

Chapter 1

Brisbane, Australia

The sign above the front door said the brothel was legal.

The knot in John Corey's gut told him he would rather be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Leon Thompson elbowed him in the ribs and grinned. 'You can still have my girl if you want. Like I told you, she likes it rough. Gets off on a bit of pain, really bucks around.'

John shook his head. The thought of inflicting pain on a woman, even one who enjoyed it, repulsed him. Leon shrugged and walked into the reception area. His lanky body reminded John of a retriever, but the large teeth, fleshy lips and slate grey eyes were more fish-like than canine.

The room was better furnished than the nondescript brown brick exterior of the building would have implied. Pale grey velvet armchairs grouped in several small clusters around magazine-strewn coffee tables, full-length dark green curtains and a corner table with coffee- and tea-making facilities were more in keeping with a private hotel than the kind of place John would have expected Leon to frequent.

'Good evening, Leon.' The voice of the voluptuous blonde behind the reception desk dripped honeyed welcome. 'Crystal is waiting for you.' Her eyes slid over John in a look that quickly assessed and approved. 'But, I'm sorry, your friend will have to wait a few minutes. Abigail is running a little late.'

'That's okay.' John was more than happy to wait. All night if he had to.

He took out his wallet, but Leon waved it away. 'I told you this was on me.' His grin turned sly. 'I've got a tab. Make sure you enjoy yourself.' He winked at the receptionist and walked through an archway into a corridor that branched to the left.

John sat on an armchair, picked up a magazine that spilled female flesh from every page, and hoped Leon wouldn't ask for a detailed account of his evening when they next met. He flipped through the magazine, looking but not seeing. He'd learned patience over the years, but befriending the Leons of the world sometimes took more than he felt capable of giving.

He'd flicked through a second magazine before the receptionist called softly, 'Abigail will see you now. Just follow the corridor to Room Six.'

The thick carpet deadened his footsteps as John walked slowly towards the room. The doorways into the rooms were set in alcoves that provided privacy from anyone passing. John had just reached the alcove for Room Six when he heard the clunk of a key being turned in a lock. He glanced up the corridor and saw a door further along on the opposite side slowly open. A man in his sixties peered stealthily around before stepping into the corridor, closing the door and hurrying to what would have to be the alcove to Room Seven.

Odd. Someone with his own private key to get into the building. Someone whose clothing said if he bought off the rack it was only because it was the best rack in the city. Someone who could obviously afford the kind of prostitutes who came with a 'high quality escorts' label. He could be the brothel owner, but the furtiveness of his movements indicated otherwise.

With instincts honed by years of operating in situations like this, John followed. Just as he reached the alcove he again heard the clunk of a key unlocking a door, and caught a glimpse of the man withdrawing the key from the lock and pocketing it before entering the room.

John listened at the door for a while, but couldn't hear anything. He'd just turned to leave when he heard a cry. The kind of cry a man might make when confronted by something unexpected. Or shocking.

He hesitated for only a second, then grabbed the door handle. It turned easily and he opened the door a fraction. Silence. Then a man's voice, low, urgent, rapidly rising then abruptly ceasing. John stayed motionless, listening. Soft sounds, like shoes thumping back and forth on carpet. A minute passed. Another male voice. The first man began arguing with the second. John could only make out a few of the words, but the anger in them was escalating.

The first voice suddenly cut off. There was a crash, quickly followed by a thud.

Then silence.

John wondered if there was a woman in the room. If she was in danger. Perhaps hurt. He waited. Damn, but he shouldn't be here. This wasn't in the job description. Stay close to Leon, find out everything, anything. Don't stick his nose in something outside his directive.

A door slammed. Inside the room.

It took only another second to decide. Cursing his lack of a weapon, he eased into the room.