



When I was twenty-five and looking for a career, I was told that it's the difficult things in life that are worth doing. Unfortunately, I found a lot of things tricky, which left me slightly dazzled by choice. But when I turned twenty-nine I decided to take control of my life. I figured I could think on my feet and fight like a girl. That's how I got into PI work: playground tactics and a lack of direction. A desperate nosiness didn't hurt either.

Unfortunately this glossy CV didn't help me much when I was hiding under the bed in a stranger's house some two weeks into the business. And if the police arrived they would soon realise I hadn't exactly used a key to get in, unless by key they meant a rolled-up copy of *Hustler* magazine rammed through a window. Those babies can really pack a punch.

My name's Cassidy Blair and I didn't need any porn the first night I started work.



‘Quit channelling your mother, Josie, and zip me up.’ I felt like I’d been vacuum-packed into a gimp suit.

‘I can’t, Cass. Like I said, it’s too tight.’

‘There is no such thing.’

‘There is when there’s a hunk of girl flesh between the teeth of the zip.’

I peered over my shoulder, then moved backwards towards the mirror. ‘You’re right,’ I eyed the V of pink skin that ran between the soft folds of the leather dress. ‘I guess I shrank it.’

‘Yeah, by eating all those M&Ms.’

I ripped the dress off over my head and tugged at my G-string. ‘What am I going to wear? How am *I* going to lure a guy who thinks Tony Danza’s the king of the world?’ I watched Josie try to sit down in her tiny clothes. Best friends should always have a visible flaw but there was enough of Josie showing tonight to make me think she was the exception to the rule, which, let’s face it, wasn’t going

to turn my frown upside down. 'I used to be a rollerskating waitress, for God's sake. There's got to be something tacky here.'

'Cass, you've got *stacks* of tacky clothes, just nothing actually sexy.' Josie might be my best friend but she was light years away in terms of taste. While I read *The Face*, she flicked through *Harpers Bazaar*. She was doing this job as a favour to me, but it looked like she already regretted the decision. She was probably cursing the cocktails last night.

She held up a green mini-dress. 'How about this?'

'Too short. My thighs are like two slabs of Spam.'

Josie sighed. 'Thanks for painting that picture for me. What's this?' She held up a long pink tube. 'A pair of tights? A scarf?' She held it at arms-length, her tone changing. 'Possibly an old condom.'

I grabbed it. 'Ah, the vamp slut girl from *Buffy* dress.' I rolled it over my head and Josie grabbed the bottom of the fabric, pulling it down.

'I bought it for a Halloween party last year in Melbourne,' I told her, trying to smooth down the rolls of stretchy fabric. 'I went as Vampire Slut Girl and, once again, I didn't get laid. It was a beacon for the lovelorn plagued by body odour. It's slutty but I don't feel as though I'm giving it all away.'

'No, you're just highlighting it in hot pink marker pen.'

I checked my reflection in the mirror. It looked okay. 'Can you tell I ate chocolate mousse for lunch all week?'

She sighed in that garden-salad-for-lunch kind of way. 'It's a *Halloween* dress, Cass, not a magical dress.'

I looked like one of those pink balloons that people twist into shapes on street corners. There was a chocolate

mousse-shaped lump where my flat stomach was supposed to be. I sucked it in. I looked okay.

As we gathered our stuff together, Josie went for one last look in the mirror. 'I might be checking my dignity at the door, but I'm not leaving behind my bag,' she said, grabbing her Fendi purse. 'Are you sure I can't wear a coat? I feel naked.'

'You *are* naked,' I said, 'except for the strips of fabric covering your nipples. But you're naked for two hundred and fifty bucks, and it doesn't get much better than that. You don't even have to touch these guys. And I'll buy you a cocktail to sweeten the deal.'

I gave myself one last glance in the mirror and then slammed the door to my little apartment. What used to be an old city office had been gutted, then blasted back and painted deep brown. It was cold in winter without the heater, but I loved it. Bright and airy, it was one hundred per cent better than my old place in Melbourne. The word hellhole took on a whole new meaning when you'd spent unemployed and friendless days in a dank Brunswick bedroom. Adelaide offered at least a careless wave at daylight.

I'd stayed in Melbourne for six dreary months before I ran whimpering back home to Adelaide a year ago. My friends blinked back their self-satisfaction and helped me resume my old life. I guess they knew they were stuck with me, so they bogged in and made the best of it. I borrowed their clothes in return, having thrown all of mine out in a fit of New Life-itis. The Halloween party story epitomised my entire time interstate. I'd tried hypnosis to cleanse the experience from my mind but all it did was give me nicotine cravings again.

I shivered slightly as Josie teetered behind me down the footpath towards the car. Five hundred bucks just to see if some guy would flirt with us. I wasn't entirely clear on exactly how far we had to go; I just knew it was for a good cause.

'So tell me again why we're doing this,' Josie asked as she tried to stuff her breasts back into the tiny multi-coloured halter-neck top while I started the car. 'These undies are flossing my bottom every time I move.' She'd stuck gaffer tape under her boobs to hold them up. I wore a push-up bra that made me feel as though I could rest my chin on my super cleavage. Neither of us were excessively busty, but right now we looked as though we should be making faux love to a pole in a smoky room.

'It's Amanda's fiancé. Amanda from the shop. Were you listening to anything I said last night?' I pulled into traffic.

'Mainly it was drowned out by that boyfriend of yours belting out hits from the nineties,' Josie muttered, slipping her feet out of her shoes and rubbing her toes. 'If I ever hear "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana again I'll stuff my ears with other people's snot.'

'Josie!' I was shocked. Josie was never crude. Her idea of vulgarity was wearing last season's Gucci slides. Maybe the crass outfit was having an osmotic effect on her personality.

She glanced down at herself and groaned while I took a corner a little too fast. We were nearly there. 'You're a giant musk stick and I'm a colour-blind junkie. How much lower can we go on the "We don't watch the Fashion Channel" spectrum?'

'Five hundred bucks, Josie.' I reminded her. 'And he's not my boyfriend.' I pulled into the car park a couple of blocks

away, paid for a ticket and slipped it onto the dash. We took a couple of minutes to tug our outfits out of various crevices and then headed towards the pub.

'I own a restaurant, for God's sake,' said Josie as we approached the building.

'You own a café, and I'm not exactly between jobs myself at the moment. We're doing this as a favour.'

'You work in a DVD shop, you big gorilla.'

'Sssh. You're making me all sweaty.'

'Oh yeah,' she said, glancing down at her protruding nipples. 'And our big concern here is not being gross!'

I ignored her. She snorted quietly to herself, then took an audible breath. 'What does he look like?'

'Dark, tall, like a cop, only not too bright. The dimmer switch gets readjusted every time he has a drink, so Amanda wants us to move in once he's had a couple, but not so many that all his brains cells are dead and he'd try to chat up the cigarette machine. He's due to meet his friends here at nine o'clock.'

Josie looked at her watch. 'It's nine now.'

'I know. The dress fucked up my timing. We'll be fine. We just need to get into position. If he's by the bar, we sit there. If he's in a booth, we have to put ourselves somewhere within his range of vision, giggle a lot and not encourage anyone else.'

'What if we run into someone we know?'

I stopped and looked at her. 'You know anyone who drinks at the Redneck Saloon?'

'It's been revamped,' she wailed. 'It's all Irish pub style

now. You never know who might be wandering in for a quick drink. I might run into my sister.'

'Well, everyone still calls it the Redneck, so it'll be as embarrassing for her as it will be for you.'

'Only she'll be dressed,' muttered Josie as we pushed through the doors. 'I think I need that drink.'

I pasted on a big plastic smile, trying to cover the nerves that were fluttering in my stomach as though I hadn't stuffed myself with pizza some forty-five minutes earlier. 'You stay here and keep a lookout. I'll scope the bar.'

I was off before Josie could say a word. A table of sixteen-year-old boys had just noticed her and were reeling from the visual fleshfest. She really did look like someone had mugged her and left her in underwear. And big earrings.

I was a very bad friend.

She moved unsteadily around the corner just as a big guy in a green jumper scrambled out of a booth and walked right into her. She stumbled and fell, but he pulled her to her feet. I ordered two cocktails and threw the money on the bar, straining to hear across the crowd.

'Hey, lovebox,' green jumper guy shouted at Josie. 'When do you want to get married?' The music from the Irish jukebox had mercifully ceased some minutes before and everyone within ten feet could hear him. 'I'm free tomorrow. We could have a bridal shower. Together. In the nude.'

I made my way through the crowd with two pina coladas, picturing the carnage about to unfurl as Josie sliced through his ego. Josie was Kathleen Turner; all sultry pout and steely eyes but I couldn't tell if men ever noticed her cynicism, so preoccupied were they with her belly button. I had recognised

one of green jumper's friends in the booth from the photo Amanda had shown me. It was Tony, our quarry.

'Wow, what an offer. Only—'

'Binky!'

I squeezed through the crowd, arms high to protect the drinks, my smile plastered on like whitewash. 'Binky, honey. Here's your drink.' I handed Josie the enormous cocktail and raised an eyebrow. 'Now, who are these good-looking chaps?' Tony's gaze had honed in on my eye-level nipples and I moved slightly, watching his gaze follow my boobs. He was leaning so far over green jumper's shoulder I thought he'd dislocate his neck.

'Well,' Josie pointed to the far corner, 'I was just about to sit dow—'

'No, Binky,' I tried to giggle, but it came out as a death rattle. 'We can't leave these boys alone. You never know who might snap them up.'

As they sat back down in their booth, we discovered to our noisy, girlish joy that the big green jumper man was Bob and his friend in the baseball cap and enormous trousers was Simon. I'd already staked out the tall, muscular 'Guido the Killer Pimp' type and I was right: it was Tony. He appeared to have the brains of patio furniture, or maybe it was just the dull lights in the pub not doing him justice. I gave Josie a significant look, which she acknowledged with a roll of her eyes.

Bob went off to buy us all another drink while I turned my attentions to Tony. Our brief had been to flirt, not touch, and see what Tony's response would be. We weren't to push the envelope; there was no point putting Tony in the unlikely situation of having sober women giving him the eye. Clearly

the man wasn't playing with a full deck, but Amanda wanted to be sure that that didn't mean playing strip poker with bimbos.

I tried to see what Amanda saw in Tony. She was attractive, especially since she'd had a very expensive nose job. Okay, maybe she was a little brainless, but she earned great money in an architectural firm when she wasn't working nights at DVDWorld to pay for her upcoming honeymoon. Tony looked like he couldn't spell façade. All I knew about him was that he drove a truck, liked country and western music and had a penchant for sex in department store lingerie change-rooms.

'Tony?' I smiled, leaning as close as I could without stuffing his nose into my chest. 'How do you spell façade?'

Tony turned to me, his dark eyes impenetrable below a heavy forehead and poorly cut hair. 'Is that a sort of cocktail?'

Conversation wasn't necessary, but I kept an ear out for Josie's lines as she poked me with the toe of her white plastic stiletto. There was always something to learn from a girl who'd dated two solicitors and a judge before she got busted by all three at the Law Ball. Only the judge actually broke it off, though. It took the others months.

'You know, you'd look great on one of those cars at an expo,' said Simon, eyeing Josie's distended chest. He looked around at Tony as though he'd had a brainwave. 'She'd look great on the hood of a Porsche. Whaddaya think, Binky? You expo material?' He turned, his nose pink from the beer and his eyes blazing. Clearly he was a hood ornament fan.

She grimaced. 'Some days, it's all I can think about.'

I nudged her with my strappy sandal. I was actually kind of fond of men, but these guys were like dogs; as long as you kept the tone right, it didn't matter what you actually said. But I didn't want to risk having to go into damage control. That might involve touching.

Bob returned with the drinks and slid into the booth beside Josie, effectively cutting off her escape. I turned my hundred watt smile on Tony and he dropped another couple of IQ points. This was a pretty pleasant way to make some bucks. Sort of like being in a zoo. With cocktails and dim lighting. In a maelstrom of tight pink gladwrap.

'So, Bob,' Josie said, smiling. 'Seeing as you're the drinks guy, here's a pickle for you. I'm all thirsty.' And she licked her lips so slowly that I'd drained my glass by the time she'd finished. The men were becoming dangerously dehydrated, and they watched enviously as her tongue disappeared inside her mouth.

You're on in ten, Ms Monroe. Josie put on her best starlet smile and I could feel the testosterone competing with the sweat in the air.

My mouth hung open in surprise as Josie smiled, running her finger around the rim of her frothy cocktail glass and licking off a dollop of cream. Tony grinned at me as I tried to turn my shock into an erotic mime with a cigarette. I could almost see the unspeakable sex acts run through his mind as I burned a little hair. I had to move this thing along a bit. I was expecting Zara to drop by later tonight for takeaway, my sandals were starting to hurt and my Swiss finishing school friend was turning into the town bike before my eyes.

‘So, Tony,’ I said, my big cheerleader smile plastered on my face. ‘You ever done it with more than one girl at a time?’

When I opened my front door to a knock some forty minutes later, Zara involuntarily jumped back on the tiny landing and almost fell onto my grouchy neighbour’s door. ‘What the fuck are you wearing?’ she yelped. ‘Chewing gum? I can see your pubic hair.’

‘You can?’ I looked down absently. ‘No wonder my jokes were such a hit.’

‘Boy, oh, boy,’ said Zara, pushing past me. ‘I leave you two alone for ten minutes and bimbos invade your bodies.’

‘We were on a job,’ said Josie, coming into the room from the only contained room in the apartment: the bathroom. ‘We were trying to see if one of Cass’s colleagues was marrying the right guy.’

‘And is she? Because if he found either one of you attractive he should be calling 1800-CHEAP-PUSSY.’

‘Real sweet of you, Zara. And yes, he wanted the Cass package. And the Josie package, and just about every other package with “Girl” on the label. Scary stuff.’

‘Why do you end up with these weirdo jobs, Cass?’ said Zara, flopping down on the couch. ‘You’re a smart woman. You could be running your own company by now.’ She looked around hungrily. ‘Got any chips?’

‘I don’t want to run any damn company, and no, I have no chips. I thought you told me you were getting pudgy.’

‘I am. I’m whining about it all the time,’ she said, picking up a wooden box from the coffee table. ‘What’s this?’

‘Present from Moody Boy,’ cut in Josie, laughing. ‘It’s a wish box. Cass gets to keep her wishes inside it like any good little eight-year-old girl.’

‘Funny ha. It was a sweet gesture,’ I said. ‘I know he’s not my type, but he just seems to be everywhere I am. I like him. I don’t want to fuck him.’

‘He doesn’t know that, though, and accepting the gift honours the giver.’

I groaned, opening a bottle of wine, then throwing a take-away menu on Zara’s lap. I really didn’t need another drink. What I needed was ten thousand bucks.

‘Leave Declan out of this, guys. I know what I’m doing.’

‘I don’t know what the hell I’m doing,’ I muttered some three hours later as I trimmed the split ends from my hair in the lights surrounding the large bathroom mirror. I had a teenage boy pining after me and I bought clothes from mail-order companies. ‘It’s really pathetic, Jock. I’m Mrs Robinson at twenty-nine.’

My little parakeet squarked at me and I let him out of the cage and cleaned the tray. He pooped on the couch and then flew into my hair. I loved it when he sat on my shoulder when I was home, and no matter what I did, he always managed to slop poo into my jeans pocket. Four out of the five nibbles on my ear were very affectionate; it was a little sad how desperate I was for contact sometimes. His constant chattering was a comfort noise and I didn’t like to admit that I appreciated the company. Some people grow them in their belly; others buy them for \$9.95 at the pet shop. I thought I’d definitely made the right choice.

I owed ten thousand dollars to the Visa card company and my \$435 a week at the DVD shop wasn't going to chip it away as fast as the interest rate was going to bump it up. The negatives of living in my apartment (no garden, occasional vertigo, cranky next-door neighbour Mr Crabtree) didn't outweigh the positives, and I would chain myself to my Smeg fridge to avoid getting chucked out if I had to.

I suspected maybe I had spent too much money on matching underwear—but then I dismissed the thought. I just loved the way the expensive stuff felt on my skin. I probably spent one hundred dollars a month; that was only twenty-five dollars a week. Most people spent that much on CDs and magazines. I spent it on underwear. Colours, lace, G-strings. It was a carnival of unmentionables. I've considered cutting down to just a G-string a month and checking out the sales, but that sort of budgeting can really mess with your head.

I went to the window and gazed out over the city of Adelaide. The stars were masked by clouds but the hills loomed up behind the city. I looked back into the glow of my apartment. I liked my lifestyle. I liked my capsule home. There was no way I could go back to sharing a house with—well—*other* people. I was going to have to find a way to make some money, and fast.



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