

## **The Red Dresses**

*By Kat Powell*

**1978 - 1979**

Working and saving money became Kathy's new focus. She did not know what she was saving for exactly, but she knew that money gave you options, choices that had been denied her in the past, and she wanted the freedom to choose her future. Life had not been kind to her so far, and she could not count on anyone else to make it better. The only person she could count on was herself!

"I'm working tonight until around midnight. Friday nights are super busy but worth it because of the tips," Kathy said to her friend and co-worker Nancy at the accountant's office where they worked on Eagle Street.

Kathy had decided to leave the law firm where she had been working for several years in favor of working as a private secretary for the head accountant at a large, inner-city firm. The decision to leave had been an easy one; it all came down to money.

Unlike some of her friends who were saving for overseas trips, Kathy did not have the travel bug. Her friend Sharon had just returned from her European adventure; her stories of exploits in faraway lands was not enough to lure Kathy.

She had taken a second job as a waitress in a busy seafood restaurant to make extra money. It was hard work and she found the general public could be extremely rude, but it paid well, and if she smiled nicely and really looked after her tables, the tips made it worthwhile.

Nancy watched Kathy make the quick change in the ladies' toilets from her respectable secretarial attire of a pencil skirt and button-up blouse into her black miniskirt and tiny, white, tube top.

“God, that skirt is short, Kath. What happens when you bend over? Everyone must see your knickers,” Nancy said, laughing.

Kathy shot her a suggestive look and said, “Now you know why I get good tips, Nance.”

She laughed with Nancy, even though she knew there was an element of truth to what she was saying. Still young at just nineteen, Kathy had worked out what made people tick, men in particular.

Nancy was a few years older than Kathy but knew she could learn a thing or two from her friend. She had smarts that Nancy, at twenty-two, did not have. For a while now she arrived at work upset about the way Colin, her boyfriend of three years, was treating her. They had been living together for the past eighteen months, and Nancy had noticed a change for the worse in his behavior recently. Kathy had become Nancy’s self-appointed confidante and counsellor, and Nancy knew that what Kathy lacked in book smarts, she more than made up for with street smarts.

Kathy suspected Colin was cheating on her but did not have the heart to tell Nancy, who was not picking up on the clues like Kathy had—the phone calls where Colin would talk in hushed tones and then stop talking altogether when Nancy entered the room, the hang-ups when Nancy answered the phone, and the late-night emergency work callouts that were occurring more and more frequently over the past few months. But for Kathy the absolute clincher was when Nancy had sprung him sitting at their local coffee shop with a blonde girl she never met before. Nancy approached them to say hello, and there was an awkward moment. Colin simply got up from the table, took Nancy by the hand, and left without saying a word to the mystery blonde or Nancy.

Kathy wanted to help her and thought the best way she could would be to liberate Nancy by inviting her out with her and her girlfriends occasionally, in the hope that she might

meet someone else. She was a pretty girl with an outgoing personality, and Colin was a deadbeat. Kathy had met him a few times when he came into the city. An electrician by trade, he used to swing by the office to pick up Nancy for a quick lunch, but that had stopped over the past few months. He was tall and thin, with greasy, dark hair hanging limply across his shoulders, and he always appeared solemn and moody. One day he was in the area installing ceiling fans in nearby offices, and he dropped by. Kathy quietly observed Nancy and Colin as they waited for the lift. Nancy tried to take hold of his hand, and he pushed her hand away.

*Arsehole!* Kathy thought to herself. *Nancy deserves better than you. You long, thin streak of misery.*

Kathy wanted to see Nancy free herself of this guy and hoped she could be the conduit to help make that happen. “Hey, what about coming out with me and the girls tomorrow night?” Kathy asked, making the final adjustments to her waitressing attire. “We’re going to Pipp’s Nightclub around nine, and then maybe onto Harrington’s, the jazz bar in the valley. You’ll have heaps of fun.” She could tell Nancy wanted to go, so she decided to push a little harder. “Come on, Nancy. Do you and Colin have any plans for Saturday night?”

Nancy hesitated before saying, “Colin said he has to work tomorrow night, something about him helping a mate who’s building a house and can’t afford an electrician, so Col’s doing a love job.”

Kathy wanted to scream at Nancy, “Love job, I bet he is, but not the type of love job you’re thinking!” Sweet, naive Nancy did not have a suspicious bone in her body, unlike Kathy who at the ripe old age of nineteen had been hardwired to distrust most people, and Colin had Love Rat written all over his pathetic face. Instead she said, “Good then. I will pick you up at eight. We’ll collect Sharon and Mandy and head into town first. Why don’t you wear that gorgeous dress you bought last week. I’ll bet you haven’t had a chance to wear it yet.” It was a date.

Kathy arrived at Nancy's house a little early Saturday evening and could tell she had been crying. "Is everything alright?" she asked with genuine concern.

"Colin and I had a fight. I think he's fooling around on me. He says he's not, but he hasn't been himself for the past six months or so. He called me crazy, told me I need to go to a shrink or something, that I'm a stupid, jealous nutcase, and then stormed off."

Kathy hugged Nancy as she sobbed on her shoulder, and thought to herself, *Spot on, Colin, the best form of defense is attack. Nancy finally called you on your cheating, and instead of being a man and owning up to your philandering ways, you went in for the kill. This is exactly what I would expect from a coward like you.*

But instead of sharing her thoughts with Nancy, who was clearly brokenhearted and deep down already knew the truth, Kathy said, "We are going to have so much fun tonight. You deserve someone so much better than him, and tonight you might meet Mr. Right because, Nancy, Colin isn't him!"

Nancy just nodded her pretty head and wiping her eyes, said, "I look a mess. Who would want me?"

"You don't look a mess, sweetie. You look like someone who's been balling her eyes out for a couple of hours over a loser. Come on, let's throw some makeup on those pretty, blue peepers of yours. You'll look like a million bucks in no time," Kathy said, steering her to the bathroom.

With Sharon, Mandy, and Nancy onboard, Kathy drove her little, white Cortina into the city, determined to take Nancy's mind off Colin and to have fun kicking her heels up with her girlfriends. The old Checkers Nightclub had undergone a facelift and a name change and was now known as Pippis, but one thing had not changed—a group of good-looking girls could still get in without paying any cover charge. Once inside, Kathy and her trio of beauties

found a table in the corner and Sharon and Kathy headed for the bar to order a round of drinks, leaving Mandy and Nancy to mind their table.

“Four Campari cocktails, please,” Kathy said to the handsome bartender with decidedly European heritage.

Campari was the drink du jour, and Kathy liked keeping up with the latest trends. Handing two of the cocktails to Sharon, they walked through the crowd hanging around the bar and back to their table.

“Cheers! Here’s to a fun night!” Kathy said, clinking glasses with her girlfriends.

“Yes, and here’s to getting rid of cheating, no-good boyfriends,” Nancy said, her mood lifting as she saw men looking in their direction. Sharon had continued a long-distance love affair with the lawyer she met with Kathy at that very same nightclub more than a year ago, when it was called Checkers.

Sharon made a toast. “May you all find your Prince Charming.”

“Oh, you old romantic, Shaz. You really are in love with David, aren’t you?” Kathy said, happy one of them had found their happily ever after.

“Yes, I am, and I think Dave is going to pop the question when we go to Melbourne next month to visit his folks. I don’t want to get my hopes up, but recently when we met for lunch in town, he lingered in front of jewelry shops, asking me which style of diamond rings I like. Then the other night he was holding my hand, and I could swear he was trying to work out my ring size,” Sharon said, laughing.

Mandy had been Sharon’s friend since high school, and Kathy had only met her a few times before, but she really liked her. Mandy had a wicked sense of humor and was fearless when it came to men. She was a “take them or leave them” kind of girl. She did not care less what men thought of her, pretty with a cute, little body that usually disarmed men, but when she opened her mouth, she would drop f-bombs all over the place.

“Fuck Prince Charming! Give me a bloke that’s hung like a horse, with a Swiss bank account and a daddy who owns a pub!” Mandy said, raising her glass once more.

The girls fell about laughing when a tall, distinguished-looking man approached their table, followed by a large, very fat man.

“Hello ladies. Good to see you are having a good time. My name is Brian, and this is John. I would like to buy a bottle of champagne for your table,” Brian said, his gaze upon Kathy the entire time.

Nancy quickly piped up, “Well, thank you. We would love some champers.”

Brian nodded his head and, still looking directly at Kathy, said, “We’ll be back in a moment.”

Nancy looked at Kathy and said, “Cor, he likes you. Did everyone notice how he couldn’t take his eyes off Kath the whole time?”

“Yes,” the girls chorused.

“You can have the fat one, Mandy,” Sharon said, shrieking with laughter. Sharon’s eyes followed Brian as he and John walked to the bar. She continued watching as Brian went behind the bar and said something to the bartender who had served them earlier.

“They must work here, Kath. Look, they are both behind the bar. Excellent, we won’t have to shell out for our drinks tonight, ladies. Let’s drink to that!” Sharon said, clinking glasses amidst fits of squeals and laughter.

Brian was back at their table, without John, but with an ice bucket and a bottle of Moet Chandon Champagne nestled inside. The handsome bartender who introduced himself to the girls as Eduardo followed Brian with five long-stemmed champagne glasses and a bowl of strawberries. Eduardo popped open the champagne and spooned a strawberry into their glasses, then poured the expensive liquid before depositing the nearly empty bottle back into the ice bucket and returning to the bar.

Brian exuded confidence and oozed charm, but he was not the sort of guy Kathy would normally look twice at. Even so, she had to admit there was something about him that aroused her interest, and who was she to decline free Moet Chandon? He held his glass up and said in his deep, self-assured voice, "To new friendships."

Brian's eyes remained firmly fixed on Kathy's as they clinked glasses for the fifth time that night. "Staying Alive" started playing, and Sharon screamed, "Come on, ladies, let's hit the dance floor." Kathy knew she was deliberately trying to give her and this interesting, new stranger some alone time to get acquainted. Mandy and Nancy were quick to follow Sharon's lead, jumping up from the table, already moving to the music and dancing onto the crowded dance floor.

"So, you know my name, but I still don't know yours," Brian said, his dark-blue eyes burning with desire.

"My name is Kathy," she said as she took another sip of the delicious, bubbling liquid, then said, "Do you work here?"

"You could say that," Brian answered, before qualifying that with, "I own the place."

Kathy thought he wanted to see if she was impressed by this last statement but did not want him to think owning the joint was a big deal to her, so instead of answering him, she simply nodded, trying to remain nonchalant.

"I haven't seen you here before. Is it your first time?" His deep-set, dark-blue eyes bore into Kathy's.

"No, well, yes, technically the first time I've been here since the name change, but I used to come here when it was Checkers," she said, thinking her answer sounded a little confused.

“You don’t look old enough to have been coming here since the days of Checkers. How old are you?” he said, a cheeky smile lingering on his lips.

“A gentleman isn’t supposed to ask a lady her age, you know,” she said, raising her eyebrows and throwing him a smirk.

“Well I am a gentleman, and you, my lovely, are certainly a lady, so please forgive that slip in social etiquette. It won’t happen again. Although, since I am the registered licensee of these premises, I am well within my rights to ask such a question to protect myself against serving alcohol to minors. But I have to say, you have a maturity that tells me you must be of a legal age. In any case, that wasn’t the reason I asked. I wanted to know from a personal interest. You caught my eye the moment you came in. I saw you and your friends at the front desk, and I knew I had to meet you.”

Kathy looked over at the dance floor and spotted Nancy dancing with a good-looking, young guy. She seemed to be having a really good time, and Kathy hoped he would take her mind off Colin.

Brian following Kathy’s gaze, asking, “Would you like to dance?”

“No thanks. I was just making sure my girlfriend Nancy is okay. She’s had a bad day,” Kathy explained, a frown appearing on her face.

“Nothing serious I hope,” Brian asked.

“No, just cheating boyfriend problems.” Just then “Le Freak” started playing and Kathy said, “Do you still fancy a dance? I love this song.”

Standing up, Brian took Kathy’s hand and formally asked her for a dance. Once on the dance floor, Kathy could see Sharon and Mandy dancing together near the stage and signaled to Brian that she would like to move over to her friends. Sidling up beside them, Kathy got into the groove of the music and laughed watching Sharon and Mandy bumping and grinding and having fun.



Brian bent down so he could talk into Kathy's ear. "I will meet you back at your table. I have to go and check on things."

Kathy watched as he walked towards the entrance of the club. The next song was slow, more suited to lovers, so she motioned to her friends that she was going back to the table. They were ready to sit back down, too.

"So, tell us all about Mr. Chandon?" Sharon asked, taking another sip of her champagne.

"And don't leave anything out!" Mandy chimed in.

"Not a lot to tell you other than he is the owner, and he seems nice," Kathy said, trying not to make a big deal out of his status.

"Well, the owner! If you don't mind, Kath, you have landed on your feet," Sharon said, obviously impressed. "I had a dance and accepted a drink. That hardly equates to landing on my feet. You guys will have me married off by the end of the night at this rate!" She laughed.

Nancy returned holding hands with the blonde, blue-eyed guy she had been dancing with. "Girls, this is Jason. Jason, these are my gal pals: Nancy, Mandy, and Kathy."

Picking up her handbag, Nancy addressed her friends. "Jason and I are going into Queen Street for a coffee. He's going to drop me home later. I'll see you at work on Monday, Kath." She threw her a cheeky wink. "Have a good night, girls. I sure will! Bye."

The trio watched, mouths agape, as Nancy sauntered out of the club, hand in hand with the surfy-looking Jason. When they were out of sight, all three cracked up laughing.

Brian returned amid peals of laughter and with a broad smile, revealing a set of perfectly straight, white teeth, asked, "Is this a private joke or are you going to let me in on it?"

“We just watched our friend Nancy leave with a cute, young, surfy guy she just met. She’s in a relationship with a guy who’s cheating on her. It’s great seeing Colin, her boyfriend, get a dose of his own medicine,” Kathy said, wiping tears from laughing so hard.

Brian nodded in agreement but quickly changed the subject and asked, “Is anyone hungry? John and I are going to Michael’s, a restaurant up on Queen Street, for a meal. Would anyone like to join us?”

Sharon and Mandy could see that even though Brian had said “anyone” his eyes were firmly fixed on Kathy the whole time. “No, you guys run along. Sharon and I plan on dancing more tonight. It’s good exercise, and we both need it.”

“Speak for yourself, Mandy!” Sharon said indignantly.

Brian smiled. “Well, if you’re sure you don’t mind me stealing Kathy away from you both? I’ll make sure Eduardo looks after your drinks tab. Please have whatever you like. It’s on the house.”

Michael’s restaurant was considered by food connoisseurs to be one of Brisbane’s finest dining restaurants. Walking down the stairs, Brian held Kathy’s hand as if he had done it many times before. John followed closely behind, making Kathy think he was Brian’s bodyguard. She wondered if Brian was used to getting what he wanted, and how he would behave when he did not get what he wanted from her tonight. Brian and John were greeted effusively by Michael, the owner and namesake behind the famous restaurant, before turning his attention to Kathy. “Welcome to my restaurant, belladonna.”

Brian patted Michael on the back, saying, “Michael, this beautiful lady is Kathy, and you will be seeing a lot more of her if I have anything to do with it. We would like to sit at the bar and have a few drinks before we take my usual table.”

*Yes, he is used to getting exactly what he wants, and he’s not afraid to ask for it either.*

After a few drinks, the unlikely trio sat together at a secluded table in the back of the restaurant. Although three is normally considered a crowd, Brian made her feel like it was just the two of them. He wined and dined her and made her feel like a princess. His deep voice sent shivers down her spine. He wanted to know everything about her. She did not want to tell him much. She wanted to keep some mystery about her; besides, she did not think he wanted, or needed, to know all the gruesome details that still haunted her. She just skimmed over the details and edited out the bad, only telling him the good bits—the success she had as an actress, the position she had held as a law clerk at an inner-city law firm, up to current times as a private secretary for the head accountant at a large accountancy firm. She went on to tell him that she was saving, had a part-time job as a waitress, and that she was not looking for a boyfriend, saying that they had always proved to be nothing but trouble.

“You don’t need to waitress anymore,” he said decisively.

*How rude.* Kathy did not like him telling her what to do. She had just met the guy and was not about to let him take control of her life. She had seen where that had gotten her in the past, so she said, “It’s not your place to tell me what I do or don’t need. I am perfectly capable of thinking for myself. I’ve been doing just fine so far without anyone else calling the shots for me.”

Instead of being offended by her declaration of independence, he laughed, saying, “I like you, Kathy. I like you a lot!”

She wanted to be angry with him but was confused instead. *Who is this man? He’s not like anyone I have ever met before.*

“I respect whatever you want to do. I should have said that if you want to earn extra money, I could give you a job at Pipp’s if you like. You could work at the reception desk. The pay is good, and you won’t be running yourself ragged serving customers. Just think about it.” He took hold of her hand and gently planted a kiss on it.

Plans were made to meet the following Saturday night. Brian wanted to see her before then but reluctantly accepted that Thursday and Friday nights were out due to her waitressing job.

“I broke up with Colin!” Nancy declared as soon as Kathy walked into work on Monday morning. “I got home at one in the morning, and he still wasn’t home. He didn’t get home until nearly three, and I could smell perfume on him. I told him I knew he was playing around, and I didn’t need a shrink. I just needed a better boyfriend. He didn’t even deny it. He just said that he would move out, and he did. Packed all of his shit up and was out by Sunday night. I invited Jason over for dinner, and I really like him.” Nancy seemed happier than Kathy had ever seen her.

Giving her a hug, she said, “Nance, I am so happy for you, and so glad you finally see Colin for what he is, a dirty, rotten cheater!” Kathy was proud of Nancy for having the courage to get rid of him. Even if Jason was not the right guy for Nancy, he was infinitely better than that love rat.

It did not take long for Brian to convince Kathy to towel her waitressing job. His relentless invitations to come to dinner at some of the best restaurants in Brisbane and occasionally on the Gold Coast were too tempting to refuse. Eventually she justified quitting; she had managed to save more than six thousand dollars, and she preferred being waited on in fancy restaurants much more than waiting on tables.

She also accepted that a date with Brian actually meant a night out with John, his constant consort. John had a quick wit, and she quickly grew to like him. It was obvious he really had Brian’s back. He was the archetype of the jolly, fat man, but she could tell there was another side to John, that if and when it was called for, he knew how to handle himself.

One night on their way to the Gold Coast in a stretch limousine to dine in a fancy, new restaurant called Juliana's, Brian opened up a little bit about his past. Until that point, it had been a topic he avoided.

"Have you heard about a nightclub called Whisky Au Go Go?" he asked. His eyes grew sad as he continued, "I used to own that club before it got blown to bits and fifteen innocent people were killed."

John Bell picked up a bottle of champagne from an ice bucket in the center console and poured the three of them a glass each. Kathy could tell from their collective silence that the subject was now closed. There was nothing more to be said.

It began after their second date; she found ten crisp, fifty-dollar notes in the side zipper of her bag. She knew Brian must have put them there, and her first response was anger. She knew that he would be at the club doing book work, so she called him first thing in the morning.

"Brian, did you put five hundred dollars in my bag last night?" she asked.

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly.

"Do you think I can be bought? Do you think I am a call girl?" she asked, growing more agitated.

"No, I don't think you can be bought, and you may have noticed that I haven't asked you for sex or acted in an inappropriate way with you. So, no, I don't think you are a call girl," he said, beginning to share her agitation.

"Then why did you put the money in my bag?"

"I want you to buy a red dress," he said simply.

"A red dress?" Kathy asked, confused.

"Yes, a red dress. I like red, and I would love to see you wearing a red dress."

“So, you gave me five hundred dollars to buy a red dress? That’s a lot of money for one dress!” she said, mocking him.

“Then buy two red dresses,” he replied, matching her mockery.

Brian continued sneaking money into Kathy’s handbag, and it was not long before she had a wardrobe full of beautiful red dresses.

Kathy did not know what to make of her relationship with Brian. She had never before had a boyfriend who did not seem to want to touch her. The only physical contact they shared was hand-holding and the occasional kiss, and not a French one. She wondered if it was because John was always with them. Sometimes they had an entourage of strippers, musicians, and bouncers in tow, and Kathy accepted that this was the way Brian liked it.

Wearing a new red dress, Kathy, Brian, and John were having drinks in the cocktail bar at the Park Royal Hotel opposite the Botanical Gardens. The Park Royal was one of the swankiest hotels in Brisbane and a favourite for some of the top touring bands to stay in. Lola had legs that seemed to go on forever and a body men would go to war for. Her performances at the Candy Club strip joint in the valley were always packed, and Lola was their most popular stripper. Kathy wondered if Brian and Lola had ever been intimate; they seemed to share a lot of history, and since she had never had any sexual relations with him, she could not help but wonder if he was seeing someone else. Nevertheless, Kathy liked Lola. She had a larger-than-life personality and a “couldn’t give a fuck” attitude.

Rod Stewart was performing at Festival Hall in Brisbane, and his band was staying at the Park Royal Hotel. A couple of the band members were drinking in the cocktail bar and enjoying the sultry vision of Lola strutting around in her tight, body-hugging, little, black dress and killer stilettos. Her mane of long, blonde hair and bright-red lipstick appeared to captivate the lead guitarist’s attention. Unable to resist the temptress’s flirtatious behavior any longer, he stood up from his bar stool and sauntered over to where Lola stood with

Kathy, Brian, and John. He did not introduce himself, though everyone at the bar knew he was part of the Rod Stewart Band. He looked as though he was used to being treated like a rock star.

“Hey,” he drawled in a thick, American accent. “I had to tell you that I love your dress.”

Lola simply smiled and flicked her long locks in his direction.

He seemed nonplussed by her response and repeated his previous statement, “I love your dress.”

Lola again smiled and took a sip of her cocktail without further acknowledging the VIP guitarist. Kathy watched on, amused by Lola’s demeanor and proud of her “I couldn’t give a shit who you are” behavior.

Frustration growing, the guitarist said loudly, “I really love that dress!”

Lola turned to face the long-haired, t-shirt-clad guitarist. In one swift movement, she stepped out of her dress, handed it to the muso, and said, “Here. Since you love it so much, you have it.”

Standing in the Park Royal cocktail bar butt naked except for those killer stiletto heels, Lola finished her drink, picked up her handbag, and walked out of the bar, past the foyer, and out the front of the hotel, where she elegantly flagged a waiting taxi and left.

Kathy did not bother reading the newspapers throughout the week, but she did enjoy reading the Sunday papers. Over a breakfast of bacon and eggs, she opened the paper to the Social pages. She dropped her fork, clanging loudly on the china plate, when she saw a picture of Brian and his wife attending the opening of a new restaurant.

All of a sudden it all made sense, why he never took their relationship beyond companionship. In a way she respected him for not playing her; it would have been easy for him to use her. It was right there in front of her in black and white. She knew she would not

be contacting Brian again. She was not mad at him; it had been a fun and exciting time in her life, and she did have a lot of red dresses to remember him by.