

Paid To Dance: Asha's Story Part One

Chapter One

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Asha found the venue nestled between shops and restaurants in the Brisbane central business district. It was just before midday, and the blacked out double doors were still locked, so Asha waited. On the walk there, her thoughts had been racing out of control. Did she really want to do this? Was she brave enough? Now she had arrived her mind was strangely quiet in the light of what she was about to do.

Asha's stomach churned with anticipation. What would they think of her? Would she be good enough for this job? If she accepted the position, she knew there would be no turning back. The doors opened, and a young woman appeared, her long, flowing golden hair reaching all the way to her waist.

"Hi, you must be Asha." She smiled. "I'm Paige. Come on in."

Paige wore a black tank top and long pants, which was more than Asha had expected, even for a manager. Asha had chosen to wear a sequined cocktail dress she had bought for a wedding a month earlier. It was very fancy for ten o'clock on a Friday morning, and she had attracted a few strange looks on the train from fellow passengers.

The interior of the club was dimly lit, the walls black and windowless. There were several tables positioned around the club, and chairs stationed along the length of the stage. The stage was an elevated rectangular platform that cut straight through the main floor. It featured three poles, one at either end and one in the middle. There were several chairs stationed along the length of the stage. A woman with long raven hair and porcelain skin lay draped along a middle section of the stage. One hand cradled her head, the other arm rested in

the curvature of her waist and hips. The sight of her dazzled Asha; she could not believe she was seeing a real-life exotic dancer before her very eyes.

The private lounge area was a cave-like room at the back of the club, furnished with black leather couches and oval ottomans. Just outside the room was an open booth, and Paige explained that a specially licensed staff member, or ‘controller’, was required to sit in the booth and supervise a private dance for its duration. Dancers received a 60% cut of their earnings from private dances, and kept 100% of tips earned whilst performing on the stage.

After the tour of the club, Paige sat Asha down at a bar table on the edge of the room. Asha filled out an application form with her contact details. Where it requested a dancer alias, she chose her middle name; Brooke.

“Great,” said Paige as she took back the form. “We’ll see you next Tuesday at 12pm for your trial shift.”

Walking back to the train station, Asha took her phone out of her bag and started writing a new text message to her boyfriend Josh.

“Guess who just scored a trial shift at *The Runway*?” she typed.

Asha caught the train to Caboolture, and her mother Laurel was waiting in the car park at the station to give her a lift back to their home in Bongaree on Bribie Island.

“How did your interview go?” she asked as Asha slipped down into the passenger seat.

“Good. I have a trial shift next Tuesday.”

“So, was it a nice club?”

“Yes, it was very dark, because there weren’t any windows. But it was fine. The manager was really nice as well.”

Laurel nodded.

“Well, as I said before, as long as you are safe.”

“Yes, I felt very safe there. They have security, and the manager supervises private bookings.”

“Very good.”

After graduating high school, Asha had made a shaky transition into the workforce. A job agency found her a position as a receptionist in the city. One day, a parcel intended for a courier had dropped behind Asha’s desk, to be discovered a week later. She had returned from running errands around the city to find the company director yelling about and cursing her to the personal assistant and the accountant, immediately containing his rage once he realized Asha was standing behind him.

The job agency found Asha another position in the advertising department of a local newspaper, which involved undertaking a certificate in administrative studies. For a time Asha enjoyed the position. She spent her days working alongside the department manager’s personal assistant, and liked being away from the busy reception environment.

Just when things seemed to be going well, she was sent to work in the main reception area to cover for a staff member on holiday. What was supposed to be a temporary arrangement turned into a permanent relocation, and Asha found herself at the mercy of a busy switchboard. She became overwhelmed by the fast pace, and her duties reduced to such a degree that the Human Resources manager called her in for a meeting. He warned her she would be fired if she did not pick up her game. Asha protested that the reception position was not what she had originally applied for, but the manager sharply reinstated that her relocation was her only choice if she wanted to continue working for the company.

Asha’s father had suggested she study childcare. It was a strong and promising industry, he said. Asha made some enquiries into colleges and courses, but ultimately she decided childcare was not for her. She had never really enjoyed spending much time around young children anyway. She took an interest in studying natural therapies, but her father sat

her down with the classifieds page of the newspaper and pointed out the lack of jobs advertised in that sector. Asha had been convinced that instead of supporting her, he was just trying to hamper her ambition and steer her in the direction he had envisioned for her. In her mind, it was more important to him that she made good money rather than do something she actually enjoyed.

A small wheeled suitcase lay open on Asha's bed, and inside she placed the sequined dress, and a pair of high heels which she had also worn to the same wedding a month earlier. She sorted through the few pieces of department store lingerie she owned. She also placed in the suitcase a green beaded halter neck top and sheer blue scarf a belly dance teacher had given her.

The night before her trial shift, Asha stayed at Josh's place. He shared a house with a friend in Chermside, a fifteen minute drive north of Brisbane city. As he slept soundly next to her, she lay wide awake, butterflies flitting about in her stomach. At eighteen, her sexuality was blossoming, and she was discovering herself as a sensual human being. Asha and Josh had been dating for two months. They had been at an outdoor concert when she had casually brought up that she was considering working as an exotic dancer. She had expected some hesitation from him, but he had been surprisingly relaxed about it. Asha wasn't sure whether his response was due to the fact that he recognized her right to make the decision, or whether their relationship simply wasn't serious enough yet for it to really matter to him.

Her physical relationship with Josh was one extension of her sexual awakening, and this new job would be another. The next day, she would take a step into a world where many other women had not yet been, and where most would never go. She was going to expose her naked body to paying strangers. What she was about to do would undoubtedly change her life forever.

The decision had been a relatively easy one to make; however the concept of acting on it was daunting. Asha related it to her first kiss; there was nothing she had experienced in her young life that she could quite relate it to. She had no idea what to expect.

The Runway opened its doors to dancers at 10am to come in and start getting themselves ready. Asha had been given the choice to work the day shift from 12-7pm, or the night shift from 7pm to closing time at 1am. Asha had chosen the day shift. The train ride back to Caboolture was an hour, and the last bus to Bongaree departed Caboolture station at 8pm. Laurel often picked Asha up from the train station. Asha had been staying overnight at Josh's house once a week lately, and he had dropped her at the bus station when he left for work early in the morning. She was considering asking him if it was okay to sleep in at his house after he had left for work in the morning, but she felt it was still too early in their relationship to ask something like that.

Josh was a concreter, and woke for work at 5.30am. Bleary-eyed and dragging her feet, Asha rose with him, and he dropped her at the bus stop at the end of the street. Asha's father worked in the city, so she decided to take advantage of the spare time she had before ten o'clock to catch up with him for a coffee. She phoned him and organized to meet him at a cafe close to his office. When she hung up, she immediately began to re-think her decision.

With her wheeled suitcase in hand, Asha met her father outside the train station.

"Here she is," James greeted. "Why the luggage?"

"I have an appointment with a modeling agency," Asha replied.

"Oh, I see. Where is the appointment?"

Asha scrambled for an answer.

"It's just near your work. I can walk with you to your office and then go from there."

"Well, I can walk you to your appointment first if it's on the way."

"That's okay Dad."

“I can help you with your suitcase.”

“No, its fine, I can manage.”

James eased off as they proceeded to a café close to the station.

Over morning coffee they filled in the blanks on life, work, and family. Afterward, Asha

accompanied her father to his office building.

“Thanks for this morning,” she said.

“It was great to see you, Asha. Good luck with your appointment.”

James went inside and Asha wheeled her suitcase across the street. She made her way back across

the block, glancing cautiously over her shoulder. The coast was clear.

From a distance, James watched his daughter walking away, pulling her suitcase behind her.

His heart swung between anguish and fury, intensifying with every step she took away from him.

Stop, Asha. Just stop.

James watched Asha as she reached the corner.

Don't turn right, Asha. Don't turn right.

The entry doors were closed, but unlocked. Stepping inside, Asha found a slender, blonde woman sitting behind the reception desk. She had introduced herself at Asha's interview as Linda.

Paige met Asha in the club and showed her past the bar through another set of double doors. The dressing room was a tight L-shaped room in the back of the club. Against the wall were old, rusty lockers. The room smelled of cigarette smoke filtered through the air conditioning.

“There you go, sweetheart,” Paige said, reaching up to a locker. “You can put your things in here. I would recommend buying a padlock to secure it.”

The L-shape of the room made a sharp turn to the right, and in this little nook was crammed a small bench, two stools, and a costume and shoe rack. On one of the stools sat the raven-haired dancer Asha had seen at her interview. Her legs were crossed, and her curvaceous body was encased in a tight black dress. Two manicured fingers raised a cigarette to her glossy red lips. She was the most beautiful woman Asha had ever seen.

“Are you a new dancer?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” Asha replied.

“What’s your name?”

“Asha. Well, that’s my real name. My dancer name is Brooke.”

“I’m Chantelle. Have you danced before?”

“No, this is my first time.”

Chantelle tapped her cigarette into a tumbler glass that she was using for an ashtray.

“Are you nervous?”

“A bit.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it.”

A piece of paper with dancers’ names listed on it was tacked to the door of the dressing room, and next to each name was a time.

“This is the schedule for stage shows,” Paige explained. “They are spaced fifteen minutes apart, or sometimes a little less if it is quiet. When it is your turn, use the phone at the bar to call Linda at reception, and she will play your music.”

Asha began to decant some of her costuming items and personal valuables into her locker. She changed out of her clothes into her sequined dress. She noticed the other girls were all wearing clear stilettos, and wondered why they all wore that kind in particular.

Before too long, all the dancers were out on the floor, gathered around one of the bar tables, awaiting the first customer.

“Chantelle, can you come to the private room and show Brooke some lap dance moves?” Paige asked.

“Sure,” Chantelle agreed.

Asha sat down on one of the leather lounges, and Paige took a seat with Chantelle on the adjacent ottoman.

“Don’t stress too much about your moves in a lap dance,” Chantelle began. “There is no structured routine you should follow or moves you have to do. Just make it up as you go along.”

Chantelle stood up.

“All you need to remember is that there is no touching between the thighs or in the ‘sacred spot’. When a customer is touching you, he has to keep his hands on the outsides of your hips, and away from your crack.”

She outlined the subject areas on her own body.

“Also, when you have your back turned to the customer, always keep an eye on him over your shoulder. It would only take one lick from someone to spoil it for you and you’ll never want to dance again.”

Chantelle leaned over Asha and placed her hands on the back of the sofa, weaving her hips in a figure-eight motion.

“So you can start off like this.”

She took Asha’s hands and placed them on her hips.

“If a customer’s hands start to wander, you can just gently guide them back to the right place, like this. Remember, even though they have paid money, you are in charge.”

Chantelle traced her hands up along the sides of her body, slowing down to outline the shape of her breasts. She brought her hands up along the contours of her neck, letting them disappear into her hair.

“There is no mouth to body contact allowed either. If the customer tries to break the rules, it is up to you as to whether you give them a warning, or kick them out of the dance straight away. But if they do touch your sacred spot, don’t give them a second chance. You don’t have to put up with that.”

Asha nodded. “Okay.”

Chantelle sat back down on the ottoman in front of Asha, lying back and opening her legs.

“These ottomans will be your best friends. You can roll over onto your hands and knees and arch your back. The guys love that.”

With the lap dance induction complete, Asha and Chantelle rejoined the other girls at the bar table.

“When you’re talking to a customer, ask him questions like, ‘How has your day been? Are you a local to Brisbane? Have you been to this club before?’” Chantelle continued. “After about ten minutes ask him if he would like to go for a private dance with you. Don’t sit with customers for any longer than that, just in case they don’t end up booking you. Don’t waste your time.”

Chantelle picked up a card in a plastic case stand from the centre of the table.

“The prices for private dances are on these. We also do table dances. It would be a good idea to familiarize yourself with the prices, but if you forget, you can just look at the cards.”

While they waited, Asha learned a little more about her new co-workers. Aged in their late thirties, Kim and Audrey were the oldest dancers at *The Runway*. Scarlett was the youngest, and Chantelle fell somewhere in the middle.

The double doors near reception opened, and two men walked into the club. They were middle aged, one with a silver hair and a large belly. They ordered drinks and sat down at a bar table, and Chantelle invited Asha to join her in talking to them.

“Hi guys, how are you going today?”

“Well, thank you,” the silver-haired man replied.

“I’m Chantelle, and this is...”

“Asha. Nice to meet you.”

Chantelle looked strangely at her.

“Brooke, Asha, what is your name?” she giggled.

“Oh, sorry, I’m Brooke,” Asha giggled, blushing.

She was yet to get used to the concept of fake names.

“Brooke is a new dancer.”

“Well, I’m Russell,” said the silver-haired man. “And this is Jeff.”

“So, what have you gentlemen been up to today?” asked Chantelle, gently pushing her hair over her shoulder.

“We were just out for lunch and thought we’d drop in.” Russell looked curiously at Brooke.

“So, this is your first day at this club?”

“My first day dancing ever, actually.”

“Oh, I see!” Russell exclaimed. “You must be so nervous!”

“Just a little.” Asha chuckled. “But it’s going okay so far.”

“Well, gentlemen, if you will excuse me, I need to get ready for my stage show,” said Chantelle as she slid down from her stool.

She slipped off to the dressing room, and Asha felt suddenly vulnerable. She had never been the one to instigate conversations, but luckily Jeff and Russell were just interested in hearing more about her first day of work as a dancer.

The music was turned up, and Chantelle came through the double doors beside the bar and strutted up onto the stage.

“Please give a warm welcome to the sexy Chantelle,” Linda crooned over the microphone.

Chantelle was dressed in a skimpy secretary outfit. The buttons of her blouse were stressed across her bust, and her long legs reached out of a short black skirt. She took to the stage with attitude, walking from one end to the other and back again, dividing her dance skills between the three poles. She seldom made eye contact with her audience, and she didn't seem to care to make a connection with them. Her dancing commanded attention, and her movements gave the customers the visual satisfaction they sought.

Chantelle approached the pole in the middle of the stage. Leaning back against it, she slowly popped open the buttons of her blouse. Tossing the blouse to the side, she reached around and unclipped her black lace bra, delicately pulling the undergarment away from her body.

Pushing the mini skirt down over her hips, Chantelle descended slowly to her knees. She crawled along the length of the stage, extending her arms in a cat-like stretch, elongating her legs as she dragged them along after her. Slinking along the stage, her back arched, her breasts softly rebounded off one another. She dipped down and rolled over onto her back, slipping her thumbs underneath the thin straps of her g-string, pushing it down over her hips.

To see a woman completely naked in a room of people was the most confronting and surreal experience Asha had ever had. Chantelle had no fear, and not a care in the world. Being up there in front of everyone was so easy for her.

Once the third song in her show had finished, Chantelle picked up her clothes and walked down the steps to the double doors. She left the stage with the same strong strut she had taken to it with, and didn't stop to acknowledge the audience for their applause as she disappeared into the dressing room.

“Gentlemen, please put your hands together for the beautiful Chantelle!”

Scarlett performed her show next, and then Kim after her. During Kim's performance, Paige approached Asha at her table.

“You don't have to go up on stage today if you don't want to. You can just watch the other girls if you like.”

“It's all right, I'd like to go up today,” Asha insisted.

“All right, then. You can go up after Kim.”

In the dressing room, Asha took her costume bag out of her locker. As she decided what to wear, it dawned on her what she had just agreed to do.

Waiting behind the double doors, Asha's heart was beating in her ears. Her cheeks were burning hot, and her hands were clammy and slightly shaking. Her enthusiasm had got the better of her. She had never before experienced nervousness such as she was feeling in that moment.

Her heart seemed to stop for a moment when she heard her music start. She pushed open the doors and walked out onto the stage. Looking at the small group before her, she was somewhat comforted by the smiles of the other girls. Jeff and Russell's expressions were casual. She was someone they didn't know, about to undress for them. How could they be so comfortable in the midst of what she was about to do?

Asha gyrated around the centre pole, trying to mimic what she had seen the other girls do. Her performance was nowhere near the level of their grace and talent. Her efforts to look sexy felt completely disjointed by her awkward movements. She knew what Jeff and Russell

were waiting to see. She had never felt so conscious of her body as she did in that moment. She willed the floor to open up and swallow her. She wanted to be anywhere but there. It seemed the whole world had stopped, petrified with her.

As she reached around for the clip of her bra, she couldn't look anyone in the eye, not even the other dancers. She felt raw and vulnerable, not only because Jeff and Russell were old enough to be her father, but because she had never undressed for anyone except her boyfriend. She felt like a helpless animal backed into the corner. How had she ever thought this would be a good idea? She wondered if she was dreaming, and would wake up any second and decide not to go through with the job at all.

There was only one item left to remove. Asha held her breath as she placed her hands on her hips. Her mouth was dry. There was a lump in her throat the size of a golf ball. She couldn't breathe as her knickers dropped around her ankles. There she stood, stark naked in front of strangers. This was the subject of nightmares.

Asha questioned her reality with every passing second. She blinked, but she didn't wake up, and the hole in the floor never opened. It was real.

The third song came to an end, and so did ten minutes that had felt like an eternity. Asha snatched up her clothes and bolted from the stage, Linda's words trailing behind her.

"Please give a huge round of applause for the amazing Brooke!"

Jeff, Russell and the other girls clapped and cheered as Asha pushed through the doors. Moments later she was joined in the dressing room by Paige and Chantelle.

"That was really good, Brooke! Really good!" Paige exclaimed.

"Oh, thanks." Asha chuckled. "I was so scared."

"That's perfectly normal," Chantelle assured her. "Just one tip. You don't need to strip completely naked in the first song. You don't even have to take your bra off until the third song if you don't want to. But that was great, well done."

Asha returned to sit with Jeff and Russell, who complimented her on her first ever stage performance. Once the hype had settled, Jeff made her a proposition.

“I’d really like to take you for a private dance,” he said quietly.

“Sure,” Asha agreed.

She felt momentary delight before dread took over again. She had barely recovered from her stage debut when she was being thrust into her very first private booking. Jeff took her hand and they walked to the private room. Paige was sitting at the booth. Asha noticed Scarlett was already in there with another customer.

“Oh, we’ll have to wait,” Asha corrected herself.

“You are still allowed to go in when someone else is in there,” Paige said and chuckled.

“Oh, right, of course.” Asha giggled.

“How long would you like to go for, Jeff?” Paige asked.

“Ten minutes, please,” said Jeff, handing her a fifty-dollar note.

He chose one of the sofas close to the entrance to the room, and Asha was secretly glad as she would be closer to Paige’s watchful eye.

“Firstly I’ll just explain a few rules. No touching between the legs, and no mouth to body contact.”

“I know,” Jeff said. “I’ve been in here before.”

Standing in front of him, Asha placed her hands on the back of the sofa, weaving her hips in a figure eight just as Chantelle had shown her. Jeff relaxed, reaching up and placing his quivering hands on her hips. Asha had never experienced a man of his age in a sexual way, and it felt uncomfortable to have him looking at her with such desire. It was impossible for her to imagine Jeff as anything other than a parental figure. For him to have sexual

desires, especially for young women like her, seemed so far removed from her perception of a middle-aged man.

Slipping the straps off her shoulders, she pushed her dress down, and Jeff softly caressed her bare skin. Removing her bra was a little easier this time, but unlike up on stage, it was not the act of doing it that was scary for Asha. This time, it was the intimacy of the private room and the closeness to Jeff. She felt her small figure was inferior in his eyes compared to Chantelle's womanly curves.

Asha turned her back to Jeff and slowly bent over, removing her g-string. Her legs felt rooted into the ground, and for a while Jeff seemed content, gently stroking the sides of her hips and thighs. She kept her back turned from him for as long as she could, but knew that sooner or later she would have to face him again. Reluctantly, she turned around and leaned over him.

His eyes fell impulsively below Asha's waistline, and she could barely look at him. She reclined back onto the ottoman, and once again averted her eyes from Jeff's gaze as she opened her legs. It was as if the rest of her body had disappeared.

"Time's up, Brooke."

"Okay."

Asha sat upright again.

"Thank you so much, Brooke," Jeff said graciously. "That was fantastic. You're a natural."

Asha was relieved it was over, and glad she had obviously impressed Jeff. She put her lingerie and dress back on and walked with him back to the bar, where he bought her a drink.

Asha had survived the two most terrifying moments of a first-time exotic dancer, and she figured it could only get better from there.

That night at seven o'clock, she retreated to the dressing room to change. Taking her phone out of her handbag, she noticed a text message from her voicemail service, and a missed call from her father. Initially she dismissed them and dialled her mother's number.

"Hi, Asha."

"Hi, Mum. I'm getting changed now and will be catching the 7.07 train."

"Okay. Asha, I had a call from your father today. He knows you went to the club."

Asha felt her stomach suddenly become as heavy as a stone, and as it dropped inside her it pulled her downwards to her knees.

"What?"

"He said he saw you go in. He was asking a lot of questions, and was very angry."

Asha lowered her head into her free hand.

"How did he find out, Asha?"

She was almost too mortified to say it.

"I called him this morning after I got in to the city to see if he wanted to have a coffee."

Asha felt physically rattled. She wondered if this was really happening, but just like her first stage show, she knew she was not dreaming.

"Mum, I'm scared," she whimpered.

"It's all right, Asha. Just get on the train and we'll figure it out when you get home."

Asha exhaled deeply, lifting her head from her hand.

"Okay."

"See you soon, sweetheart."

Asha hung up the phone and took a moment to let the information sink in. She dialled her voicemail, and listened to the message. It was from her father. She could hear the quiver of fury underneath his steady tone.

“Asha, I know you went into this place called ‘*The Runway*’ today. I don’t think this is the right place for a girl like you to be going. Please give me a call so we can talk about it.”

What a disaster. Her first day at work as a dancer had been charged with adrenaline, and had come crashing down as soon as she had finished her shift.

Asha’s mother Laurel was sitting in her car outside the train station when Asha arrived. On the drive home, Asha folded her arms and closed her eyes, resting her head back against the seat.

“Asha, this is a very serious situation that you are in at this job. You have to be so careful, as I told you.”

“I know, Mum. I know.”

Asha’s eyes welled with tears.

“I’m hurt that you didn’t listen to me when I told you to be careful about this. I wouldn’t tell you to do something for no good reason.”

“I’m sorry, Mum,” Asha whimpered. “I didn’t do it because I deliberately didn’t listen to you. I didn’t mean it. I just didn’t think.”

“Okay, so now we know what the situation is, we know where we stand.” She reached over and touched Asha’s hand. “Your dad may still have found out sooner or later. It’s just unfortunate that it had to be on your first day.”

Laurel had kept a plate from dinner aside for Asha, but Asha had all but lost her appetite by the time she arrived home. She was completely drained, physically and mentally. She just wanted to disappear into sleep.

Laurel wrapped her arms around her daughter and held her close.

“I really meant what I said,” Asha insisted. “I really am sorry that I didn’t do what you told me to.”

“I know you are,” Laurel soothed. “You just need to be so careful about who knows about your job.”

They came apart, and Laurel pushed Asha’s hair out of her face.

“Have a shower, freshen up, and get some sleep. We’ll deal with this in the morning.”