleeding obvious and blithely ignoring her pointed lack of response.

Without looking in their direction, Brenda knows the bloke's missus isn't happy with him striking up a conversation with the bird in the tiny white bikini. That much air being sucked in through flared nostrils is a sound she's all too familiar with, and it's not long before he's dragged away complaining as loudly as any three-year-old who hasn't had their fill of the playground.

Sleep is claiming Brenda when she experiences a total eclipse, with the complete lack of sun chilling her immediately. My god, if she'd thought Hilton's stomach looked big behind a straining business shirt, au naturel it's something else altogether.

The one thing not large about the bloke is his swimming trunks, but what they lack in size they make up for in volume, with the loud bright orange and yellow tropical print being far more suited to curtains. What is it about fat blokes that they have no shame? If she was carrying even half that much excess weight, the only thing she'd be seen dead in outside the house would be an effing iron lung.

"You're looking bloody ripper," says Hilton, his gaze all over her body. "And almost as hot as I am."

For a moment Brenda thinks he's saying he's 'hot' as in attractive but his cannonball into the swimming pool puts paid to this. It also puts paid to her hoping to stay looking glamorous as Hilton's bulk displaces a good third of the pool water. A large percentage hits her with as much oomph as if someone had upended a bucket over her, leaving her spluttering and muttering.

While he swims a couple of lazy lengths, Brenda dries herself as best she can. She didn't even bring a towel with her and neither has Hilton for that matter. In the end she resorts to using her muslin shirt to avoid sitting there with water dripping off her. Damn it, even the insides of her sunglasses are wet. Thank god her waist-length dark hair is up in a high pony tail or else it'd be hanging in rats tails.

Swiping under her lower lashes, she inspects her finger. Damn it all to hell, she shouldn't have needed waterproof mascara for their date. Thank god her bikini goes semi-transparent when wet, meaning Hilton will be looking everywhere but at her panda eyes. A couple more gentle swipes and her finger comes away reasonably clean. It's not great, but it's the best she can do for now.

She's not long resumed a pose that sets her figure off to best advantage when Hilton clambers out of the pool with about as much

finesse as a large bull seal mounting an ice floe, stands right next to her and proceeds to flip his head about wildly, deliberately showering her with more water.

What the hell? Does he think he's five or something?

Apart from having him looking like a juvenile, no-one sporting a comb-over as cantilevered as his should shake-dry their hair like that. She's seen less action on ceiling fans.

It comes out when Brenda's halfway through the beer Hilton's bought that he owns this homage to a bygone era of holidays.

"Worth a bloody fortune for the land alone," he assures her after a healthy swig. He drops his head to close the distance between them before adding, "Gonna be bowling the old bird in a coupla months. Just gotta sort out the cash for the new place. It's gonna be bea-u-tee-ful."

He emphasises how beautiful by arching his arm in a manner commonly used by game-show hostesses. All this does is emphasis what a dump the Sun Court is, but it's clear to Brenda that he can already see the new hotel that'll be taking its place. She hopes there's some cash going begging that he can throw in her direction to save her from having to do the same.

Their date goes to a whole new level when a waiter delivers another round of beers that Brenda hadn't even see Hilton order. As before, the tray is put on the small table between their loungers, but this time there's a key sitting next to the frosty beverages. The large, dark green, plastic tag with peeling gold room number is hard to ignore.

Hilton doesn't, instead he picks it up, dangling it for Brenda to see. "May as well make use of the old girl while she's still around."

He closes his meaty fist around the key and proceeds to make a show of sliding it down the front of his swimming trunks, no doubt for Brenda to retrieve later. He picks up his second beer and chugs half the contents in a brick-through-a-plate-glass-window display of his eagerness to retire to their room. But there's no way she's gonna be rushed. What was that saying about buying a book when you can use the library? If she wants more than a few drinks and average sex in a less than average motel, she's going to have to be careful how she proceeds.

Unfortunately, you can't plan ahead for these things and she's still mulling over her options when she hears Hilton mutter "Don't dare use the facilities at any of my other properties."

She braces her feet against the end bar of the lounge and slides herself into a more upright position. "Other properties?"

He hesitates but for a moment, obviously torn between keeping his true worth on the QT and being able to boast to a chick in a bikini about how much money he's got. As always the little head wins out over the big head.

His portfolio is extensive enough that Hilton would be better suited as his surname, leaving Brenda unsure whether to be impressed or pissed off. Sure, she's impressed at the amount of hotels and commercial properties he owns, but supremely peeved that he's chosen the skussiest, low-rent one of the lot for their tryst.

The cheap bastard.

"You're obviously huge ..." Brenda drops her gaze to his tackle, where it's squashed beneath the overhang of his stomach. "... in property. I'm actually on the look-out for a new place myself."

She proceeds to paint a tale of woe about her bastard landlords from Brisbane fleecing her by doubling the rent, laying the paint on thick and in a nice pink hue that she hopes will remind him of other things. Okay, so they haven't doubled it, but the price hike is enough that it's still unattainable without a lot of help.

The more she thinks about it, the more she's better off staying where she is. Sure it's a little grungy, but it's close to the beach and to the main drag.

There's also the fact that Hilton's name wouldn't be on the rental contract meaning he can't evict her if things go tits-up. This isn't to say it's her name on the contract either, but that's because she likes to travel under the radar, if just to avoid old speeding fines or jealous wives.

"What are they putting the rent up to?"

This has Brenda's internal calculator going at full steam, working out what she'd need on top of the increased rent to cover her day-to-day expenses before spitting the amount out as though it's poison.

He looks confused, his brow knotted, leading Brenda to believe she might have stuffed up her calculations, but she confirms the total is right before he speaks again.

"But that's nothing. I can cover that for you."

Wait for it.

"So long as I'm allowed to visit every now and then." He wiggles his eyebrows like caterpillars on a hot footpath, indicating the visits will be anything but platonic.

And, bam, just like that her latest benefactor has been hooked and damn near landed. Hopefully he lasts longer than his predecessor, but if she wants that to happen there's no way she's putting out today. He

can rearrange that bloody room key in his trunks as much as he likes, she's not biting. Or sucking. Or anything.

Scrabbling around in her handbag, Brenda finds the battered Rolex that had belonged to Brian, her wallet number one.

"Wow, is that the time?"

Her looking at it is purely for show. The bloody thing has never managed to keep time and she only hangs onto as a reminder to never lose sight of the end goal. Something she'd missed spectacularly with Brian.

"But, I thought ..." Hilton shoves his hand down the front of his trunks in a desperate attempt to retrieve the well-hidden room key, as if producing it will have Brenda deciding to stay.

Tossing the useless watch back into the depths of her bag, she gains her feet, making a show of tucking various body parts back into her bikini, meaning his old fella will be upping the ante and making it even less likely he's going to get to the key in time.

"Oh, I want to, believe me. But I can't tonight."

She hands him a crumpled piece of paper with her address on it to lessen the blow of abandonment. "I'll be home tomorrow night, though."

CHAPTER 3



NEXT EVENING, BRENDA makes a deliberate point of being out. Not that she's out on the town, just hunkered in the dunes with a clear view of her place. She knows Hilton won't come looking for her here thanks to the note she's left for him on the door. If he follows her instructions, this will leave her with a rent advance and a certain degree of power. She needs control over when and where they catch up, not wanting to have him turning up unannounced like he owns the place.

With the rent not due for another week, she's got time up her sleeve to get him good and hooked before she has to get more rent money off him. She sure as hell can't have him paying it direct. Even she doesn't do that.

It's dark before she sees him in the weak light of the bare bulb dangling over the back door. She'd known he'd come around the back because an army of terracotta pots guard the front door rendering it useless.

Even as far away as she is, she hears him swear when he clocks the envelope stuck to the middle glass panel of the door. Not that audio is necessary given how savagely he rips the envelope free. He makes short work of opening it and, as she'd hoped, his body language changes. Slumping against the door frame he stares slack-jawed at the contents.

It's not long before his free hand drops to his crotch allowing him to

jiggle his bits into a more comfortable arrangement. Brenda has to admit it, the photo of her wearing nothing much more than a smile always gets them. And sure enough, Hilton's hand moves from his crotch to his pocket.

Brenda's shoulders drop and her lips curve into a smile. At least she hopes he's going for his wallet and not better access to the family jewels.

Nope, she's good.

She gives it five minutes before standing, shaking her clothes free of sand and tip toeing back to the shack. Paranoid? Hell yes. She'd learnt long ago to never read a situation at face value and it had saved her arse on several occasions. When it came to sex, guys could be downright sneaky and so she'd become sneaky in turn. Not that she'd ever been the innocent thanks to the unorthodox upbringing her parents had subjected her to.

Her folks were criminals and spectacularly unsuccessful ones at that, meaning Brenda had been fending for herself for as long as she could remember. That sort of training never leaves you, meaning the only person she fully trusts these days is herself. And even that's touch and go at times.

Dammit, why can't meter maids be allowed to wear flip flops. Brenda stares at her gold platforms, her heart overflowing with hate. Or maybe it's anger that she has to earn a living traipsing the streets shoving coins into the meters of people too stupid to work out how long they've been parked and go back and top-up the bloody things themselves. It's either that or they've cottoned on to the fact that if they're from out-of-State, the chances of them being tracked down to

pay their fine are next to zip, so why bother paying in the first place?

She's destined for better than this, even if she has to lie, cheat and extort to get there!

Despite Hilton leaving her a good few notes the other night, she's not confident enough to throw in her only other means of income. On the upside, all this walking has her more toned than she's ever been. She could bounce coins off her arse if she wanted to.

It's her third circuit in front of the Iluka and she hasn't seen any sign of Hilton, or his car. He'd left his phone number along with the money, but the problem with phoning a guy is you never knew who'd answer. She could fake it being a wrong number, but after the third or fourth time of this happening, the missus was usually on high alert and you might as well cross the guy off your list.

Brenda's days of dealing with women who were so complacent that they'd lost track of their bloke are over. Much easier to stick to a few ground rules and keep everyone happy. That it leads to her patrons being a lot more generous is simply a bonus.

She's on a return trip toward the Iluka, with each footfall feeling like she's stomping barefoot on gravel when she spots what looks to be a brand spanking new Mercedes pulling to a stop out front of the hotel. Nice car but black is a bloody stupid colour in this climate. The damned thing would have the heating properties of a stove.

Keeping an eye on it, Brenda pauses every 20 feet, checking meters and topping them up if necessary. She's a couple of cars away from the black Merc when she sees Hilton drag himself out of the car, bringing her up short. Sheesh, what was wrong with his old car? At most it had only been the previous year's model.

Despite sore feet, there's no way she's missing this opportunity.

Rent day is coming up and with this being the first at the new rate; she needs his help now more than ever.

A quick hobble is all she can manage, but it's enough for her to intercept him in the middle of the footpath, her hand on his back to stop him. How come he'd missed her? It's not like her uniform is subtle.

"Can I help you, miss?" His voice is loud, its syntax unnatural enough to have alarm bells ringing.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

Brenda's volume is equal to his, her words as feigned. Hoping to get away with the screw-up, she swings away from him and looks at the meter by the front of his car. A sideways glance leaves her in no doubt as to the reason for his hasty retreat into the hotel.

Torn between getting away from potential trouble and maintaining her supposed innocence by topping the meter up, it takes all Brenda's nerve to keep to her role and slide a coin into the slot and turn the handle. It's the first time she's ever topped up a meter while someone was sitting in the car, albeit in the passenger's seat, and so she isn't sure of the correct protocol around handing over the small card. Should she put it under the windscreen as usual, or wait for the window to be wound down and pass it over personally? Does she even need to bother with the card given it's obvious who has completed the good deed?

The last option has the most appeal and so following a weak smile in the direction of the hard-nosed blonde glaring at her through the windscreen, she spins on her heel and makes her way along to the next car, all the while trying to look as though she hasn't got a care in

the world.

“Oi, you. Stop right where you are!” It doesn’t take a science degree or a rear view mirror to know this command is for her. But screw taking any notice of it.

Keeping up her pace and even quickening it slightly, Brenda abandons topping up meters.

A quick shifty in a side mirror lets her know she’s gotten away. For now. Even encumbered with impractical footwear as she is, Brenda is quicker on her feet than the fifty-something woman currently tottering along in heels that should never be worn by someone that age. She makes the most of it, turning into the next walkway she comes across and cutting through the block as though the cops are on her tail.

She doesn’t slow until she’s out the other side and on one of the streets she’s meant to be patrolling on this shift. Even then it takes a while for her heart to settle, as much from the exertion as adrenalin. She hopes she hasn’t blown it with Hilton because she doubts her feet are up to double shifts.

A hand slamming down on her shoulder has her heart back up to triple digits.

“Where the blimmin’ heck have you been?”

Facing Sonia, the chick she was supposed to be sharing the beat with, Brenda’s unable to stop her hand straying to sit flat on her chest.

“Ah, sorry, I ah, got caught. Up.”

Her excuse is weak and there’s no way Sonia swallows it, but hey, she can’t complain, the woman’s been scoping out a few prospects herself, although hers are of the matrimonial variety.

“Come on, we still need to do the other side of this street and there’s

a parking warden hot on our heels." She jerks her head back the way she'd come and Brenda spots the uniform of a council parking warden, not far back.

"Hah, not on our watch." Despite her feet hurting and a feeling of being hunted hanging about her, Brenda concentrates on doing the warden in the ugly uniform out of a job.

Sonia and Brenda are half way down the other side of the road and managing to keep well ahead of the parking warden when a black Mercedes drives slowly past. If Brenda hadn't been looking up, she might have missed the look Hilton's wife gives her. Brenda also doubts the woman is rearranging her pearls when she slides her finger across her throat like that. Of greatest concern, the woman looks bat-crazy enough to follow through on it.

And just like that double shifts to make rent aren't looking so bad. Maybe even working in another State.

"Jeez! What was that about?" Sonia's eyes are wide, letting Brenda know that not only has her fellow maid spotted the gesture made by the older woman but that she's also spotted Brenda's reaction.

"It's nothing. Just a misunderstanding."

"Best you sort that out. You know who she is, don't you?"

Opening her mouth to answer, Brenda can neither confirm nor deny. She wouldn't have a clue what Hilton's surname is or if the blonde is even his wife. Although odds are she is. All Brenda knows about him is what he'd boasted pool-side at the Sun Court. It's not like he has his name plastered over every building or company he's dabbling in like the real Hiltons.

"That is Marcia Taylor. Word is she not only likes wearing stilettos,

she carries them, too.”

“Italian?”

“Sicilian! Apparently she’s nuts enough to be on horse-strength medication.”

“Jeez.”

“Rumour has it she washes the pills down with the hard stuff.”

Yikes. Brenda isn’t even sure if the weather in New South Wales is any chop at this time of year, but it might be worth the risk. If she takes the advance Hilton left her the other night, cashes in the large jar of coins she’s collected during her stint as a meter maid and sells off everything not nailed down at the shack, she should have a decent amount to hit the road with.

The problem would be where to hightail it to? It wasn’t as if she had any contacts outside the State of Queensland. Not that her contacts inside the State were anything to rave about either. The only member of her family she stayed in touch with was her Auntie Pat and even there the relationship was strained due to Brenda’s habit of leaving in the middle of the night.

“Just keep your head down for a week or two and you should be gold. At least I hear that’s worked for others.”

“Hmmm, if you say so.” Brenda can only take Sonia’s assertion that laying low will have the target on her back fading enough for her to feel safe.

One thing’s for damned sure, she’s either going to have to give up on Hilton, or be bloody careful how she proceeds.

It’s for this reason she ducks behind the nearest car when she sees the black Mercedes coming back down the street with Mrs Taylor scanning the footpath with all the concentration of someone pig

hunting without dogs.

CHAPTER 4



THE BOOMING “KNOCK KNOCK!” thrown through the back door has Brenda go from being half-asleep to rushing to tweak her crop top and denim cut-offs to reveal even more.

“Come on in.”

Hilton doesn’t need to be asked twice and Brenda gets the impression if she’d taken much longer, he wouldn’t have waited for an invitation at all. She’s not sure she likes his sense of ownership about her or the place she’s living in.

“Have you been avoiding me?” His frown does nothing for his looks.

“Hardly. More like I’ve been keeping out the way of your wife.”

“My wife?”

“Yeah, you know the blonde with murderous tendencies. That old bird.”

Without waiting to be asked, Hilton lifts her legs in the air, sits and plops them on his lap. But with his gut filling most of the available space he has to hold them in place, taking the opportunity to rub his hands up and down her legs. Thank god she’d shaved them that morning.

“You’re fine. I told her you’d mistaken me for someone else because of the new car.”

“And she believed you?” Brenda’s unable to temper her disbelief and Hilton’s hackles are up in short order.

She wracks her brain for something more complimentary than “and I’m sure you got away with lying through your teeth like that”, instead settling on “That is, why wouldn’t she? I’m sure you were ... ah ... very convincing.”

“Convincing enough I’ve wangled tonight out. I thought we could spend it together.”

While Brenda is carrying out internal fist pumps, she doesn’t show any response outwardly. Her reserve is deliberate. Experience lets her know that if they had to work for her favours the results were better all round.

“Oh, yes?” She throws doubt into these two small words and leaves them hanging, interested to see what response she’ll get from him.

It’s not what she’s expected, but she’ll run with it.

After digging around in his back pocket, he rains a handful of money down on her and even though she’s not able to count it, she gets that there’s enough to cover her rent for the next few weeks. On seeing a one hundred dollar bill settle in her cleavage, she revises that estimate to at least a month’s rent and expenses.

“As enticing as you look lying there, do you have anywhere with a little room for us to spread out?” His looking into the bedroom while saying this is hardly necessary. This isn’t her first go around.

“Well we could move into the bedroom, but to be honest, the bed’s a single and if we try half the positions I’ve got in mind, we might wreck the bed.”

Her words, while sounding flippant, have been carefully chosen. She’s promised him the earth, but discounted them getting it on right now. Sure there’s the floor, but if he’s like most guys over fifty, there is no way he’ll be able to get down there, let alone get it up while

down there without anti-inflammatories being involved, which rather defeats the purpose.

The cogs whirring behind Hilton's eyes threaten to wobble off their axles before he breaks the silence that had settled on the room.

"We could adjourn to the Sun Court."

He runs his hand up her leg and dangerously close to her crotch, letting her know she's going to have to be smashed before she can do the deed with this guy. Not a happy thought.

He stops stroking her legs. "The place isn't that bad?"

That he's taken her moue of disgust as being for his choice of venue, and not her revulsion at thoughts of sex with him is just typical of his sort.

"What about the Iluka? I hear the views from the top floors are spectacular." Anything to distract from the task at hand would be welcome.

His expression is now that of someone desperately in need of laxatives.

"Unless, of course," she pauses, "you can't get us in there."

He picks up the gauntlet as she's expected but it's the speed with which he acts on the challenge that comes as a surprise. Boy, she's got him good.

Her feet hit the deck with a thump, having been thrown from his lap when he'd jumped up, ready to leave. He's already out the door and heading toward the beach and the shortest route to the Iluka before he calls out "I'll be back in half an hour. Make sure you're appropriately dressed."

Half an hour? That doesn't give her much time to get the necessary

drinks under her belt, let alone get dressed. In the end she saves time for drinking by simply ditching the crop top and shorts and throwing a crocheted dress over the top of her skimpy underwear. It doesn't leave anything to the imagination, but that's the point, isn't it?

She's chugging through her third chardonnay when he returns about twenty five minutes later. It's not her favourite drink, but it was in the fridge and the alcohol content is greater than that of the bottles of beer stacked on the bottom shelf.

They're half-way through the dunes when Brenda comes to her senses. "What about your car? You can't leave that parked outside my place."

There's no way Brenda wants it sitting there like a beacon where someone like his wife might clock it.

He tugs on her arm to get her moving again. "I parked a couple of streets up and cut along the beach." His voice is tinged with indignation as though she's labelled him a rookie.

With that worry removed, Brenda allows herself to be lead along the beach in the direction of the Iluka. Damn shame the place isn't absolute beach-front as they'll still have to run the gauntlet of the Esplanade before they make cover.

They're on the beach across the road from the Iluka and below the high-tide mark before Hilton speaks to her again. "Okay, I'm going to go in through the front doors, but you'll need to nip around the back. Once you're in through the double doors marked 'staff only', go to the service elevator, get in and head straight on up to the twenty-first floor. I'll be waiting for you in room 214."

"Room?" Brenda's unable to hide her reaction to them not being in the penthouse and at having to sneak in the back way. Deep down

she'd like, just once, to be escorted in through the front doors and swept up to the top floor as someone to be proud of, and not the opposite.

"Sorry beautiful, the penthouse is booked and even with the place practically dead at this time of night, I can't risk taking you in the front way. It'll be worth it, I promise."

His expression is that of a small boy who's just been let loose in the confectionery aisle at the supermarket with twenty bucks. It's also covered with a fine sheen of sweat, the result of their hurried walk along the sand.

That bloody mini bar better be chocker-block to overflowing for this to work.

Despite his assurances that the back areas of the hotel would be as good as deserted, this doesn't prove to be the case. She walks through the double 'staff only' doors like she owns the place and is traversing the wide open area inside when she spots a suave looking bloke leaning against the far wall having a cigarette. He's a little over six foot and dressed from head to toe in black, but it works. A tousle of dark hair shot with silver and olive skin pegs him as Mediterranean in origin. That he looks to be closer to fifty than thirty is the icing on the cake for Brenda.

Her steps falter momentarily when he raises an eyebrow, obviously questioning her presence, but she's not thrown for long, answering his query with a wide smile. Reaching the service elevator, she pushes the up button, watching the display above the doors to avoid looking at him again. Tempting, so very, very tempting, but if he's working here he's not worth her time.

After what feels like eternity, the lift dings its arrival and she squeezes through the doors before they're fully open, pressing the 2 and a few other buttons repeatedly in an effort to have the doors closing sooner than they're ready, but they won't be hurried.

They haven't budged from their widest point when the dark-haired smoker drops his cigarette to the ground. Pushing himself away from the wall, he steps on the butt on his way over to her.

Finally, the doors start to hiss closed, causing him to speed up, but thankfully his out-stretched arm is a good few feet away when they clatter shut, just giving Brenda enough time to wink at him before he's blocked from view. Maybe she shouldn't have been that cheeky, but damn it if he wasn't a hell of a lot cuter than the lard arse she's on her way up to visit. Life could be cruel at times.

Ignoring Hilton's instructions, she gets off at the second floor and sends the service elevator on alone, having pressed at least half a dozen buttons to ensure it doesn't make it back to the lower level any time soon.

The second floor corridor is empty, meaning she encounters no-one on her trip from the back of the building around to the front where the main elevators are. Once again she pushes the up button to summon an elevator.

One arrives and she gaily sends it on its way having pushed enough buttons to have it visiting almost every floor between here and heaven. The second elevator arrives not long after its companion is on its way.

Her finger hovers over the little-used 22 button but she knows pushing it would be a waste of time with the keyhole next to it clearly telling her she's not good enough. She pushes the button below it and

once again the doors are closing when she sees the cute guy from downstairs. Again he's a second too late and Brenda's unable to stop herself from laughing delightedly, but only once the elevator is safely moving and the chances of him hearing her are lessened.

The elevator takes forever to climb its way to the twenty-first floor, leaving Brenda to hope her handsome pursuer has the lungs of your average smoker so that even if he's taking the stairs he won't be able to catch her.

Stepping out of the elevator, she knows she's gotten away with it.

So far.

Room 214 is off to her right and visible from here, but she doesn't have time to muck about making-believe she's meant to be up here, instead walking briskly to the door with its large gold number and knocking loudly and rapidly.

It's answered immediately, swinging open while she's still actively knocking. Whoa. Now this is a surprise.

Underpants would have been nice.

Not that there's anything to see with that belly flap of his adequately hiding his manhood.

He steps to the side and she zooms past him; something he takes as a sign of her eagerness rather than her desire not be caught in the hallway.

Slamming the door closed, Hilton is airborne a second later, severely challenging at least two of Newton's laws of motion. The other thing that's challenged is the bed, when he lands spread-eagled in the middle of it.

Bloody hell, three chardonnays were not going to be nearly enough.

“I’d love a drink.”

With any luck she’ll be able to get enough down him that he passes out before she does.

To avoid eye contact with her now furious paramour, Brenda wanders over to the large sliding door that gives access to the balcony. She makes a show of looking through it as though able to see the view beyond, but she can’t see a damned thing, with the window instead acting like a huge mirror.

The sight of a naked Hilton first bouncing himself off the bed and then bending over to check out the contents of the small mini fridge has her close to exploding with a horrified guffaw. It’s only slapping her hand over her mouth that stops it.

For each drink he offers, she comes up with an excuse. Too strong, too weak, too sickly.

“Can’t you get something from room service? Bubbles would be nice.”

Clambering up from his hands and knees, Hilton stalks over to the phone beside the bed, picks it up and dials a single number. That he manages to do this all while giving her a filthy look is testament to how annoyed she’s gotten him.

Their order placed, he spins in her direction with centrifugal force lifting his stomach enough that she gets a brief glimpse of his jewels. No challenge there.

“How about you slip into something more comfortable? Like your birthday suit.” He wiggles those damned eyebrows of his again.

And right there in that moment, Brenda has to decide.

It’s a decision she doesn’t dwell on for long.

CHAPTER 5



BRENDA LEARNED LONG AGO life isn't easy and that it was necessary to do bad things to achieve your overall goals and if one of those goals was a life of ease, there wasn't much Brenda wouldn't do in its pursuit. And so, with the merest of hesitations, she walks over to the end of the bed, drags her lacy dress over her head and drops it. Now the only thing standing between her and the altogether is her sheer lingerie.

Even though he's already seen her in her bikini, she slowly turns, giving Hilton plenty of time to inspect her like a side of beef. She'll pass with flying colours, she always does. She's grade A arse and she knows it.

Her hands are snaking around to undo the clasp of her bra when there's a discreet knock. Wow, room service in this place is fast. She drops her hands to the side to wait until Hilton answers the door. No point in a floor show if no-one is watching.

Again, he swings the door wide with little regard for whoever is on the other side getting an eyeful of his bits. But this macho display doesn't hold up. His hands drop to his crotch in an effort to hide anything not covered by his gut. He staggers away from the door until he backs into the bed, dropping to its bronze satin coverlet with a high-pitched squeak.

Brenda waits for whoever is out there to walk in, but no-one does. With Hilton staring at the open doorway and seemingly stuck in

place, dread fills her chest. There's only one person could instil this much fear in her erstwhile suitor.

Marcia!

Well, screw facing the crazy bitch wearing nothing but her undies. Brenda grabs her dress from the floor and yanks it on not caring if it's the right way around or not. Hilton is also in motion, making short work of racing into the bathroom, grabbing a bathrobe off the back of the door and scrambling into it. He then scoops his clothes up off the floor and walks out of the room without a word, throwing her for a loop.

But the door doesn't close after him and so she waits, expecting Mrs Taylor to storm in any second and drive a stiletto into her foot, or her chest. Brenda gets her handbag off the sideboard, ready to go down fighting if needs be, but no-one enters.

Eventually curiosity gets the better of her, or maybe it's the suspense of waiting to see who's out there that is killing her ever slowly. Either way, there's no way she's staying trapped in here and given the weight of her handbag with all those coins in the side pockets, heaven help anyone who gets in her way.

If she's lucky, there won't be anyone there at all.

A quick peek around the edge of the door puts paid to this hope.

Well, this isn't who she'd expected and given he isn't puffed Brenda can only assume he didn't use the stairs.

But why would Hilton be scared of him?

He's only an employee.

Isn't he?

"May I come in?"

“Ah, yeah. Sure, why not?”

Throwing her handbag behind the door where it lands with a resounding thump, Brenda stands back so he can enter. Maybe tonight isn't going to be a complete wash after all. She's about to close the door when room service arrives in the form of a pimply youth pushing a small trolley complete with ice bucket, a bottle of yet-to-be opened bubbles and glasses.

“Put it there.” He indicates a spot over by the window with an assured air, labelling him as being anything but hired help.

That the youth is subservient is also interesting and when he leaves without getting either of them to sign for the bubbles, Brenda knows for sure.

Interesting turn of events and one that could well work in her favour.

“So,” he says, moving toward her, “bed or balcony?”

The fizz of excitement that explodes in places that had earlier been quivering in dread is spectacular and Brenda is unable to stop herself from smiling broadly before making a real production out of pretending to ponder the choices he's given her.

“Hmmm, the bed does look comfortable.”

She waits until he moves toward it before adding “But I do love a view.”

“Oh, we use both, but choice of first is yours.”

God, even his broken English is sexy.

If, as she suspects, he also has shares in this place, she might get her room upgrade after all and not mind one bit that she's sharing it with him. Once again Brenda lifts her dress over her head and drops it, but this time she has help undoing her bra. On leading her out onto the

balcony, he's as naked as she is.

She cries her release to the view twice before they move inside again.

It takes Brenda a minute to work out where she is although she has no difficulty working out what it is that's woken her. That man's head is beautiful in a lot more ways than one. Easy on the eye and easy on the lips, who'd have thought it?

Before room service arrives with their breakfast, she returns the favour, for once not finding it a chore, but isn't even half way through her first croissant when he ruins her appetite.

"Why ees beautiful woman like you, with a brutto husband of my sister?"

Because of the accent and mix of languages, it takes Brenda a second to untangle the relationship. Oh bugger. No wonder Hilton had been quaking in his boots.

"It'll be our secret, right?" Brenda crosses her fingers under the table, but she's not holding out much hope. Things had been going far too well for it to last.

His negligent shrug lets her know she's screwed.

"Marcia ees famiglia."

"Do I at least get a head start?"

"There ees no rush to leave."

It's an offer she's not going to turn down, especially when the next item on her list will be racing home along the beach to throw everything into her car and move somewhere else for fear of that crazy tart tracking her down. Or running her down. Neither option is one Brenda is keen on.

It's a couple more hours before she's free of his gravitational pull and hurrying along the beach on legs so wobbly, they're as good as useless. In between bouts of great sex, she'd found out it's not Hilton's money in all the hotels and commercial buildings, but rather family money that Marcia's relatives are never going to hand over to him in a million years. They consider their daughter and sister to have married beneath herself. Despite her dislike of the woman, Brenda has to agree. Without money, Hilton is nothing but a fat slob.

She's cutting up through the dunes to the shack when she looks back at the Iluka. There's no missing last night's lover standing naked on the balcony of their room and she knows she's been spotted when he gives her a lazy wave. Damn it, she hopes he keeps his promise to do nothing more than tell his sister what Hilton has been up without bringing up her name. Not that he knows what it is.

Opening the door to the shack, she staggers to a halt. Hilton is out cold on her couch, snoring like a cane toad with a head cold. Dammit, she doesn't have time to deal with him now. Scooting through to her bedroom, she's pissed off to see his distinctive black Merc parked in her driveway, effectively blocking her Toyota Celica in. That stupid idiot. He may as well have written her address down and handed it to his deranged wife.

Without bothering to wake him, she crams her belongings into the two battered suitcases that have been her travelling companions for the past couple of years. Damn it, she'd wanted to have time to strip the place of any valuables and flog them at a market somewhere but with that fool Hilton passed out in the lounge and his brother-in-law no doubt having already dobbed them in, it won't be long before

Marcia is out and about looking for blood.

She's sneaking past Hilton with a suitcase in each hand when there's a break in his snoring. She doesn't wait to find out if this is simply an adjustment in his breathing or a sign he's waking. Suitcases safely stowed in the boot, Brenda tiptoes back into the shack. She needs to find the keys to the Merc, move the damned thing and get out of there. It's not a choice she can take. The keys are nowhere to be seen, but then she spots a bulge in the front pocket of Hilton's shorts and even without a medical degree, she can tell it isn't one designed by nature.

Damn it; it'll be impossible to get them out of there without waking him. If his shorts weren't so tight, she'd give it a whirl but as it is there's no way she's putting her hands anywhere near his goolies unless there's no other option.

Her foot is poised above his gut ready to put the boot in when she remembers the beer in the fridge. She'll be stuffed if she's leaving that behind and so there's another delay while she transfers this to a beaten-up Esky and shoves it in the boot next to her suitcases.

Hilton is still unconscious when she walks back into the lounge and so she has no remorse in filling a pot of water and tipping it over him.

"What the hell?" Hilton splutters and curses, pulling himself into a seated position.

With him busy with his couch yoga session, Brenda tosses the pot into the sink where it lands with a resounding clatter that has him looking in her direction.

"Keys!" She holds her hand out, beckoning with her fingers to hurry him along.

"What?"

“I need to move your car so I can get the hell out of here. Your nutty wife is probably already cruising the streets looking for the Merc.”

“No she won’t.” Hilton settles back into the couch, looking supremely confident.

“She will! Her brother was leaving to tell her about us after I left him just now.”

CHAPTER 6



IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG FOR Hilton to put the pieces together and know he's already been replaced, but this is one bridge Brenda is happy to incinerate, never having been keen on crossing it in the first place. Her failed protector's face turns a dangerous mix of purple and red, hinting at a killer combination of dodgy ticker and high blood pressure.

If anything, his colour deepens when he jumps to his feet and stalks across the room in her direction. "You slept with that bastard, Stefano?"

Brenda neither confirms or denies, but does take note of the gorgeous Sicilian's name, all while bouncing to distribute the adrenalin evenly around her body. She's mid-bounce when his meaty paws grab her upper arms in a cruel grip. She doesn't hesitate. After an extra high bounce she jams her right knee hard in the direction of his nuts in a move she's perfected over the years. Here's hoping she's given it enough of a boost to get past his stomach and have them good and smashed.

His kneecaps come in for some rough justice when he drops to the wooden floor with a lung-emptying "oomph". Brenda shoves him fully to the ground with her foot, leans over and is in possession of his keys a moment later.

Sprinting back outside, she makes short work of unlocking the Merc, starting it and throwing it into reverse. Screaming out of her

driveway she continues down the short lane leading to the main road. Once there, she keeps reversing until she's backed the car out and onto the Main Beach Parade where she doesn't so much park it, as abandon it, even leaving the keys in the ignition in hopes someone will nick it for a joy ride.

As tempting as it would be to take it herself, because even in reverse the car has handled better than her car, she's got enough to deal with without adding a stolen car to the mix. A second after jumping into her piece of Japanese junk, she screams like a banshee. "Screw it all to hell." Her crocheted dress and sheer undies were never going to be up to the challenge of saving her arse from the heat currently being generated by the black vinyl upholstery. She doesn't waste time getting a towel, instead wiggling her bum around until the worst of the burn dissipates.

She's glad of this when on turning out of the lane and onto the Main Beach Parade; she sees a light blue Mercedes pull up behind the black one. It's exactly as Sonia has described and so Brenda doesn't dare floor it for fear of drawing attention, and instead putters along all while simultaneously keeping an eye on the road and the action in her rear view mirror.

She's close to being able to turn right and escape properly when she takes one last peek at the scene behind her. Marcia's looking in her direction, her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun.

"Crap!"

Brenda's expletive is two-fold. First she doesn't like the way the woman has continued to stare in her direction and on turning back to face the road, she has to jam her brakes on for fear of taking out an old

lady shuffling across it pushing a walking frame the insurance company should have written off after the first accident it'd caused. What was it about the elderly that had them under the mistaken impression they had as many lives as the cats they owned? Just because you fed nine or more of the little suckers, didn't mean you were bullet proof.

Giving up on the old girl getting out of the way, Brenda pulls out onto the wrong side of the road and slowly inching past. On turning the corner she's glad she's done so when she sees Marcia weaving her way back to her car.

No way is Brenda waiting around to see if she's just being paranoid, she floors it, taking as many corners as she can in as short a space of time as possible before pulling into the driveway of the motel where Sonia lives rent-free in exchange for cleaning the units. Brenda doesn't slow until she's at the end of the driveway and has turned into the parking space behind the last unit. She'll be okay leaving the Celica here because the space is Sonia's and the girl doesn't own a car.

There's nothing polite about Brenda's request to stay. She knocks on the door with both bags sitting at her feet like patient hounds. The door is barely open before she picks up one of them and barges inside, pushing Sonia out of the way in the process. Sonia's still stuttering for an appropriate response when Brenda grabs the second bag.

"I take it you'd like to stay?" The unnecessary question out of the way, Sonia shoves one of Brenda's bags to the side so she can close the door. "Hope you're happy with the couch."

Sonia slides the net curtains to one side and checks the end of the driveway as though expecting Marcia to swing in there any second. "I'm not sure I want you here if that crazy cow is after you."

“I’m telling you. I got away without her seeing me or where I went. I’ll only need to crash here for a couple of nights.” Surely it can’t be long before the drugs and alcohol kill off enough of Marcia’s brain cells that she forgets all about Brenda, or least where she lives?

“Hmmm, okay.” Sonia doesn’t sound convinced, but Brenda grabs this half-arse offer like it’s a lifeline. Anything is better than crashing on the beach or in her car.

Sonia looks at Brenda from the meter she’s currently topping up. “I did warn you she was trouble.”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” Brenda slides the small card under the wiper, straightens and readjusts her tiara.

Despite this show of bravado, she’s feeling vulnerable. None of the other wives she’s ever run into have been as tenacious as Marcia is proving to be. She’d had to crawl on her belly up through the dunes to the shack to retrieve some stuff she’d missed, because there was no way she could go in the front with Marcia parked at the end of the lane as if on permanent patrol. The bloody woman needed to get herself a life.

“I need to, ah, go check something out. You okay on your own?”

Knowing exactly what, or rather who, it is Sonia needs to check out has her smiling. “I’m good.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

Being left on her own is a relief. Without Sonia there to set the pace, she can slow down. Didn’t the girl get they got paid by the hour, not the sodding kilometre?

On the outside Brenda hopes she looks relaxed as she strolls along topping up expired meters, but with a wary eye out for a certain light blue Mercedes, she’s anything but. She’d have hoped Marcia would

have given up by now, knowing Brenda is no longer interested in Hilton. But on the other hand she shouldn't be surprised. Vendetta is an Italian word and not to be ignored even if it does sound more like a moped than a blood feud.

Sensing movement out the corner of her eye, Brenda turns with dread but the car crawling in tandem with her is red and of a design that lets everyone know the driver is loaded, if not necessarily hung. Checking him out Brenda's smile is tentative. While she knows what's on offer is a match for the flamboyance of the vehicle, she still isn't sure where Stefano's loyalties lie.

Maybe having ratted Hilton and her out to his sister as he said he would, he's feels like he's done his part? Brenda's still hacked off that her liaison has put her on the run. In her eyes, she's not the guilty party here; Hilton's the one who's married.

The red sports car remains in Brenda's peripheral vision and she's unable to stop herself from speeding up. Much as she'd like a repeat performance, if he's going to re neg on this promise and do something stupid like grab hold of her for his sister, the more distance she can put between them the better. Thanks to all the hours spent traipsing around, she knows every alleyway and arcade on offer, where the back entrances lead to and those leading to dead ends.

She turns off the footpath as soon as she's able, speeding down an arcade and only turning to look when she's at the back door that leads to a car park and thereafter to another arcade. She freaks on seeing Stefano abandoning his car in traffic to follow her but some insistent beeping has him climbing back in and roaring off.

Now she's faced with a decision, keep walking through the car park

and out the other side or complete a U-turn and head back to the street she's come from. What would Stefano expect her to do? She's still dithering when the door next to her is wrenched open with enough force that if she wasn't as badly dehydrated as she is she'd have had an accident.

"Come, you need to go. My sister she know what you look like."

Damn it! "And why is that?"

Brenda has a good idea and Stefano's air of mild guilt confirms it. She smacks him hard on the shoulder in retaliation. "Bastardo!"

He looks at her, his face a picture of stunned surprise. "My sister, she ask me."

"And what if your wife asked you something? Would you spill your guts then, too?"

Brenda waits. The last thing she needs is to have two Italian women gunning for her.

Stefan's smile is broad, his eyes twinkle. "Ah no. But she ees not blood."

"Thank the lord for small mercies."

"She ees not even Italian," says Stefano, further adding to her sense of relief.

On hearing his sharp intake of breath, Brenda looks up to find his gaze locked on the street at the end of the arcade.

"Sod it!" The bloody woman is sticking to her like poo on a blanket.

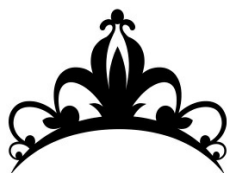
"You go, I meet you again soon."

Not wanting to risk him changing his mind, Brenda slides through the gap between him and the door jamb, speed walks across the car park and into the arcade opposite, but instead of rushing through to the next street, she slides into a shop near the back, fairly sure Marcia

won't see her hiding among the racks of dry cleaning waiting for collection.

Putting a finger to her lips in a plea for silence from the old bloke behind the counter is as much life insurance as she has time for.

CHAPTER 7



BRENDA COUNTS ONE-ONE-THOUSAND to ten, really slowly, to allow for Marcia's odd, weaving gait, before sliding a couple of bags to the side and peeking out. Her view of the arcade is the merest slit, but it's Marcia-free and that's good enough for her. Counting off her heartbeats she waits until she deems it safe to pop her head out of the doorway, looking in the direction of the street.

Seeing Marcia turning onto the footpath, Brenda is off, stumbling back into the car park at speed, but seeing Stefano still parked there has her stopping. Even more surprising is that he's beckoning for her to join him.

She's torn. On the one hand, the reason Marcia is on her tail is because he's ratted her out, but he didn't hold onto her earlier, making it a piece of cake for his sister to nobble her.

The tan leather seat is nowhere near as hot as she's expecting and certainly a lot cooler than the vinyl seats of the Celica would be if they were open to the elements like this. She's doing her seatbelt up when he fishtails out of the car park and off down the Esplanade.

"Where to?"

Reeling off the directions to Sonia's place, Brenda's pleased when he follows them, at speed, pressing her back into her seat. She loves the power of the car and wishes there was more time to enjoy it, but it's about as subtle as her work uniform. Couple that with it being a convertible and she's an easy spot for Marcia, even at a distance.

She doesn't know if he's showing off but is alarmed when he manages to get the car into second gear in the short driveway at the motel. Fortunately the brake pedal is as effective as the accelerator and it's this that stops them mowing down the rickety wooden fence at the end of the property.

"You need leave town."

"You think?" Brenda's unable to hold back her sarcasm. If he'd kept his trap shut, she wouldn't be on the run at all. She hasn't finished with Surfer's Paradise, preferring to leave a city on her terms than being run out of the place by a Mafia wife with a drinking problem and mental health issues.

Climbing out of the car isn't as easy as getting in had been. Compounding her exit is Stefano grabbing her when she's nearly free of the seat and planting a kiss that has her toes curling.

Damn it, he's some of her unfinished business.

"Until next time."

Without an address, phone number or even a blood type, Brenda's not sure how there's supposed to be a next time. It's not like he's going to be able to pop around here and see her. In another ten minutes she'll be on her way out of town.

Scratch that. Out of State.

The plus on packing now is that she hasn't had the time or space to properly unpack since arriving at Sonia's a mere two days earlier. No time to pick up her pay packet, no time to hand in her notice, no time to return the uniform. Brenda doesn't even give herself the luxury of changing, instead throwing a towel over the molten lead driver's seat and buckling herself into the Celica in anticipation of having to drive

like a maniac in the near future.

She's pulling out of her parking space when there's a bang on the roof of the car that has her close to using the towel to absorb something other than heat.

"And where are you off to?"

"Jeez Sonia, you scared the crap outta me."

Brenda's unable to keep the edge off her voice; the girl had given her a hell of a fright.

"Is this anything to do with that crazy Italian bitch ripping me a new one down on the Esplanade?"

"Huh?"

"Yeah, I just had a run-in with the lovely Marcia. Took me a while to convince her I hadn't been banging her husband."

"So why the hell are you here? She coulda followed you."

"She pulled an effing knife on me. I need a drink and a change of underpants."

"Bleedin' hell."

While the two of them might have joked about Hilton's wife being a sandwich short of a picnic, this is way more serious than Brenda had considered. Stefano hadn't been kidding about her getting out of town, and soon. "Gotta go!"

Shooting backwards into the drive proper, she nearly takes Sonia out in the process. "Sorry!" she yells through the open sunroof before putting the car into first and accelerating down the driveway to the road. Rather than pull out blindly, she checks carefully in case the crazy tart is in the neighbourhood but the way is clear in both directions. She turns away from where she'd last seen the light blue Mercedes thinking it better to get away cleanly than quickly and is

relieved her trip to the main road out of town is without incident.

The last thing she needs is to run into that nutter, or vice versa.

Not that the drive to the Pacific Highway is without risk, especially with the number of ways out of Surfers being limited because of the waterways that surround the area. Brenda heads north to Southport, then shoots across to the Pacific Highway and heads south from there. With luck Marcia will be driving around the streets of Surfers Paradise and not venturing farther afield.

On safely reaching the highway, Brenda relaxes enough to take her eyes off the rear view mirror and shove a mix tape into the stereo. Long drives are always better with music.

She's cruising along inside the speed limit and singing with gay abandon and a complete lack of talent when a sixth sense has her looking in the rear view mirror.

The chorus sticks in her throat.

There's no mistaking the make of car and the colour is easy to spot, too. Even if it's a reasonable distance behind her.

Dammit, you'd think with her leaving town the bloody woman would give up, but no. Just her luck to strike a tenacious one. Usually once she was actively going, they left her to it.

Without conscious effort, she puts her foot down; pressing the accelerator as far as it will go. Better to face a cop than Marcia. Not that putting her foot down makes much difference to the Celica's progress. It's nowhere near being in the same league as the vehicle rapidly closing in on it.

One thing's for sure, Brenda can't stay on the highway. She's dead meat out here. But where to go? And won't turning off mean slowing

down?

Nevanwood? She's got no idea if it's a town or a cattle station, but she's just passed a sign announcing the turnoff is coming up on her right. But soon enough to help her?

A quick peek in the rear view mirror and Brenda's surprised to see the Mercedes is no longer as visible as it had been earlier. Her view of it is being blocked by Sefano's now-familiar red sports car weaving left and right, stopping the Mercedes from passing. And for once the sports car isn't going full tit. If anything it's slowing down and forcing the Mercedes to do the same.

Ripping her gaze away from the action behind her and back to the front, Brenda almost misses the turnoff to Nevanwood, forcing her to take the corner at more speed than she'd like or is recommended. Lucky for her there's been no traffic coming from the other direction, but keeping the car on the road is still touch and go. She doesn't let up on the accelerator, passing cars in riskier spots than she normally would.

Only when she can no longer see Stefano's car does she throw hers down a side road. Unfortunately the tar seal doesn't last long with its gravel replacement having the Celica throwing up a huge plume of dust and marking her position as nothing else.

The road she's on runs straight for ages, forcing her to turn onto a track that's really only a glorified fire break, with the grass running down the middle swishing the underside of the car. Brenda hopes her trail of dust will now be hidden, but to be sure, she keeps flooring it until she's around a couple more bends. On spotting a short drive leading to a shed that's seen better days she throws the car to the right and around the back of the building, where she jams on her brakes,

sliding dangerously close to the trunk of a large gum tree.

Clambering out of the car she scans in all directions.

Thank god, if she can't see the track because of the shed and all the foliage that surrounds it; by rights she should be hidden from anyone passing by.

If only the blasted dust would settle.

For once Brenda feels vulnerable being half naked. Dragging what she hopes is the right suitcase out of the boot; she dumps it on the ground, opens it and has a good rummage, pleased to find what she's after a moment later.

There's nothing flattering about the poo coloured shorts, or the t-shirt that's faded to a dull olive green, but they're as camo as she has on hand. She doesn't bother removing the gold bikini, instead pulling the shorts and t-shirt on over it. With the addition of sneakers and a cap, she's ready to go down fighting.

Suitcase safely stowed back in the car, she has a quick look inside the shed, made easy by the back door having long been taken out by rot and termites. She's relieved to see a rake leaning against the wall just inside the door where she can reach it because with the piles of crap that fill the place, it'll be heaving with snakes or worse. She hefts the rake getting a feel for it and is glad to find it's one of the heavy duty old-school variety and so more than a match for a nutter with a knife.

Taking the towel off her front seat, she spreads it on the ground under the tree. Even shaded as it is, there's no way she's waiting in the car. Not only would it be too hot, it would also be too easy to get trapped there if Marcia sneaks up on her.

She sits there for quarter of an hour on high alert before allowing herself to relax marginally. The adrenalin eventually abates leaving her hungry and thirsty. There's nothing she can do about her hunger, but a lukewarm beer from the Esky in the boot will be better than dying of thirst.

Leaning the rake against the front of the car, she staggers to her feet and back around to the boot. It's while she's retrieving a beer that she hears a car and it's closer than she'd like.

It's not Stefano.

"Crap!"

Beer shoved back in the cooler, Brenda lowers the boot lid and quietly clicks it into place. Only when she's back beside the tree with the rake hoisted in front of her does she have any sense of comfort. Yet again her heart is hammering in her chest and her body is all flight or fight.

The car gets nearer ever so slowly, with the driver taking their time either because of the state of the track, or because they're looking for something.

Or someone.

She's torn between staying hidden and moving enough that she can check out the track. In the end, the anticipation builds to the point it's impossible to keep still.

She takes a couple of steps to her left, but it's enough.

More than enough.

CHAPTER 8



DAMN IT. THE WOMAN HAS the homing instincts of a effing blood hound, but where is Stefano? Brenda shoots back to the base of the tree, hoping to hell the woman doesn't think to look behind the shed. The car pulling to a stop and sounds of the handbrake being yanked on give her the answer, even if it's not the one she was after.

Screw staying here and facing the crazy bitch. While not being dense, the bush behind her does offer some cover and it's here Brenda flees, as quickly and quietly as she can. Only when she can no longer see the red of her car through the the greenery does she stop, taking refuge behind a clump of ferns, the rake firmly under her control.

Even unable to see the action from this distance, she has no trouble working out what's going on. The scream from Marcia says all too clearly that the woman is pissed off at not being able to find her prey. What follows is the sounds of someone wearing stilettos kicking the hell out of a car.

Damn it, she hasn't got money for a panel-beater.

A couple more loud dings and Brenda has had enough.

She's nowhere near as quiet on her return trip to the car, instead she thunders through the bush, using the rake like a battering ram and yelling at the top of her voice. She was never going to be able to sneak up on Marcia, so to hell with being quiet.

She bursts into the opening next, rake raised above her head and ready to do the woman an injury for damaging her car. Marcia looks

to be as angry as Brenda, albeit for an entirely different reason.

"I'm leaving, what is wrong with you?"

"I share nothing!"

"Jeez, you're welcome to the fat bastard. Just leave my car alone." Brenda reinforces this request by brandishing the rake like a medieval weapon, for this she may as well be holding a feather duster, albeit that rational thought is lying in a heap somewhere back on the Pacific Highway.

"I share nothing!"

"Yeah. I heard you the first bloody time." Brenda jabs the woman in the stomach with the flat end of the rake. It's not hard, but it's enough to have barmy blonde toppling off those stilettos of hers. She lands on the ground and bumps a couple of times before settling and Brenda isn't able to stifle a giggle.

Big mistake.

If she thought Marcia was pissed off before, it's nothing compared to now. By the time she's managed to stand again, the woman has steam coming out her nostrils.

In Brenda's favour is that the older woman isn't steady on her feet, even having abandoned her high heels. She suspects if she could get anywhere near the old girl without risking life or limb, she'd be able to smell the gin or whatever it was she'd used to swallow her medication.

Half an hour later and they're still at an impasse, although Brenda has managed to stop the woman doing any further damage to the car by threatening her with the rake. How is she supposed to get the hell out of here without having to inflict a prison-worthy injury — or worse — suffer it? Much as she'd like to deck the stupid tart, she can well do without a GBH charge hanging over her head.

Unfortunately all the running around is taking a physical toll on Brenda, with her tongue now firmly stuck to the roof of her mouth.

"Bloody hell, I need a drink."

For the first time since she arrived, Brenda notices something approaching sanity in Marcia's gaze.

Surely it couldn't be that simple?

"Stay there!" Reinforcing this instruction, Brenda jabs the rake so close to Marcia that the woman flinches and again lands on her bum with a bounce.

Not sure she'll stay like that, Brenda races to the boot and grabs two bottles of beer. Surely with the woman already half, if not fully smashed, it won't take much to have her out cold. Even drunk enough to shove her in the Mercedes and tie her up would suit Brenda.

Without an opener handy, Brenda uses the rake to pop the cap off the first bottle of beer. She puts this on the roof of the car before repeating the process with the second. Screw handing the woman a full bottle of beer while her own hands were busy. Brenda has been in enough public bars to know how that ends.

Only once Marcia is drinking her beer, does Brenda guzzle her own. Gross. Warm beer sucked, but it was better than suffering from a dehydration headache.

It takes half a dozen more beers for Brenda to get Marcia to a point it's safe to go near the woman without being armed with the rake. Jeez the old bird is a booze hound. If Brenda hadn't deliberately paced herself, she'd be out cold by now. The woman lying on the ground at her feet might well be a blubbering wreck but she's nowhere near unconscious. But she is quiet enough that Brenda will be able to tie her hands behind her back. It won't matter how angry she gets then, it's bloody hard to drive a car without your hands. The belt from Brenda's black sun dress will be perfect for hog-tying Marcia and thanks to her earlier rummage, she knows exactly where it is.

She's putting her suitcase back in the boot when she hears the Merc's engine roar into life.

"What the hell!"

How the hell did Marcia go from wallowing around on the ground and into her car so quickly? Obviously she's not as under the influence of the beers as she'd made out. Bitch.

Marcia is now armed with something a whole lot more dangerous than a stiletto or an old-school rake. She's in possession of enough alcohol to preserve a dead wallaby and sixteen hundred kilos of German engineering.

It's not a good combo in anyone's books.

Running out from behind the shed, Brenda's in time to see her nemesis reversing up the track at speed and Brenda doubts she's leaving. The car skids to a stop and half the gear box is removed in the change from reverse to first. Marcia floors it and while the wheels initially spin, they soon gain traction and the large car lurches forward, its speed impressive for such a huge hunk of metal.

Without time to think, Brenda can only react, throwing the rake javelin-style at the Mercedes. It hits glass and keeps on going, shattering the windscreen into a million pieces. A large step back into the ferns that feather the track is the only reason she misses out on being totalled. Well that, and the smashed windscreen causing Marcia to swerve wildly to one side.

This also puts the woman on a collision course with the old shed. But with no let up on the accelerator, the Mercedes hits the glorified pile of firewood with a horrendous splintering crash. The old building proves no match for the large car and it groans in protest while

collapsing around the vehicle like a deck of cards, imprisoning Marcia in the process.

Not waiting to be asked, Brenda crawls out of the undergrowth, belts over to her car and is hooning her way down the dusty track a short time later. She doesn't know if Marcia is alive, and quite frankly she's not waiting to find out. She'll ring someone later and let them know where they can find the poor cow.

Maybe.

Not even when she's safely back on the Pacific Highway and heading south again does she ease off on the gas. She's pushing it for getting a speeding ticket but for all she knows Marcia is on her tail again, complete with the bloody shed, like the baddie from a Bond movie. Unstoppable.

The needle on the gas tank slipping into red territory means she has to stop sooner than she'd like. After a nervous glance in the rear view mirror, she turns into the next servo on her side of the road, pulling in on the station side of the fuel pumps. She's doubly pleased when a large off-road vehicle pulls in on the other side of the pumps, hiding the Celica even further.

Fumbling to screw the gas cap back on, she doesn't immediately comprehend what the sound is. What starts out like a mosquito fuelled by alcohol, soon morphs into the distinctive scream of a high-performance engine being pushed to the max. Stefano flies by a second later.

Thankfully there's no sign of the Mercedes.

For now.

Her gas paid for in coins, Brenda is back on the road with her foot now more lead-like than ever. She doesn't know if she's got a hope of

catching Stefano, but there's a slim chance the blue Mercedes is behind her somewhere. Slowing down is not a risk she's prepared to take.

The highway is hugging the coastline before Brenda spots Stefano although if he hadn't had to stop for gas too, she doubts she'd have caught up with him at all. While both cars are red, there any similarities die. Constant checking of her rear view mirror lets her know that, for now, Marcia is nowhere near, but Brenda worries that in another half hour she won't even have that luxury with the sun going down like a lead balloon. One minute you can see, the next it's lights out.

Pulling into the petrol station, she parks well away from the pumps and as far back on the property as she can without being in the service bay.

Having earned her trust when he'd run interference earlier, she leans casually against the pump next to his car waiting for him to return from paying for the gas. Walking through the doors of the petrol station, which doubles as a local store, he looks at her, but doesn't react.

"What the hell?"

Dammit, she'd forgotten she was still in her Camo Barbie outfit. She whips off the cap and shakes her hair free. A quick flip of the front of her t-shirt flashes him her bikini top and his smile is soon as bright as the gold lamé.

Rather than walking around to where she is, he opens the passenger door gesturing for her to get in.

Tempting though it is, there is no way she's abandoning her car, and more importantly, all her stuff. "I'll follow you."

He shrugs, closes the passenger door and makes short work of walking around the back and pulling her into a crushing embrace involving more tongue than is common in a petrol station.

Reluctantly pulling her lips free, she whispers, "I hope we're going somewhere close."

"Melbourne close enough for you?"

"Melbourne? But that's not close at all."

"Ees where I live. I only visit famiglia een Gold Coast. For holiday."

Now this is something Brenda can cope with. The idea of moving to a city two States away from Mad Marcia appeals, and now she's got a solid gold, or at least gold-plated contact, it's even better. Issue is, will she be able to keep Stefano on as short a leash as she'd like, although tied to her bed would be preferable?

EPILOGUE



THE TRIP DOWN FROM THE Gold Coast takes a lot longer than it should. It's also a hell of a lot more fun with Stefano forking out for their accommodation. Brenda had been expecting to sleep in the back of her car so a king-size bed is a pleasant surprise.

Shame the five star accommodations doesn't last once they're inside the Melbourne city limits. After this Stefano is cagey about her camping out at any of the hotels his family owns, preferring to put her up in one of his rental properties. Brenda thinks this is mostly to do with him not wanting his Mrs to stumble upon them.

Still, after being chased all over the Gold Coast by Hilton's wife, the crazy Marcia, Brenda's a little gun-shy on running into wives. Maybe Stefano's approach might be better in the long run.

Meantime, she's stuck in a scuzzy hostel for young ladies in South Melbourne. While she might be young, she's no lady and the old bird who owns the hostel keeps a beady eye out for any shenanigans. As if you'd bring a bloke back to rooms as grotty as these are. Candlewick bedspreads are the best passion killer known to man so far as Brenda is concerned.

She looks around the room that's been her home for the past month. Everything is faded and worn. Make that threadbare and even plain old dirty in places. Stefano had better sort his shit out and get rid of the current tenants at a three bedroom property he owns on Punt Road in South Yarra.

“Brenda! Phone!” is shouted up the stairs. As an intercom system it’s crude, but effective. And, with the only person knowing where she lives being Stefano, Brenda crosses her fingers this is the call she’s been waiting for.

She’s out of bed in a flash, drags on her dressing gown and is thundering down the stairs soon after. She grabs the receiver before anyone walking past has a chance to hang the phone up because they’re expecting a call themselves.

“Stefano?”

“It is indeed. The tenants have gone!” His voice is chock full of anticipation as to what this will mean for him.

Her response to this amazing bit of news is a deliberately tepid, “and?” While she might be as happy as he is about this development, her motto is treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen. It works a treat, especially on men like Stefano.

“And I was thinking you’d like to move in. It would mean I could see you more often.”

“Fine, although I don’t appreciate having had to wait this long. When can I look at the place?”

It’s arranged she can call around to see it that very morning. Boy, he’s really keen. While she’s playing it cool with him, she can’t move in soon enough. Shelling out money for rent when she could be getting her accommodation in return for favours is not ideal in her world.

After scrawling the address on a page she’s ripped out of the telephone directory, Brenda saunters into the kitchen hoping she can nab a piece of toast off someone. Lucky for her there are two New Zealand girls who have bread to spare. Brenda nods toward the loaf

sitting on a less than clean cutting board. "Don't suppose I can help myself to a slice of bread? I haven't had a chance to go shopping this week."

"Sure help yourself. I'm Samantha, by the way. Call me Sam," says the blonde girl. "This is Jennie."

Brenda looks at the second girl, who's a lot taller with short, brown curly hair, receiving a tentative smile in return. That the girl slides a block of butter and jar of vegemite in Brenda's direction has her warming toward her.

"Grab yourself a coffee if you want," says Sam, shaking a jar of instant like it's a maraca.

Brenda makes the most of their generosity and it's while she's slicing herself a second doorstop that she overhears something that has the blade stopping mid-loaf. Surely it can't be this easy?

She looks up at them. "You're looking for somewhere to live?"

Both girls nod in response.

"How much do you want to spend?"

When they answer in perfect unison Brenda isn't sure if they mean each, or for both of them. A moment later it's confirmed they're talking each. With each of them paying that sort of rent, and the flat actually costing Brenda nothing, she wouldn't need to work unless she wanted to. And she doubts that's going to happen soon.

She'd feel bad about it, but at the end of the day, they're still getting a cheap place to stay.

"Just so happens I know of a place going, I'm checking it out in a couple of hours, if you're keen."

Later that morning and Brenda pulls her car into a side-road up

from the address Stefano has given her. Because the flat is on a main thoroughfare, there's no parking right out front. Striding down the footpath, she swings in through the open gate and immediately spots Stefano sitting on a bench in the garden. He's smoking a cigar and checking out a track guide.

If he hadn't been there, Brenda would've thought she was at the wrong address. The place looks stunning and more than she could have hoped for. His face lights up when he spots her with him patting the seat next to him in invitation.

Brenda smiles in return before sauntering over and giving her walk every ounce of seduction she can throw at it. Watching his eyes widen, she knows she's got the mix just right.

Sitting next to him, she doesn't give him a chance to speak before taking hold of his chin and kissing him deeply. He's responding when she pulls away. "My friends, are they here?"

"They are inside, but you, you do not need to hurry."

Brenda pulls out of his embrace and looks at him as if he's slipped a cog. "I do if I want the best bedroom." She leaves him where he is and walks into the flat, finding the two Kiwi girls in one of the bedrooms.

"Sorry I'm late traffic was a complete bitch for a Saturday morning so what do you think of our new landlord?" she says, in one breath.

"Very cute, and married by the looks of things. Mind you, we might be able to come to an arrangement on how we pay the rent," jokes Sam.

"Too late, why do you think the place is so sodding cheap!" Not that Brenda's letting on it's as cheap as it is. No point in that.

"What! You didn't?" says Sam.

"Multiple times," says Brenda.

“How can you do that?” says Jennie, aghast.

“I can give you a book, if you like.” Brenda’s unable to believe the tall girl is as prudish as she is. It’s 1977 for goodness sake.

“Not that! I know how to do it. But sex should be special. It should be with the right guy.”

Brenda rolls her eyes. “Screw me, that’s ‘virgin’ on the ridiculous.”

“You mean verging,” says Jennie, a little primly.

“Yeah, whatever.” Brenda leaves them, wandering off to check out the other rooms.

By the end of the visit, it’s been confirmed they’ll move in that very afternoon. It’s going to piss the landlady at the hostel off no end, but it’s something they can all live with. Brenda’s even looking forward to living in a flat with two other girls. Who knows what sort of fun they can get up to? She just needs to work on loosening up that Jennie chick. Couple of casks of wine should do it. Actually make that three.

THE END



I hope you enjoyed this prequel to my ‘That Seventies Series’. If you want to find out what trouble Brenda, Sam and Jennie get into, check out Friday Night Fever. While this is Sam’s story, Brenda is in the thick of things boots and all. Actually she’s usually the one who gets them into, and out of, the trouble.



If you found out your fiancé was cheating, would you crawl into a hole? Or, would you teach him a lesson he'd never forget?

Samantha Bennett has dreamed of a big white wedding since she was little. And she's so very close to her goal when the dream blows up in her face. Okay, so the cheating skuzzball boyfriend hasn't actually popped the question, but it was only a matter of time.

Fleeing to Australia to avoid her revenge biting her on the bum, Sam hasn't completely abandoned her quest to find 'The One', when life catches up with a vengeance. She's still dealing with this when she runs into Chris, a gorgeous Aussie guy, who also appears loyal, dependable and too good to be true.

Will Sam make up her mind before her competition makes it up for her? Or will the cops find her before she has the opportunity?

Friday Night Fever is a laugh-out-loud, feel good read for any woman who's had to deal with a cheating, good for nothing, useless

waste of space.

NOTE: While this book is part of a series, it also reads as a standalone. It was originally published as "This Girl's Abroad" with dozens of four and five star reviews.

What others are saying:

“What a fun read! The story is unique, and the characters are super likeable. I would have enjoyed hanging out with these ladies in the seventies! The inclusion of dogs and their owners adds to the fun. Sam's romantic storyline is satisfying, and there are plenty of laughs along the way. I'm looking forward to reading more from Andrene Low.”

“Amusing, entertaining read. I would have given it 5 stars if it hadn't ended so suddenly. I was expecting more so was left wondering what happened next. But then I found book two. I have read this twice now, and salami boy still makes me laugh out loud.”

“I honestly loved this, and never picked the ending! The whole 1970's genre is perfectly captured in these pages, and I found myself lusting after a spa, platforms, and casual attitude to alcohol and sex! Read it and escape to a fantastic world of gold chains, cutesy dog outfits, and lots of very well written sex! Can't wait till the next instalment.”

FRIDAY NIGHT FEVER

THAT SEVENTIES SERIES – BOOK 1

Andrene Low



Originally titled This Girl's Abroad

CHAPTER 1



SAM SQUARES HER SHOULDERS and rolls another liquorice allsort of white internal memo, coloured copy paper and dark blue carbon into her IBM golf ball typewriter. Yet more drivel from Peter Crisp, her boss.

Crispy Critter is thirty-five going on fifty and middle management right down to the comb-over and a body that looks as though it's been put together like custard. He's a cheap bastard who drives a Nissan Sunny with rust flakes so bad that anything over 60kph make it look positively autumnal.

As her platform shoe hits the foot control of the Dictaphone, Crispy's nasal voice fills her head. "To Barry Davison, R17 Forestry Project, Year Ending 31 March 1978. Barry, please call me at your earliest convenience to discuss."

This is followed by asthmatic breathing, but nothing else.
and if that's all, that's in your sodding memo, why don't you pick up the phone and ring him, ya lazy prick?

Sam hears these words as clearly as Crispy's and the golf ball spits them out onto the memo paper.

"Crap!"

Rolling the wad of paper out of her typewriter, she holds the lot in one corner and flaps it until the sheets of carbon drop limply onto her desk.

Mrs Darren Walters. Mrs Darren Walters. Mrs Darren Walters.

Sam's expecting Darren to make it official the following weekend when he's up from the base on one of his regular fortnightly visits.

Her hand once again strays to the handle of the top drawer of her dark, walnut veneer desk. She slides it open just enough that she can gaze at a picture of Darren in his army fatigues, sent with one of his many letters.

If there's one thing Sam loves, it's a guy in uniform. Not as much as a guy who's ditched the uniform altogether. But close.

Looking at her soon-to-be fiancé reminds Sam how important her well-paid, crappy job is. Her goal of saving enough money for a wedding more over-the-top than her parents are willing to pay for is getting closer every day. It's only the thought of a five-tier cake, live band and bucket-loads of frangipani that have stopped her telling her boss to shove it.

Taking a ring off her right hand, she puts it onto the wedding finger of her left. Joy bubbles away when she holds her hand under the light spilling from the Anglepoise lamp on her desk. She admires the wedded look but, hearing the elevator *ding* its arrival, turns it from married to stretching before putting her hand under the desk and swapping the ring back. As the elevator doors open, she automatically smiles at the new arrivals, but rather than head in her direction they disappear down the corridor.

Retyped without additions, she takes the one-line wonder into Crispy's office for his signature and waits patiently while he goes through his usual wank of reading it, with fountain pen poised expectantly. Then, after enough time that he could have proofed the Magna Carta, he signs his chicken-scratch signature with the flourish of minor royalty.

Back at her desk, she finds Mrs Johnson from Personnel waiting for her. This is the woman who'd first interviewed her for the job. A

second-hand car salesman couldn't have done a better sell on how great the job was.

One careful lady owner, my arse!

"How are you settling in? You're not finding it too challenging?"

"No. We typed more than this at secretarial school."

"Is that right?" Mrs Johnson unclasps the large tan diary that has been protecting her meagre bosom, swings it open and scribbles furiously before snapping it closed. It's back on boob patrol seconds later.

Before the woman can ask anything else, a bellowed, "Sam, in here, now!" erupts from her boss's office.

Mrs Johnson's mouth drops open at the tone, but she remains mute.

Sam picks up her pad and pen and heads into Crispy's office and sits, although it hardly seems worth it. The stuff she takes down in shorthand is as wordy as that on the micro cassettes he leaves in his heavily brass-detailed out-tray.

"Shut the door." His voice is controlled, with a hard edge.

She jumps to do his bidding. A confidential memo would make a nice change.

Her hand is still on the doorknob when he starts berating her.

"How dare you discuss my work with that woman." His voice is low, as though he suspects Mrs Johnson is still hovering.

"But she—" Sam turns toward him.

"What happens in this office is none of her business," he hisses.

Sam looks down at Berber carpet, the colour of camel dung, before stuttering, "But I ... only told the truth ..."

"Good god, the truth is the last thing that woman needs to hear. Now I'll have to stop her riffling through every damn piece of

correspondence I've ever produced. Any more screw ups like that and I'll have to let you go."

"Yes, Mr Crisp," says Sam, in a small voice.

Mrs Darren Walters. Mrs Darren Walters. Mrs Darren –

"Of course, we could discuss it over a few drinks."

She groans inwardly; god, not again. "I'll have to ask my, ah, fiancé if it's all right."

"It could be our little secret. We wouldn't need to let anyone know."

Especially not your wife, you cretin.

At 4.59 pm she flips the switch on the side of her sage green typewriter before dropping a cracked, grey vinyl cover over the top. She smashes the off button on the top of her lamp, grabs her oversized shoulder bag and heads for the elevator.

Crispy had left earlier; up to the senior management offices for the usual Friday night drinks. He'd been bouncing like a puppy in anticipation of mixing with the upper echelons.

God knows what they think of him.

She slumps against the wood panelled back wall of the lift. She can hardly wait to report this latest Crispy instalment to Jennie. Sam and Jennie share everything and always have. Best friends from kindergarten, the confidences have gone from dolls and kittens to boys and clothes and everything in between.

There'd been a lull in their relationship last year, when Jennie had been dealing with her fiancé, Steve, and his battle with cancer. Steve and Jen had been planning a trip overseas until he was diagnosed and they'd had to postpone. Steve lost the fight, leaving Jennie adrift and while she'd talked about finishing her fine arts degree, her heart

hadn't been in it and she'd ended up working for her parents.

Jennie's now decided to go on with the trip as some sort of tribute to Steve. Sam hopes Jennie will be okay on her own and knows she'll miss her friend more than she can imagine.

The lift stops spongily on the ground floor and the doors rattle open, and Sam's brought back to her surroundings. After peeling herself off the wall, she strides across the marble lobby and up to the automatic front doors. It takes a second for them to register her presence before they slide asthmatically open. Walking through them, she breathes in deeply. Even with undertones of diesel, the air tastes fresh after the air-conditioned staleness inside.

The closer she gets to her car, the springier her gait. A girls' night out with Jennie is just what she needs to wash away any lingering traces of Crispy. A nice, big glass of straight scotch might be in order, although antiseptic would be more appropriate.



Later that night Sam's room is a fug of hairspray and Magie Noire perfume as she goes through the rigmarole of getting ready to go to the pub. Half a can of Wella super strength 'black death' hairspray and a round brush has her blow-waved blonde hair flicking back away from her face on both sides. If she were any more Farrah Fawcett she'd be getting calls from Charlie.

With the dryer safely back on its hook on the side of the dressing table, Darren's dog, V8, pops her head out from underneath the bed. V8 loves being in the thick of things but has a pathological fear of the hairdryer. Sam thinks it must have been something that happened to her as a puppy, but because Darren had picked up the dog at the SPCA they had no way of knowing.

It was as much a mystery as her breed, which seems to be Wolfhound mixed with Staffy and a little Labrador thrown in for good measure. As far as Sam can tell, the main Labrador trait V8 had inherited was the biscuit one; the dog only had to hear the kettle being switched on to appear in the kitchen seconds later.

It hadn't taken long after the adoption for Darren to realise he couldn't keep V8 down on the base and he'd asked Sam's parents if they would look after her. For Sam's mum, it had been love at first lick.

"It's all right girl, all finished." She bends down and sweeps the bulky fringe of hair clear of V8's eyes. "Although I think you could do with some hairspray to keep this mop of yours under control." Sam grabs the can of spray and some hair clips from her dresser but V8, suspicious, is already squirming her way through the nearly closed bedroom door.

Sam puts the hairspray and clips back before looking down at the neckline of her dress and frowning. Opening the top drawer of her dressing table, she rummages until she finds an old pair of school socks. Stuffing one into each cup of her bra, she then rearranges her boobs so they look natural. Picking up the red dress she'd finished making the night before, she steps into it, and sucks in her tummy so she can zip it up.

After a thorough search, she wanders out into the lounge looking for a favourite pair of earrings. Her parents are watching the news, although Sam's mother does a double take at the red dress.

"Do you think you should be going out dressed like that when Darren's down at the base?" Her mother absently strokes V8, who's inching her way up onto the couch one leg at a time.

“It’s not that bad!” says Sam, looking down and getting an eyeful of cleavage. “And anyway, Darren trusts me.”

“If you’re sure,” says her mother. Her dad hasn’t taken his eyes off the telly.

“I am!” Sam lifts the lid of the crystal bowl on the mantelpiece. Empty, apart from a moth carcass and a couple of perished rubber bands. Closing her eyes, she thinks back to when she’d last worn the earrings, then goes out into the hallway leaving her parents to the doom and gloom on the telly.

Downstairs, she opens the door to the granny flat where Darren stays when he’s in town. Picking up a T-shirt of his from the end of the bed, she holds it up to her face. Just breathing in his scent kicks her heart rate up a notch. She keeps breathing from the T-shirt, before dropping it in the laundry hamper behind the door in the tiny bathroom.

She finds her sterling silver earrings behind the lamp on the bedside table.

Back up in her room, she opens her wardrobe and looks critically at herself in the mirror on the inside of the door before sliding hangers until she finds a more modest black and silver dress. Sam still can’t believe she’s managed to snare Darren and isn’t about to screw it up. He’s cool; everyone looks up to him, even the guys, and he’s definitely a trophy. She wishes she could be viewed the same way, but even though she has the blonde hair and long legs, she’s a pair of knee-highs short of the minimum cup size.

Sam skips down the curving front steps soon after Jennie pulls up in her lime green Morrie Thou’. Jennie is anal about time and being even

a little late makes her left eye twitch. 'Kermie', as the car is affectionately known, has finally shuddered to a standstill by the time Sam reaches the bottom of the wrought-iron-framed pebblecrete steps.

Before she can open the car door, Jennie is out and around into glare of the headlights where she stands with arms wide, eyebrows raised and head cocked to the side. The denim flares are flattering and make her athletic body look curvy. Her short hair is its usual explosion of curls, the colour a deep auburn that could almost be mistaken for black, until the sun hit it. This, coupled with large hazel eyes, would make her look like a pixie if it weren't for her measuring close to six foot.

"You look good. I love the embroidery on the jacket."

"You don't think it's too much? I did bring some other stuff just in case."

Eyeing the bulging carry bag on Kermie's back seat, Sam knows if she doesn't stop the wardrobe panic in its tracks they'll end up back in her room for another hour, while Jennie works through every possible combination of the clothes she's brought with her. Jennie'd never been like this when Steve was alive. Losing him seemed to have knocked her confidence. "You look perfect. Come on, let's get there before all the good seats are nabbed."

Peeling the 'Farrell's Plumbing Supplies' magnetic sign off the passenger door where it's been missed by Jennie, she puts this, along with her own carrier bag of gear, onto the back seat. Farrell's is owned by Jennie's parents and explains the assortment of pipe joints and general plumbing paraphernalia that litter the footwell on the passenger side. Sam slides her feet in amongst them until she makes contact with the car's floor before slamming the door shut.

She's spending the night at Jennie's as it's easier to stagger into the sleep-out behind Jen's parent's place than dodge every creaky floorboard in the hallway at home. She tends to keep sober when Darren is in town, not wanting him to see her all messy from too many drinks. But she's not averse to a few when he isn't around.

Jennie pulls out and they belt along on their way to the pub. Belting for Kermie is 45kph, his top speed without risking mechanical disintegration. Jennie can proudly boast to having no speeding tickets but only because it's a physical impossibility.

The girls talk loudly so they can hear each other over the assorted clatters and clunks that give Kermie his personality, although a lot of these are the result of the pipes and spare parts rattling around Sam's ankles. "I think next weekend might be the one," says Sam.

"One what?"

"The proposal." Sam hopes this news won't upset Jennie.

"What makes you think that?" says Jennie, evenly.

"He asked me to book a table for us at The Fontainebleu in his last letter."

"Wow, that's flash. What are you going to wear?"

"Not sure. I'll go through my wardrobe tomorrow."

Even at Kermie's sedate speed, it only takes ten minutes to get to the pub. The trip home, via back roads, will be more than double to avoid running into the booze bus. Even though Jennie's a light drinker; it's safer to dodge the breathalyser altogether.

The bar has as much class as you can get with mock Tudor. It's supposed to be "oldey-worldey" but only manages "slightly-tackey". The pseudo-oak bench seats are upholstered in velvet with what looks like a subtle pattern but is an accumulation of stains so numerous, the

original colour no longer shows.

The carpet's the same but with more adhesive qualities. Fortunately the drinks are cheap and there's usually a good covers band.

Despite their being early, the only table available is a beige plastic-topped, metal monstrosity and the result of the landlord's decision to "jazz the place up a bit". It's from the same school of design as the fake open fires. The matching plastic chairs have cracks vicious enough to leave your arse looking like that of a stripper's after a sales convention gig.

"Do I look okay?" Sam checks her dress with her hands.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Nothing. Must be my imagination."

"It's fine." Jennie spins her around so she can three-sixty the outfit.

"Then why are people staring at me? Damn, I knew I should have worn the red dress."

"Relax you look fine."

"God, you wouldn't believe the crap Crispy tried on today," says Sam, after they've settled themselves as comfortably as they're ever going to.

Jennie's so transfixed by the bright green drink that's put down on their table, she doesn't respond.

"It's a Grasshopper," says Tania, owner of the drink and a friend to both of them.

"Gizza sip." Sam grabs the glass and helps herself to a large gulp.

"Well?" say both of the others.

"Not bad. Why's the glass so clean?" Sam compares it to the state of her own.

"It was fresh out of the box ... I think it's their first cocktail. Ever,"

says Tania.

Standing, Sam waves at the barman, points at the glass and indicates three with her fingers. He grimaces before going out to the back, grabbing a ladder on his way.

They're onto their fourth round of Grasshoppers when Jim, Tania's fiancé, turns up. He's tall and thin with a mop of wildly curling blond hair and Sam thinks he looks a bit like Roger Daltrey from The Who. He bends over and kisses Tania's strawberry blonde curls before lowering himself into the saved seat next to her.

"Sorry I'm late, love." Jim squeezes Tania's shoulder. "Got held up by a bloke I'm doing an engine rebuild for." Jim has a tidy sideline in mechanical repairs and it's paid for more than one overseas trip for him and Tania. At 5'2" and seven stone dripping wet, Tania is a bundle of energy who keeps Jim firmly in line. Sam doubts there'd be much money being made at all if it wasn't for Tania's influence on the freewheeling Jim.

Round number five and Sam and Jennie are in need of the ladies. They make their way easily through the tables and chairs but things slow down when they get to the three-deep mob standing next to the bar that runs the length of the room.

At first, the crowd looks impenetrable but Jennie spots a break and goes for it. Sam follows in her wake. They don't push and shove but edge their way through, moving people to the side by placing their hands on any backs they encounter and applying pressure in the direction they want them to move. It's an art form.

They move through Brut 33, then a patch of Charlie onto some Aqua Manda and even the odd whiff of Opium. Jennie's squeezing her nose to hold back a sneeze by the time they're spat out into open

space by the toilets. "I wish people wouldn't slap on so much stuff," she says nasally.

They push open the swing door into the ladies and are happy to find it's empty; they hadn't been bursting when they'd left the table. Sam heads into one of the two cubicles, locks the door and hastily pulls her knickers down before carefully lowering herself into a hover position over the toilet. There's no way she's sitting down, with the glistening shine on the toilet seat having nothing to do with elbow grease. Still, she wishes the publican would use something to reduce the gag factor of old pipes and unscrubbed lino.

She's started a controlled pee when a couple of girls pinball their way into the ladies. The new arrivals bounce off washbasins and walls in turn and Sam's glad the lock on her door is strong when one of them falls hard against it. The new arrivals push at the doors of both cubicles and get a shouted "Busy!" from Jennie and Sam.

God, they must be hammered if they can't read the bright red ENGAGED showing on the locks.

"I can't believe the silly cow doesn't know he's screwing around," slurs one.

Sam's ears prick up.

Great! Some juicy gossip to take back to the table.

"Guess he's pretty convincing," says the other.

Give us a name! We need a name.

Sam would rub her hands together but it would throw her off balance and she'd risk bum touching porcelain or head smacking into the door.

Come on, even just a first name.

"He's got a nerve staying at her parents' place when he's up here."

Sam's heart falters.

"They even look after his bloody dog."

Her chest is frozen; breathing shallow.

No name, please no name.

"He's got balls, all right," slurs one of the girls.

"And I guess he knows how to use 'em." Her friend laughs drunkenly.

Her legs give out and Sam sinks to the toilet seat. It's cold and wet.

"Come on, let's go to the other bogs before I piss my pants," says one of them.

They stumble their way out and the door hisses slowly closed behind them blocking out the raucous sounds of the bar. The relative silence is broken by Jennie, who's now outside Sam's cubicle. "Sam? It could be anyone."

"He wouldn't do that to me!" says Sam, wiping, then standing up and grabbing more paper to dry the backs of her legs. After pulling up her knickers and arranging her dress, she yanks down on the chain by her head before turning and opening the door.

When the roar of the old cistern refilling dies down, she adds, "Darren wouldn't do that to me, would he?"

"No? ... No!" Jennie yanks on the circular towel searching for a dry patch, before drying her hands on her jeans.

"He wouldn't!"

Sam's conviction is kyboshed when Jennie says, "I know how we can find out for sure."

CHAPTER 2



BACK AT THE TABLE when the band stops for a break, Jennie says casually “Hey, Jim, we’re hoping you can help with something.”

“Yeah, shoot,” he says, looking at Jennie.

“Just heard some girls talking about a bloke who’s screwing around,” says Sam, causing him to turn toward her.

“It sounds suspiciously like Darren,” says Jennie. Jim’s head snaps back.

“Can’t help, sorry,” is his choked response, as his gaze swivels between Sam and Jennie.

“Can’t help, or won’t help?” says Tania.

“Yeah. Spill or we’ll tell Darren you told us anyway,” says Sam, smelling blood.

“Well, ah, all right. But you didn’t hear this from me.” He looks over one shoulder then the other before leaning forward. “You know that Aussie barmaid at the Mirage Hotel down by the base, the chick they call Head Girl?”

“Cheryl? There’s no way! Darren said she’s a real dog.” Sam’s breath rushes out and her shoulders relax.

“Yeah, well. Apparently she’s more lap dog than Doberman and Darren was the one who gave her the nickname Head Girl.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” says Sam, bile popping up at the back of her throat. She swallows quickly.

“But it’s not like you’re ever gonna meet her,” says Jim, earning him a sharp kick to the shin from Tania.

"I'm outta here." Sam stands abruptly and heads for the door. She gets more of the same looks as when they first arrived. Sam realises they have nothing to do with her outfit.

"Wait for me." Jennie hurries behind her, catching up with her around the side of the building where she's getting rid of all the cocktails. Jennie holds Sam's hair out of the way but there's not much more she can do until the final Grasshopper is released into the wild. Sam still feels nauseated but this has more to do with Darren than any alcohol still in her system. Straightening, she sways a little when she takes her hand away from the wall.

"You all right?"

"Yes. No. Not really."

"Do you truly think he's about to pop the question?"

"Why else would he get me to book The Fontainebleau? It's too flash just for dinner."

"You'll have to cancel the booking. You can't just pretend you don't know!"

"I can't do anything, can I? Not without dumping Jim in it. Although the fact I know and Darren doesn't know I know ..." Sam forces a smile and even rubs her hands together with what she hopes passes for glee.

Despite this show of bravery, she's hurting. What Darren doesn't know is Sam's choosy about sharing her toys. As a three-year-old, she'd smashed her entire teaset rather than let a girl she didn't like play with it. She'd got one hell of a hiding and it had put an end to her ability to entertain at home, but she still felt it had been worth it.



Next morning, Sam's head is threatening to shatter like a drop-

kicked piggy bank, the result of crying quietly most of the night.

Even now, tears are stuck in her throat where she's jammed them in an effort not to wake Jennie, who's gently snoring in her bed on the other side of the sleep-out. Thank god she'd arranged to spend the night here; breakfast with her parents would have been impossible.

Looking at the dust swirling lazily above her where it glows in the sunlight that's slipped under the bottom of the too-short curtains, Sam takes a shuddering breath. It's loud enough to interrupt Jennie, who barks her throat clear before rolling over and focusing on Sam's face.

"You're a mess," she says, pushing back the covers and staggering over to Sam's bed. "Move over."

Sam scoots over as far as she can and Jennie crawls in and drags Sam into her arms. This is all it takes to have her sobbing loudly.

"You'll be all right," says Jennie, into Sam's ear while stroking the back of her head. "You'll get through this. You don't think you'll ever laugh again, but you will."

"Jennie, I'm so sorry. Listen to me going on about my problems. Are you doing okay?" Sam pulls back to look closely at Jennie.

"It's been thirteen months." As Sam continues to peer at her, Jennie adds a forcible, "I'm fine. Really!"

Sam's drops her head back into the crook of Jennie's arm.

"I was so sure he was the one. I've even been practicing signing my married name. What if he does propose next weekend? What will I say? I'll have to tell him The Fontainebleu was booked out. Why did he do it? What's wrong with ... me?"

Jennie's answer to this jumble of thoughts is to continue stroking the back of Sam's head.

Eventually Sam is out of tears, her chest hurts and her sinuses are

chocker.

Jennie's still beside her but has fallen asleep again, her snoring more than a match for anything Sam can come up with. Sam falls asleep too, exhausted. She's woken later by Jennie mumbling. "You could come travelling with me. I know it was what Steve and I were going to do but I'd love it if you came. You can always come back home if you're not having fun."

Sam stares at the ceiling. "You're flying out to Melbourne on the eleventh, right?"

"Yep, only thirteen more sleeps to go."

Sam isn't looking forward to facing everyone and their pity; it's not like her job is any great shakes and Crispy Critter wouldn't let it rest until she shagged him or he forced her to quit.

"You're on, I'll come with you! But by jeez, I'm going to stick it to Darren before I go."

"Ooh, it's going to be a blast," says Jennie, coming fully awake.

Sam can tell by Jen's expression that she's not talking about their trip.



Sunday afternoon and Sam's sitting leadenly on her bed stewing over Darren and wondering about clothes for work in the morning. Something neck to knee in a heavy serge that'll keep Crispy's eyes at bay would be good. A sob jumps into Sam's throat and tears pattern her faded jeans. She's wiping her eyes when her mother comes in with some clean clothes.

"What on earth's wrong?"

"Nothing." Sam desperately scouts around for a reason for her tears.

“Nothing?” Her mother sits on the bed.

“Well, it’s ... ah ...” Sam falters, clambering through her head opening files in hopes of finding a good excuse.

“Go on.”

“My, ah, boss.” Sam has no trouble filling her mother in on the situation at work, making Crispy out to be bad enough that she’s in tears at the thought of going to work in the morning.

“But you can’t let him get away with that.” Sam’s mother puts her arm around her shoulders.

“But I can’t quit, it’ll look bad on my work record and the money’s good,” says Sam, before blowing her nose.

“I wonder if that’s why the last girl left. Do you know her name?”

“Sure, she Dymo-labelled it onto everything on the desk that wasn’t screwed down.”

“Good. Go get the phone book!”



“Morning, Sam,” floats out of Crispy’s office when she tiptoes past the next morning. “Come in, Sam. No need for pad and pen, just your lovely self.”

“Be right there,” she mutters to her boss’s summons in a perfect, whiney imitation before going in to see him. Standing right up against the front of his desk, her hands stray to her knotted stomach muscles.

“When shall I book the restaurant?”

“I’d rather not.”

“I was thinking of this nice little place in Parnell, it’s out of the way and they have accommodation, too. For dessert, I like the idea of covering you in whipped cream and licking it off.”

Sam’s close to gagging at this suggestion but manages to say, “I’d

rather poke my eye out with a stick.”

“Good, I’ll make a booking for ... what?”

“Forget it, Mr Crisp. I do not want to go out to dinner with you, and I certainly don’t want to be your dessert.” Sam’s voice is strong and clear although she’s shaking.

“You know how it works, Sam. No dessert and ah, well ... no job.”

“I thought you might say that, so I phoned Gina, your old secretary.” Thank god her mother had thought of that. It hadn’t been hard to track down Sam’s predecessor.

“You did *what?*” Crispy’s face is mottled with rage and he looks ready to blow.

“We’re going to have a chat with your wife. She’s bound to believe three of us.”

“Three?” he squeaks.

“Yeah, Gina got hold of Mary. You remember *Mary*, don’t you?” In truth, Gina had been onto it like a lawyer seeking damages.

“Get out!” he yells, his hair flopping about like the lid of a grand piano caught in a cross wind.

“Not without a reference.”

“I’ll send it on,” he says through gritted teeth. “Just get out of my sight.”

“Na uh, not without a reference. And let’s have them for the others, too. I’ll even write them.”

“You little bitch!” he screams and Sam’s glad she’s on the other side of the huge, spit-flecked I’ve-got-a-small-penis desk.

Sam types up three glowing references; even she thinks she might have pushed how fabulous they all are, then takes them into a seething Crispy for signature.

This isn't strictly necessary, given his signature is such a scribble she can fake it; it's simply the perverse pleasure of making him sign them. He doesn't even bother reading them. Probably a good thing as she feels that vein in his forehead would pop for sure.

Before walking out of the building for good, she stops at the personnel department where she takes her dad's hand-held recorder out of her pocket, ejects the micro cassette and pops it on Mrs Johnston's desk with a note.

It'll be time the last Crispy Critter pulls that sort of crap.



"How'd you get on?" says Sam's mother that evening. "We thought you'd be home before now. Surely you don't have to work out your notice?"

"I'm not leaving, Crispy backed down. I even got a pay rise." Sam spouts the lies she's been practicing quietly all afternoon in the library down the road from the office. She practiced so much that eventually one little old dear had asked if she was all right.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" says her father.

"I've got him on tape - I can keep him in line." If she keeps up the pretence of going to work, she can tell her parents the trip to Aussie is only a holiday; that way they won't have to know about Darren's cheating until after she's gone. Better to slip away without all the fanfare.



Sam's awake before her alarm the following morning, irked that she has to get up and pretend to go in to the office. She could have been having a lie-in. But if she can keep up the pretence and get away

cleanly, there's less chance of further humiliation in front of everyone. If such a thing is possible. She still can't work out what it is she's done wrong for Darren to cheat on her. She's not sure she wants to know.

Thinking about what he's done has a lump working its way up her throat before erupting in a hiccupped sob. But she consciously swallows her tears. As it is, having hardly slept, her eyes feel like tinsel. She lies there working through plans while waiting for the alarm to ring.

"Morning, dear. There's bread in the toaster and tea in the pot," says her mother when Sam drifts into the kitchen.

"Thanks." Sam takes her usual spot at the table. "Um, one of the other ... ah ... things I negotiated with Crispy, is a holiday, so I'm going to go to Melbourne with Jennie." Sam's surprised at how easily this lie comes. She hasn't practiced this one at all.

"How long for?" says her mum.

"A month." She then digs her hole a little deeper by adding, "With pay."

"A month with pay! But what about Darren?" says her mother.

"I'll let him know next time he's up."

"But what about the airfares? You'll have to dip into your savings," says her mother, feeding a toast soldier to V8, who's in her usual spot under the table.

Sam gets the spade out again. "I, ah, got a bonus from Crispy."

"You *did* back him into a corner," says her dad.

Sam finishes breakfast and heads off to "work". She's going to spend the day a few suburbs away organising a passport, sorting out airline tickets and putting in a request for travellers' cheques. Working out what to pack so she doesn't exceed the maximum twenty

kilos will be the real challenge.

While the first day is easy to fill, as the days progress, it gets harder and harder. She resorts to spending most of the day hiding in the sleep-out at Jennie's place, reading magazines and working through her packing list. She's careful to be away before Jennie's parents get home.

Her back hard up against the headboard and her legs stretched out before her, Sam runs her finger down the spines of the teetering stack of magazines on the bedside table. Grabbing a handful off the top, she dumps them in her lap. *Cleo, Cleo, Cleo, House & Garden, Cosmo*. Sam's nearly through the pile on her lap when she comes across a well-thumbed copy of a bridal magazine. Flicking through it she comes to a page with the corner turned over. Jennie would have looked incredible in that dress.

Stroking the page, before finally turning it over, her breath catches in her throat. The dress on the next page is gorgeous and Sam knows it would look amazing on her. The tears pool above her lower lashes and spill over; she drops the magazine and swipes at her eyes with the back of her hand. She gropes for the steno pad and pen next to her on the bed and adds another item to a rapidly growing list.

27 - itching powder in grots.

CHAPTER 3



THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY SEES Sam ready well before Darren arrives, as she's a lot less anxious about outfit selection than usual. A brand new and frighteningly sexy dress hangs in the darkest recesses of her wardrobe. She's not putting it on until just before they leave so it's a nice surprise for Darren, and she can get out of the house without her mother seeing it.

"Sam, Darren's here," announces her mother.

"Thanks!" Sam yells back, before putting the finishing touches to her makeup.

Before leaving the sanctuary of her room, she examines herself in the mirror and takes a few calming breaths. Heading down the hall, out the front door and onto the front porch, she looks down at the no-good-two-timing-spineless-slimy-son-of-a-bitch and calls out, "Hey, babe, you're here! Be right down." He meets her grin with one of his own, although she knows his isn't glued on with bright red lipstick.

Skipping down the stairs, Sam throws herself into his outstretched arms.

Darren picks her up and swings her around, all the time checking if her parents are around. Seeing no sign of them he drags her even closer and into a kiss. He lifts his head. "Missed you," he breathes into her ear.

"Oh, have you?" says Sam, dreamily.

"God, yes, it's so lonely down at the base."

"You're a bit later than usual." Sam pulls back, double crossing the

front of her robe and tying the belt firmly.

“Yeah, the car’s seriously in need of a tune up. I even had to stop for gas.”

“I’m pretty much ready. I’ll get dressed and we can head out.”

“That’s not like you. You get off work early?” Darren goes to the boot of his car to take out his bag.

“Yeah, super early today.” She had spent the day reading books about Melbourne from Jennie’s mountain of research materials. Back up to her room, she finishes getting dressed while Darren unpacks and when her black satin dress slithers into place, she trembles in anticipation. She’s filling it out beautifully thanks to a pair of socks in each cup, not that she planned on him finding them later.

“You look hot, especially from this angle.” Darren waits for her at the bottom of the stairs.

“It’s not too short?”

“No! It’s choice.”

Sam makes it to the bottom of the stairs, progress being slow due to her new shoes, and stands next to Darren.

“Bloody hell! How high are those heels?” He looks down at her platforms then up at her face.

“Six inches. It doesn’t bother you that I’m taller than you, does it?”

Jim is the first person they run into at the pub. “Hi, Dazzer. Was thinking you must be up this weekend.” When Sam moves from behind Darren to stand next to him, Jim adds, “Jeez, mate, have you shrunk?”

“No! Sam’s decided she needs to clean the ceiling with her damned hair.”

“Yeah, that and checking out people’s bald spots,” says Sam, laughing.

Darren moves swiftly to face her and she mentally ticks off item #32 on the list. All going well, he’ll have ground his teeth to stubs by the end of the night.

“Where’s Tania?” she asks Jim.

“Had to work late, so Jennie’s picking her up.”

Seeing Darren isn’t rushing to the bar, Sam announces, “I’m going to get a drink.”

Darren, busy hitting Jim up for tips on how best to tune his car, asks her to get him one, although he doesn’t offer to buy one for Jim who’s swilling the dregs of his beer in hopes of being included in the round. Darren stuffs a twenty down Sam’s cleavage.

Bloody cheek.

Last time he did that she thought it was cute; now it made her jaw hurt.

I’ll get him a drink all right.

Fishing the \$20 out of her bra and holding it up, she offers to get Jim a fresh beer.

Let my cheating dick of a boyfriend pay Jim for the info for a change.

Darren’s eyebrows rise at her presumptuousness, but she’s off before he can say a word.

Score another point! And one that wasn’t even on the list.

“Hi, Paul,” says Sam, to the barman.

“What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have a DB, a Scotch and Dry and Darren is dying to try a Grasshopper.”

“For gawd’s sake, not those things again.”

“Go on, he’ll probably only want one.”

“It’s all he’s going to get,” mutters Paul, as he grabs a cocktail glass from under the bar. It must be one of those used by the girls the week before and looks none too clean. He grabs the blender and she can see it’s been rinsed with the same care.

“Christ, what the hell is this?” says Darren, when she hands him the drink.

“It’s a Grasshopper. We were drinking them last week, even Jim had one. You liked it, didn’t you?” says Sam, handing him his beer.

Short of accusing her of lying, Jim mumbles, “They’re different, that’s for sure.”

Darren looks at Jim. “If you’re sure, mate.” He chugs the whole glass in one go. “Bloody hell, that’s disgusting. It tastes like rotten milk. Even smells like it!” He shoves the empty glass under Sam’s nose.

“Smells fine to me,” Sam manages to gasp without breathing in. One whiff and she’d be back examining the bushes down the side of the building.

“If they’re so good, why aren’t you having one?” says Darren, suspiciously.

“Too many calories. Don’t want to put on weight! You might start looking at other women,” says Sam, causing Jim to choke on his beer and Darren’s face to colour. “I’ll get you a beer if you like? Have you had dinner? Can I get you a pie?”

“A pie! From here? Jeez, Sam, what are you trying to do, poison me?”

“No? Some crisps then?”

“That’d be good. We’ll look for a table.”

Darren slides another twenty into her cleavage and takes the opportunity to gently squeeze one of her boobs. When he frowns, Sam glances down surreptitiously. Knee highs don't have the same bounce back quality as flesh but everything looks the same as it did before, so it must just have felt weird to him.

"Here, hold my drink while I fight my way back to the bar." Sam shoves her full glass in his direction to take his mind off the uneven texture of her boobs.

"Sure, anything for you, love."

"Sure, anything for you, love," mutters Sam, as she shoves her way back to the bar. "How about you get the bloody drinks?"

It's dawning on her that while Darren might pay, she's been the one doing all the fetching and carrying. She absently rubs the muscle twitching just below her ear.

Tania and Jennie arrive while Sam is making her way over to the table Jim and Darren have nabbed. Her co-conspirators spot her, wave and head toward the bar for drinks. As she slips between the tightly packed tables she gets subtle thumbs ups from a few of the women she passes; apparently her plan for revenge isn't as secret as she'd like. Still, as long as no one lets on, she should be fine.

"Have you told Darren about our big trip yet?" says Jennie, soon after she sits.

"What trip?" Darren looks at Jim, who's spluttering into his beer causing some to slop over the edge.

"We're coming down to see you! A girls' road trip," says Sam.

Darren spits out the mouthful of beer he's just taken and snaps up his head to look at Sam. "You can't visit me at the base. There's nowhere to stay."

“We’re all sorted. Jennie booked us into the Mirage.” This stroke of brilliance had been Tania’s idea.

“Look Sam, I’m on call all weekend so I wouldn’t be able to see you.” Darren pulls his beer-dampened T-shirt away from his body and flaps it aggressively.

“Never mind, we’ll still come down, it’ll be good to get out of town and we can amuse ourselves at the pub meeting all your mates.”



Saturday morning and Darren’s still making lame excuses for why she can’t visit him down at the base.

“Darren, is there some reason you don’t want me down there?”

“No. Course not. What time’s the booking tonight at The Fontainbleu?”

“They were fully booked. So I’ve booked us in for the next weekend you’re up.”



It’s with a sense of relief that she stands next to Darren’s car on Sunday afternoon and watches him sling his weekend bag in the boot before slamming it shut. She’s managed to keep him away from her parents all weekend, worried they’d say something about her forthcoming holiday to Aussie.

He gives her a perfunctory peck on the cheek rather than partake of the usual tonsil hockey, obviously still miffed that he hasn’t been able to get his end away over the weekend. She’d put him off by faking a gloriously bloody period. Any time he’d become too frisky she’d added more detail until her descriptions were akin to the storyline of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

Following Darren's car as he backs it down the driveway, Sam waves at him through the reflection of clouds scudding across the windscreen. She's standing on the footpath when he pulls to a halt and his head juts out the window. "Nearly forgot, I've had a shift rotation, so I won't be up again for three weeks."

"And you've just remembered this now?"

"It slipped my mind." Darren's face is devoid of emotion.

"I'll need to change the booking then?"

"You're still coming down?"

"For The Fontainebleu." Sam's unable to stop her eyes from rolling.

It's with mixed emotions she waves him off. She's sad to know she won't be looking him in the eye as she metaphorically knees him the goolies.



Wednesday evening and Sam's sitting on the lambskin rug in the granny flat, surrounded by the entire contents of Darren's wardrobe. He doesn't keep much stuff down at the base as he's mostly in uniform, so there's a lot to get through. She's singing along tunelessly to a Bee Gees album at full volume. Her new headphones were an unexpected gift from her dad.

Sam grabs her seam ripper and cuts through every second stitch in the crotch of Darren's best pants. She's dropped the hems with stitching so neat he won't be able to tell. Let the bastard think he is shrinking.

She puts the pair of pants, now sporting a ball-breezy crotch, with the clothes she's already worked on. She's particularly proud of a pair of jeans where she's sealed the inside of the legs, near the bottom, with invisible hemming tape. Next time Darren follows his usual,

wanky dressing style of putting both feet in then leaping up and pulling the jeans on all in one go, he'll crash in a heap, hopefully smacking his head on the way down.

Sam jumps when someone taps her on the shoulder. Turning, she finds her mother holding the downstairs phone out to her. She takes the headphones off in time to hear "... for you." Followed with, "What on earth are you doing?"

"Just fixing a few things for Darren." Slowly she puts the shirt she's about to work on down behind her. Her mother isn't stupid; the less she sees the better.

"Hey, it's me," says Jennie. "I just tried to change the booking at the Mirage and Head Girl said they don't have room for us that weekend."

Both Jennie and Sam burst out laughing. They don't have any intention of visiting the base and trying to change the booking is just another way to tighten the screws.

"Wow, he doesn't want us down there, does he? Mind you, he probably needs a rest after what we put him through last weekend," says Sam, laughing.

"I can't believe he hasn't caught on."

"Did I tell you about flicking a can of sardines on the vinyl roof of his car before we went for a walk at the beach on Sunday?"

"What happened?"

"We got back to the car and it was like a seagull convention. The roof was covered in bird poo, took him hours to get it clean. He was spitting tacks but didn't twig it was me. As usual he'd walked on ahead leaving me to catch up."

It takes a while for them to stop giggling. When Jennie stops, Sam

starts, and vice versa. It's a while before they can carry on with their conversation.

"Only one thing left to do now." Sam squelches a final snigger.

"Sam, are you sure about that?"

"Yep, it's the only way I'll know for sure. I'll let you know how I get on."

"What if he wants to go through with it?"

"I'll jump off that bridge when I come to it."

Sam hangs up, pulls a crumpled piece of paper from the back pocket of her jeans and takes a deep breath before dialling the number scrawled on it.

"Mirage Hotel, Cheryl speaking," says a woman with a distinct Australian twang. Head Girl herself.

"Hi, wondering if Darren Walters is there at the mo?"

"No, but he's due in later today."

"Can you let him know Sam, his *girlfriend* from Auckland, called?"

"Any other message?" Cheryl's reaction to the girlfriend comment leaves her in no doubt that while she's been in the dark, Cheryl hasn't. *Bastard!*

"Just let him know my parents won't be happy about an extra mouth to feed."

Less than ten minutes later the phone rings. "I'll get it," yells Sam, up the stairwell when she hears footsteps upstairs.

"Hello?"

"You stupid cow! How you can you be pregnant? You were bleeding like a stuck pig last time I was up there?" spits out Darren.

"Yeah, I might have lied about that ..." Sam's heart pulses

nauseatingly in her mouth.

“You know you’ll have to get rid of it. I can’t deal with the responsibility of a sprog right now.”

“Now hang on a bloody second ...”

“You can’t get it done here. Cheryl’s told me about a place you can go to in Sydney.”

“I don’t believe it. You want me to go to someone recommended by your whore!” says Sam, shakily.

“What do you mean, ‘my whore’?”

“Give it up, Darren.” Overcoming her hatred of confrontation, Sam adds, “Everyone knows about you and Head Girl. Even me.”

“Who told you?” says Darren, suspiciously.

“I heard about it at the hairdressers.” Sam’s not about to dump Jim, or herself, in it.

“Jeez. Look, I’ll send you a cheque for the trip to Sydney and we can talk things through next time I’m up.”

Eventually the dial tone cuts through Sam’s shock and she slowly hangs up the phone.



A couple of days later and Sam gets home from another day at the “office” to find a letter on her bed from Darren. Actually there isn’t a letter, or even a note, just a thousand-dollar cheque on its own. She looks at it until she’s crying so hard her nose is running. Her first impulse is to rip it into a million little pieces and jump up and down on it, but her practical side kicks in and she tucks it into her wallet.

The stupid bastard hadn’t even crossed it, so she’s going to cash it as soon as she can; especially as it’s made out for five hundred dollars more than Tania thought she’d get. That’ll be five hundred dollars

more pain for Darren when Sam can safely let him know how completely he's been stitched up.

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But wait, there's more...



She's lost her soul mate. She doesn't believe you get a second. Will the least likely candidate of all be able to change her mind?

Jennie Farrell always believed there was a happily ever after out there for everyone. Shame she's missed out on her own. Rocking up in London with close friend Samantha, Jennie falls back on her long-ignored artistic skills to make ends meet. Her future is even looking bright when she runs into Rupert Smythe-Brown, an aristocratic prat used to getting his own way, no matter who gets hurt in the process.

Painted into a corner, Jennie turns feral and Rupert doesn't know what's hit him. Well he does, but for once he's not enjoying it. Thank goodness she's got Mark, a strapping six foot four Aussie bloke watching her back and keeping her out of trouble – at least when he's not trying to get her into it.

Brush With Fame is a chuckle along, feel good book for any woman who's ever wanted to fight back but hasn't felt strong enough.

NOTE: While this book is part of a series, it also reads as a standalone. Previously published as Mounted and Hung

What others are saying:

“I think I enjoyed this book more than book one. The characters are awesome, Eadie, Charlie the cat and the fur coated room. And Rupert getting stuck was hilarious. Looking forward to book #3.”

“This is the second book in the series. And I loved it. There wasn't as much sex as in the first novel in the series, but the sex was replaced with intrigue and manipulative conniving! A great storyline with some clever twists. Lovely writing, which flowed seamlessly across the pages. The characters are strong, and it's refreshing to see strong female characters instead of simpering weak boy-obsessed girls. Set in the 1970s in London, I loved reading about places I could recognise. The attention to detail is extreme, and I love that in a book. Looking forward to reading the next one in the series - Screwed for Money.”

“Loved the book, the second in this series. Excellent writing and plot! A must read.”

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She gave up on family a long time ago. Now she's been 'adopted', is there anything she wouldn't do to protect those brave enough to take her on? Hell no there isn't!

Brenda Munroe has been mercenary since she was a kid. It was this or finding herself out on the streets. She also learned not long after puberty there's none so generous as an old chap who thinks he's going to his mitts of a pair of boobs not in danger of being tucked into a waistband. Imagine then the irony of her being done out of her fledgling nest egg by a man.

Strapped for cash — and preferring the ninety-five-and-loaded to the old nine-to-five — Brenda opens a residential school for girls, teaching them in weeks what it's taken her years to master.

Will her students be the only ones learning new skills, or will Brenda finally understand family's about a whole lot more than the blood relations you've been lumbered with?

Strapped for Cash is a rollicking, laugh-out-loud book for any woman who's ever wanted to take life by the scruff of the neck and shake the heck out of it.

NOTE: While this book is part of a series, it also reads as a standalone.

Originally published as Screwed for Money

What others are saying:

“Loved the whole series - could not put them down! Awesome characters, fantastic storyline. Can't wait for the next one to come out!”

“Loved it. Couldn't wait to get to the end. HAD to know what was going to happen. Felt that all three books had finally 'tied' everything up - literally and metaphorically... This would make an amusing television series. The little nods to things from the Seventies was a great touch, there were just enough to make you cast your mind back fondly without overwhelming you with cheesy nostalgia. Not chick lit. Not pure comedy. Not romance. Not crime. But a delicious mixture of all those genres.”

“Loved this series and this book tied up everything nicely. The humor and wit throughout the book was delightful and I was laughing out loud a few times. This writer gets better and better!”

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Table of Contents

Heels and a Tiara	2
Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	10
Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4	25
Chapter 5	33
Chapter 6	40
Chapter 7	47
Chapter 8	54
Epilogue	61
Friday Night Fever	68
Chapter 1	69
Chapter 2	83
Chapter 3	92
Thank You From Me!	102