



# THE HAREM

LAWRENCE  
BURK

# The Harem

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Printed in the United States of America

## Introduction

*The Harem* was a product of Vivian Bouvier's desire to exact revenge on a cruel world. With the unwitting help of a childhood friend, she created a world of blackmail, extortion, and murder.

The story begins in New Orleans in 1983. Vivian was coming of age and had little to no emotional support to guide her through tough times. Her mother sold sexual favors until she got pregnant and ultimately abandoned Vivian and left her on her grandmother's doorstep, before taking her own life by overdose. Her father was a truck driver passing through the city on his route across the country, who would never know of her existence. Being raised by her Grandmother alone in the French Quarter presented its own challenges. Vivian's grandmother was widely known in the quarter as an authentic creole median, whose tarot and hand reading shop attracted many curious visitors to the French Quarter. The neighbors were cautious of her, suspecting she may have been a witch and discouraged the other children from associating with her.

John Strahan was Vivian's only friend and lived a couple buildings down from her. His mother struggled on welfare since her husband was incarcerated, she fought to keep a night job cleaning a local grocery store and stocking shelves. John didn't pay Vivian's grandmother any mind, he assumed all old people were off in the head anyway, besides her grandmother being a voodoo witch doctor, made Vivian all the more mysterious.

Robert Strahan was John's uncle and raised him to be heir to his casino empire on the Mississippi gulf coast. After Robert hit it big, he offered to take care of his brother's wife and son and let them move in with him to the historic and beautiful mansion Castle Rouge just north of Biloxi. Vivian opened her front door to the heart of New Orleans every morning to watch the sun rise

and dream of a better day, but things had changed the summer  
John left her, she stopped wishing upon a rising sun.

## Chapter One

It was five minutes to six and the sun would soon be rising. Vivian met the summer mornings watching the sun rise over the Mississippi River. As the sun cracked the horizon, she envisioned a new day of potential blessings and hope. “The sun will be up in twenty minutes, hurry up,” she hollered to John’s open window. The muggy air clung to John’s skin as he forced his shirt over his sweaty body. Being Vivian’s only friend meant he was tagged frequently to attend to her whims. Vivian was too smart and too mysterious for the other kids in the neighborhood to understand and were afraid to get too near her for fear of her grandmother and weird customs.

“I’m coming,” he called out, just before stepping through the open window onto the balcony. Vivian waited in the street below, anxious to get to the park. He stepped over the rail and jumped down to the street below. “You’re going to hurt yourself one day, and when you do, I’m going to say I told you so. You should use the stairs like everyone else.”

All John heard was, “Blah, blah, blah.” They walked a few blocks to Woldenberg Park, to a spot that looked out over the river, and sat on the bench he had carved their names into the previous summer. They sat, holding hands, and waited for the orange glow to rise above the horizon. They often fed the ducks that flew in every year. Vivian looked out over the river, and told John, “Maw-maw told me not to get too close to you.” Vivian’s accent was strongest when she was nervous, and he picked up on it.

“Why would she say that?” John replied.

“She told me that you’ll break my heart, then I’d break yours.”

“Come on, you don’t believe that do you?” John asked.

Vivian never doubted her grandmother, she had never been wrong. She’s seen many of her grandmother’s predictions

come true and though her grandmother didn't acknowledge her spiritual powers, she didn't deny them either. Whenever Vivian asked her about the tarot and spells, she would only say, "That's just how I make a living, child. The cards don't lie, people do. You need to figure that out on your own." She felt she was probably better off not knowing what she meant and let it go.

The sun just cracked its first light off the river and within minutes the eastern sky turned a beautiful orange. Though it was warm and humid, a feather soft breeze crossed their faces and Vivian felt the hope of a new beginning. John didn't share her sense of enlightenment; he was just there to support his girlfriend. For Vivian, the sunrise meant you had another chance in life, that today could be the first day of the rest of your life. She was a dreamer and desperately wanted to believe in fairy tales, or at least happy endings, all the while being pummeled by life.

After the sun had cleared the horizon, they walked back to John's apartment. His room was on the second floor above a restaurant. They shared a stairwell with his neighbors who always seemed to be fighting. "Come up for breakfast," John said.

"I'm not hungry," Vivian said, "where's your mom?"

"She's probably hung over in her room again, she came home right before you came over."

He quietly opened the door, they left their shoes at the door and tiptoed back to John's eight by ten-foot room, barely big enough for a bed. They sat on the end of the bed facing each other and talked a while about his mother always drinking, his father in prison and their desire to get away from it all.

Vivian didn't know why, but an overwhelming urge to lean in and kiss John overtook her. John was shocked and a little afraid. They had shared a kiss with her before but this one was different. It wasn't just their lips coming together like one would kiss a baby on the head, her tongue invited itself into his mouth and his heart began to beat faster. He knew what sex was, he's seen his mother hang on to his father and his uncle, but it had

never occurred to him that it was something he'd be involved with himself so soon. He had just gotten comfortable holding her hand; this was much bigger. It didn't take long for him to figure out that there was much more to girls as he got his first erection not caused by a morning pee.

For kids to explore themselves wasn't new, but for John, it was a little bit scary. He wondered if he had failed at that too. He'd always been told he was a burden and not worth a shit.

"What are you doing?" he asked while trying to force his erection back down.

She took off her shirt exposing her barely visible breasts, "don't you like me?"

"Of course, I do," he said.

"Then touch me," she grabbed his hand and put it on her chest.

Neither John nor Vivian knew what they were doing, but Vivian was a fast learner and determined to learn as much as she could as fast as she could. The city wasn't going to keep her captive. She couldn't wait to grow up and get out into the world, away from New Orleans.

John nervously and fearfully said, "Quit, my mom will hear us," he quietly argued.

"She wouldn't hear a scream right now. It's ok, relax," and she put her hand down his pants.

John was shaking, partly out of fear of being his first time, and partly because of the uncontrollable feeling he experienced when he lost his functions in her hand.

"It's ok," she consoled him, "we have plenty of time to get this right."

They lay together, arm in arm, face to face. They looked into each other's eyes, he said, "I love you Vivian, I don't always understand you, but I love you."

"I love you too. I'm worried about what Maw-maw said, that you're going to hurt me."



“I will never hurt you; I will always be here for you; I will always love you.”

Those were very comforting words. Vivian’s mother and father were both gone, she had but one friend, and her grandmother was old and didn’t understand her. Before she left, she patted him on his crotch, “You just need a little practice.”

She left him confused and in shock. He wondered if there was something wrong with him. ‘Was she disappointed in his premature experience?’ By eight o’clock Vivian was back home. She left John in a trance on his sweat soaked bed, hypnotized by the sound of the fan on the nightstand, clinking and clanking as the unbalanced blades beat against the wired guard. All John could think about was her smell, her touch, her body, and his poor performance.

Later in the day, Vivian became overwhelmed by a feeling of loss and betrayal. A voice echoed in her mind, “He’s going to hurt you girl.” Maw-maw warned her. In the middle of that hot summer’s day, John’s uncle showed up at John’s house with news, pounding loudly, he rapped on the door.

“Oh my God,” John’s mother belted out, “hold your horses.” She answered the door with her robe half open, exposing herself, “Robert, what are you doing here?” she said while rubbing the sleep out of her eye.

Robert was the arrogant prick brother of John’s father. He took advantage of John’s father and allowed him to take the fall for a crime he committed, landing him behind bars pulling time in Angola State Prison. He had the hots for Louann and secretly despised his uneducated and unworthy brother for having her. With his brother out of the way, Robert could step in. Louann knew he was a scoundrel and a cad, but life had passed her by and maybe Robert could give some of it back. “I’ve got great news; I’ve secured the financing to purchase the Castle Rouge in Mississippi and I want you and the boy to come live with me.”

Robert offered to care for John's mother and him, and that was an offer she couldn't refuse. She was unaware of Robert's role in her husband going to prison, never knowing, or caring the truth, and John never suspected anything sinister. He was twelve and believed what he was told.

The very next morning John waited outside Vivian's home, before she had a chance to wake him. "We're moving to Mississippi," John said.

"I could have guessed," she said heartbroken, "Maw-maw was right, she told me not to get close to you." Vivian aghastly confessed.

"It's not like that. My uncle's taking us out of state, but we will only be a hundred miles away, we can get back together."

Her pubescent hormones were flooding her brain with emotional fire, she had just given herself to him, her first and only love, and in less than twenty-four hours, he was leaving her. Heartache and disappointment couldn't begin to describe the pressure squeezing her heart. She knew of pain and sorrow; she witnessed many clients come into Maw-maw's shop and cry about losing a loved one. Sitting in the back of the room while her grandmother held seances and read people's future gave Vivian a little different perspective on sadness, grief, and loneliness. "I wish I could go with you," she begrudgingly but politely said.

"I wish you could too. Maybe you can, I'll ask my uncle if you can come."

As much begging and even some tears, the answer was no. "You should be lucky that I'm taking you. You can stay if you like, but know that I'm here for your mother, I'll understand if you want to leave."

Being young he knew he hadn't a choice in the matter. He told Vivian, "Uncle Robert and mama told me they couldn't be responsible for you, and you can't come. I promise to call and write, and we'll come up with a plan to get back together."

"Do you promise?" she asked.

“Yes, we’ll be together soon.”

She knew better, it was in the cards. Just as she suspected, the calls and the letters got fewer and far between. She was turning thirteen and already had a broken heart. She felt all alone, a lamb in the forest, but Vivian grew hard and strong on the inside and decided she would never feel that pain again. The more time passed, the more depressed she became.

Even though John’s father was no winner, John saw his uncle in an even lesser light. However, he did enjoy the benefits of having money and learned to hide and control his distain in an effort to gain his trust. John went from a poor child to an affluent teen overnight and he was addicted to the power he received from having money.

In the beginning, John wrote every week, and called a couple times a week. Slowly he decreased how often he called. When she tried to call him, she was consistently told he wasn’t home. After a couple months his letters stopped coming and by six months all communication had been lost. Within a year from John leaving, Vivian’s grandmother died from a stroke in the middle of the night. Vivian returned from school one day to find her sprawled out on her bed, clutching a chicken foot. To this day, she doesn’t know what her grandmother was protecting herself from.

Once again, Vivian was handed down to another guardian. Foster parents came and went, some better than others, many only took children to gain the system and receive funds from the state that they had no intention of fully supporting the child’s needs. That was the case for foster parents two and three.

Vivian spent the first half of her time with foster parents two trying to please them and the second half locking herself in her room at night to keep Mr. Glenn’s hands off of her. It was during her time with the Glenn’s that she completed her transformation from girl to woman and from innocence to victimhood. The first time she was molested, she curled in a ball

and cried all night and went to Mrs. Glenn next morning, after he left for work still crying, “Ms. Betty, Mr. Donny hurt me,” her whimper turned back into sobbing, “I’m bleeding and it hurts.”

Instead of holding and consoling her, much less checking to see if she needed a doctor, or considered calling the police, she slapped her across her face, “Well it damn sure should you little hussy, walking around here half naked all the time, what’d you expect.”

Vivian went from being traumatized to a state of tortuous fear, the whole world was coming down on her.

“You better listen to me you little tramp, don’t you go telling lies about my man. Stay away from him and keep your mouth shut or you’ll find yourself out in that street.”

Vivian was scared, she had nowhere to go, no one to protect her, she didn’t know how to cope with the feeling of being worthless. For the next few months, she didn’t go to school, Mrs. Glenn didn’t notice or care. She’d leave the house in the morning and come back in the afternoons and occasionally wouldn’t come home at all. Being thirteen and forced to fight for her dignity all alone, made her angry and hard until one day she had enough.

The house was a creaky, rundown, two story off of South Claiborne Avenue, and in the middle of the night, Mr. Glenn heard Vivian get out of bed and walk down the hallway toward the bathroom. He was waiting for her outside the bathroom door when she finished. He grabbed her wrist and put his finger to his mouth, “Quit,” he whispered, as he led her back to her room. When they reached the top of stairs, she stopped, causing him to turn toward her. He was getting ready to jerk her arm when she leaned way back away from him, raised her leg, and kicked him square in the chest with the sole of her foot, forcing him over the first step and violently backward down the hard-wooden stairs. By the time he rested at the bottom of the stairs, his head was unnaturally contorted past his right shoulder. She stood at the top of the stairs and spit down at him. He lay dead with a broken neck

in his underwear all night. Mrs. Glenn found him early the next morning. Vivian slept in peace for the first time in a long time. A social worker came later that day to take Vivian back, Mrs. Glenn was in no position or condition to take care of a child.

Another set of foster parents took in Vivian shortly thereafter. She wasn't the sweet innocent girl she once was but tried to be polite. By now she didn't trust anyone except a few girls she met out on the street. Foster parents' number three cared only for the state's welfare payments and could have cared less what Vivian did with her time. The less they heard from her the better. "Children are nothing but trouble," was all she could remember foster mom number three ever saying.

Her new friends were older teenagers already taking advantage of their sexual assets and making a little money here and there from visitors from out of town. Spotting visitors and tourists was easy, they walked around looking at everything, always in small groups and never alone, while the locals looked only to where they were going and hardly ever looked up.

Social workers were required to check in on the children in the foster system, though they were frequently neglectful. Vivian's social worker had been to her house three times and never found her at home. On her fourth visit she came in the middle of the night to find Vivian walking the streets with her friends. That ended her stay at foster parents-number three.

By the time the Baxter's took her in, she had lived a very tumultuous life. She had recently turned fifteen, fully formed, fully indoctrinated in the art of sexual desire. She had run the streets and befriended many young 'working girls,' mostly runaways from dysfunctional homes. Vivian stopped using her given name and simply started calling herself Vee. She liked the sound of it, and it emboldened her to hide behind an alternate personality. A mysterious persona that didn't take shit from anyone. Not only did her name change, but her status also changed. Parents number four were naively generous and

allowed her all the room and privacy she wanted. They knew she had been through a lot and more than anything, knew she needed to feel loved and wanted. The freedom they offered and the care that they gave her, eventually helped her to resemble a family. The Baxter's decided to commit to their convictions and filed the paperwork to adopt her.

Vivian spent much of her teenage years collecting secrets and information on people and used it to manipulate them. She referred to it as her Information Management Business and had amassed a small fortune from a host of victims she cunningly blackmailed. She gathered sensitive information from various school employees, administrators, lunch attendants, especially teachers, and was saving the money in hopes of one day escaping New Orleans. Using secrets to manipulate people became an art form and she became a Rembrandt.

She lived in a larger house now than she was used to, north of the city, but in her mind, she was still too close to the gutter from where she came.

By the time Vivian turned seventeen, she had developed into an incredibly beautiful and seductive young woman, though she wasn't very refined. "Mom," she asked one day, "It's hard to meet a good guy, there's plenty of assholes out there, but how do you find a good one, do you have any advice?" Vivian knew exactly what guys wanted, she just wanted to learn to maximize her control over it.

"Honey, maybe I should take you to the spa and get you some help learning about makeup and taking care of your body. We can practice some social skills while we're out. Being a prude herself, Mrs. Baxter knew a different form of manipulation, a seductive and emotional complex form of influence. She saw herself being a good mother by teaching her daughter the finer art of being a lady, something she herself had always wanted to be. Vivian saw this as an opportunity. She would let Mrs. Baxter play the teenager's mother and advise her on the art of being seductive

without realizing that she was helping her create a first-class femme fatale. Vivian may have sometimes hidden her sexy body beneath baggy clothes to refrain from drawing too much attention to herself or wore something totally inappropriate for a sixteen-year-old at other times, and as time passed, she developed an exceptional taste for style and sensuality.

“First things first,” Mrs. Baxter said, “men will look at your body, they will see the curve of your ass and hips, they’ll notice a firm and slender waste, then they’ll focus on your breasts and by the time they see your face, they will have already had mental sex with you. The key to controlling their attention is in your eyes and your voice. You have to be able to look at them in such a way that they’d be afraid to turn away. So, let start with the face.” Vivian had no clue there were so many tricks and secrets to properly wearing makeup. After an hour of lessons and application, Vivian rose from the table looking like an angel in a sailor’s dream. Her face was clear and perfectly tinted, shades and highlights accentuated her features and for the first time in her life, she looked into the mirror and actually liked what she saw. “Who is this in the mirror?” she inquired. “I’m beautiful, I don’t know myself.”

“You have to learn what your appearance does to other people and make it work to your advantage. When a man looks into your eyes, they should be telling him, I own you, you belong to me. Next,” Mrs. Baxter said, “we relearn how to walk. Dazzle them with your beauty, then hook them with a graceful stride and seductive pose, they’ll come a crawling,” and she demonstrated with a simple pass. “One foot directly in front of the other, evenly spaced and perfectly timed, your hips swaying side to side but not dramatically, head up and back straight, if you are graceful, no man could deny your attention. It helps to walk with a steady cadence, slow and deliberate, walk to a rhythm only you can hear.” As she taught Vivian her secrets, it then dawned on Mrs. Baxter; she was transforming into a sexy woman right in front of

her, and much faster than she'd expected. "Listen honey, you're only sixteen, there are many people out there waiting to take advantage of you, never ever go anywhere without a backup plan or friends."

They left the spa and walked around Edgewater Mall for a while. Ms. Baxter told Vivian, "Go ask that guy for a light," and gave her a cigarette, "with the fewest amount of words. I'll give you a clue, the least amount of words you have to use, the more seductive you will become."

She took the cigarette and stepped toward the young man slowly, but with purpose. The boy saw her coming from the corner of his eye. 'Catch their attention subtly and hold it firmly,' she remembered Ms. Baxter saying. He turned in time to see her just a few steps away. She tilted her head slightly, raised her eyes to his, and slowly put the cigarette to her recently painted lips. She stared into his eyes, he hadn't a chance. One gaze into her hypnotic and seductive eyes told him everything, he pulled out a lighter, lit her cigarette, she blew a little smoke with a kiss back at him and his jaw dropped. She walked back to Ms. Baxter with a huge smile on her face as to say, "How was that?"

Ms. Baxter was impressed. "Honey, you didn't have to say a word, did you?" Back when I was young, a girl as good with men as you, could have made a killing out of no-good cheating husbands," she spoke with experience. Speaking from experience, which was the trigger Vivian needed. The key to getting everything she wants lies with getting even in the world.

Vivian spent much of her time at college honing her seductive talents. Every opportunity to influence young men was met with enthusiasm. Young ladies were not immune to her charm either, envy was a powerful tool and all the girls wanted to be like her. She learned to manipulate people through the dark fears and pleasures of the soul, and in her desire to control people and situations, no depth was too deep to dive. She had three hard



years on the streets of New Orleans to make up for and broken dreams and promises to reconcile.

During Vivian's senior year, she set in motion the events that would take her out of New Orleans once and for all. Vivian met Blake at the Loyola's 1995 graduation celebration. He was one year ahead of her and graduating with honors. She paid close attention to the society pages and knew where all the gatherings and events were being held. She simply showed up at events and made herself at home. Without invitation, she could walk up at any gathering and find the right person to charm. It was a gift; she had never been turned away.

Blake wanted to get into politics, Vivian knew someone like him would surely pay a price, his integrity was for sale, she just needed to find out what his limits were. "Hi," she boldly addressed herself, "Vee's the name," as she handed him her hand, tilted her hips, and cocked her head all in one graceful motion. She watched his eye go from her face to her hand then back to her face. She smiled devilishly, "Bonjour."

Her outward personality and charm captivated him, as it did everyone, "Blake, Blake Kelly," he held her hand. His mind was racing, he couldn't think. 'Do I know you?' then concluded there was no way he could've forgotten that beautiful face. 'Who is this gorgeous creature?' She was all he could focus on.

"Are you here with someone?" he asked.

She had been practicing a Georgia accent in an effort to free herself from the impoverished feelings of home, but an occasional French accent slipped past her lips. "I wasn't when I arrived," she said. Then with a subtle turn of her face and her eyes sweeping back to him, said, "You look like a bourbon drinker, do you want to get a drink."

She nailed him, "You must be so proud of yourself?" referring to graduation. "The whole world is now at your disposal, what are you going to do with it?" She was a thinker; she wasn't afraid or impressed. She knew she was the prettiest woman in the

room and Blake felt himself becoming more obsessed with her by the minute. If she asked him to walk blindfolded across a busy city street, he wouldn't have thought twice. "Where did you come from? Are you an angel from heaven?"

"If anything," she laughed, "more like a devil," she smiled at him seductively and subjectively; it was hook, line, and sinker, under her spell.

"What's your surname Vee?"

"No darling, it's just Vee. Now, how about that drink?"

'What a night,' Blake thought, 'she was amazing.' She stole every minute of his attention for the duration of the evening. "Vee, I have to know, where did you come from? A few hours ago, I didn't know you, now I feel like I've known you all my life."

"Do you really want to know where I came from, or would you rather know where I'm going? You're poly-sci, right? There's opportunity across the river. Spend the next couple days researching the Castle Rouge in Mississippi, then let me know if you'd like to hob knob with the A-listers on the coast."

Blake wasn't expecting that. He'd been so captivated by her charm he failed to see that she might have an agenda. He had just graduated and already had a lead into his new life and career. He met an amazingly beautiful woman and felt the world was at his feet. His successful father afforded him many opportunities most people don't get, and that thought was salt in a wound.

He agreed to take a trip to the casino with her. He was under the impression that she was affiliated with the casino or in some way had influence. 'A meet and greet with all the elites on the coast,' he thought, but all Vivian knew about Castle Rouge was what she read in travel magazines and a couple articles in the paper. Her goal was to simply get herself invited, that was Blake's purpose.

Get into John's head and make him pay emotionally for jilting her and have a little fun along the way was her plan.

Promises aren't promises if they're not kept. Blake was just a tool; one that she would use with precision, she had John and Robert in her cross hairs.

After meeting a girl that worked at Castle Rouge, Vivian managed to get Robert's personal phone number. She Placed a call to Robert and said she was representing a future congressman from Louisiana, Blake Kelly. "He'll be visiting the coast to get away from the campaign trail for a couple days and would like to visit your casino but has concerns over security. Sometimes, campaigns get complicated you know," she spoke with a slight accent.

"We're very well protected here; I encourage him to come."

"That would be wonderful, perhaps we could share a moment over a drink."

"Yes, perhaps. I'm always here, Ask for Robert."

## Chapter Two

Blake didn't know of Robert Strahan or the Castle Rouge. His family mainly stayed close to home in Louisiana. It's been nearly twelve ten years since John saw Vivian. She was sure John wouldn't remember her and equally sure she wouldn't forget him. She wasn't a little girl anymore, she was a full-sized beautiful woman who carried herself extremely well, far from the awkward movements of her youth, the last time he saw her she was a scared and skinny girl with pig tales.

The valet took Blake's Mercedes while the usher opened the casino's door for them. They entered boldly and were met by Robert Strahan himself. "Mr. Kelly, I'm pleased you came to visit our fine resort. My name is Robert Strahan, owner, and manager of Castle Rouge, you must join us for dinner?" he asked.

"Pardon me, how do you know me?" Blake asked, confused.

"Your assistant placed a reservation for you, you are the next congressman for Louisiana, aren't you? We like to keep in touch with our neighbors and friends from the other side of the river you know." Robert said.

"Oh, yeah," looking suspiciously at Vivian. "May I introduce my friend and date, Miss Vee." Then turned to Vivian, "Vee, apparently my assistant made arrangements for us to have dinner with Mr. Robert Strahan," not aware that it was her.

The Castle Rouge houses the finest and most expensive chaperones on the coast. To be invited as the guest of the owner was more than an honor, it was acknowledgement. Blake would learn a lot about acknowledgement over the course of the evening. His biggest acknowledgement would be conceding emotional defeat to Vivian.

Robert said, "Mademoiselle," as he took and kissed the back of her hand. "How did Mr. Kelly get you on his arm?"

It was awkward for Blake, that Robert would hit on his date right in front of him, but Blake played along to see how things would unfold. Robert gave him a bone with the reference to being future congressman, his ego was now vulnerable and open to suggestion.

Vivian heard and felt the misogynous tone in Robert's voice, but there was a confidence in her knowledge of the outcome that allowed her to ignore his possessive assumptions and relish in the thought that he would soon pay that check that he's been writing all his life.

She then took Robert's hand and pulled it in toward her, opening his palm she looked down at it and whispered, "How charming, Mr. Strahan, tell me," she leaned in a little closer, "what does it take them," referring to all the young chaperones all around the room, "to be on your arm?"

Robert never saw that coming, overwhelmed with intrigue, but cautious in his reply, he said, "But, Ms. Vee, one smile from that beautiful face is all."

She took his arm for him to escort her in, and said, "I could use a bourbon, easy on the ice."

He turned to look at Blake, "Son, you've got your hands full with this one."

Vivian looked back, "Come darling, mama's going to get loose. Right about then, John walked out from between a row of slot machines just inside the door. The casino was a barge on the Tchoutacabouffa River and Castle Rouge was firmly on the banks. The two were connected at the dock that separated the Riverboat Gambling and a Playboy Mansion. Curious what gorgeous beauty would wrap herself around his creepy ass uncle, he walked up and introduced himself. Robert didn't let John get too involved with the casino but gave him much leeway with regard to the Mansion. "Welcome to the Castle," John said as he reached to shake Blakes hand, all the while looking at Vivian. He

then turned his attention to Vivian, and took her hand, “John, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“And who are you, Mr. John?”

“I’m sorry, Robert’s my uncle, he’s pretty important around here you know.”

Robert could hear his condescending tone and closed his eyes in shame for a second.

“I feel like I know you,” he admitted.

“I think you tell all the girls that,” she said accentuating a Georgia accent.

He looked back at her with a question on his face, “No, really, there’s something about you.” She smiled, then he smiled. “Follow me, our table is upstairs.”

Robert looked on at his nephew’s awkward approach and was hesitant to leave her in his company, but he was a busy man.

“Blake,” Robert said, “we’ve decided to donate to your election, but you’ll need to decide whether to donate a little time to our needs in return.” Blake knew this was a tit for tat, quid pro quo arrangement but thought to hear them out just the same. “Don’t worry,” Robert said, “not all political favors are illegal.”

“What do you want in return?”

“Let’s talk about that tomorrow, tonight, let us relax and enjoy the evening. John can talk to you tomorrow about all that, he’ll speak for me, but tonight we enjoy the best life has to offer.” Something Blake didn’t realize was how expensive life was with regards to something greater than money.

After dinner, Robert excused himself to entertain other guests and let John entertain Blake and Vivian. They continued their conversation on the balcony of the lavish lifestyle the Castle Rouge offered. John was openly proud to show off his fortunate lifestyle, bragging and boasting of the many conquests with the ladies.

“Vivian,” Blake asked, beginning to feel a little like a fifth wheel, “What else had my assistant fail to tell us?” They looked

over the railing to the casino floor. Vivian spotted the police commissioner with a woman, probably his spouse, going into one of the secured poker rooms.

“John darling,” she said, “Is that the Biloxi Police Commissioner over there, he looks like he’s at home.”

“Why do you say?” John asked.

“He’s here socially, there’s no other way to look at it, you’re greasing the Comish.”

John didn’t want to bring attention to such observances and tried to downplay it. Vivian looked around the room, saw cameras throughout the casino and the mansion and realized a gold mine when she saw one. With all this recording technology, she could lure in many a prey. Unsuspecting businessmen cheating on their wives, political secrets whispered in innocent ears cuddled up to girls half their age. This was where she thought she was meant to be, in the heart of human degradation, where souls are bought and sold, and dreams are crushed like a child with no family.

John had plans for the mansion when his uncle dies. His visions of grandeur were getting stronger by the day and his patience was feeling short. His uncle garnished so many enemies, it would certainly be a difficult investigation had something were to happen to him. John’s plans and desires would go unfulfilled while Robert was still alive. Little did Robert know that the wheels were already in motion. John had already made a deal with his uncle’s lawyer to ensure the inheritance was in place. Robert Strahan was an ass, and no one would miss him when he was gone. John would finally have revenge on his uncle for putting his father in jail and have the fortune and future he’d always dreamt of.

As the evening advanced, and the alcohol kicked in, Blake saw less and less of Vivian. Before he knew it, he was all alone. His vision was a little blurred by now from drinking too much and looked around to find a place to sit. A young woman approached

him, in her mid-twenties, wearing a long and glamorous gown split down the middle, barely exposing her silky-smooth thighs and undergarments as she took each step. “You look like a seat will do you good mister Kelly,” and escorted him to a room off the east wing’s corridor. She sat him down on the end of a bed and asked if he needed to rest. He was a little disoriented, too much to drink, but he knew he was in a vulnerable position. Before his mind wandered further, he was out cold.

He wouldn’t find out about the photographs that were taken that night till he was a sitting congressman and Robert needed a favor. Meanwhile, Vivian had been entertaining John in the grand room at the front of the mansion. She canvassed the huge room imagining it was hers. She’d change the drapes and remove the chandelier. She’d open it up even more and turn the first floor into ball room.

“So, your uncle owns this place?” she said approvingly.

“Yeah, one day it will be all mine.”

“Well, when it is, give me a call, I can turn this place into a gold mine.”

John was slowly being drawn into her spell. Every word she spoke lured him closer. Her eyes said, ‘take me’ while her lips said wait.

“What do you mean gold mine?” he asked, “This place brings in tens of thousands every day.

She put her hand out and passed it from one side of the room to the other. Each of them has a story to tell, what do you think their secrets are worth?”

He had no way of knowing that’s what she was doing with Blake but the fact that she could think like that excited him, almost as much as her beauty. He was confused as to what a good response to her statement should be. She was now in his head and pulling strings. “All right then, I’m listening, what do you have in mind?”



“Now darling, there’s plenty of time for planning and playing, you don’t own this place yet.” She reached in her hand purse and pulled out a small perfume bottle, sprayed it once out in front of her and walked through the mist. “Come now, dance with me, show me there’s some moves under that suit.” She led him out to the middle of the floor. People were just standing around having conversations while soft music in the background created the atmosphere. He never noticed that they were the only one dancing. Everyone else noticed and gave them room. She had John wrapped up tight by now.

Her plan was to plant a seed and let it grow. She was surprised how easy it was and how quickly it happened. She figured it would take a week or so to really sink in, but she saw John give a caterer a nod out of the corner of her eye, turned in time to see the caterer’s face. She instinctively knew they had a conspiracy a foot. She’d seen the caterer’s picture in the newspaper a few months back and knew he was a petty criminal who got off on a technicality after a botched break-in. “Hold it,” Vivian said.

“Excuse me?” John said.

“If you have that man doing something for you, you should stop him. He’s the wrong man for the job.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s nothing but trouble, if you need someone for a dirty job, get someone with nothing to lose.”

“There’s no way she knows what’s going on, ‘is there?’ “What makes you say that?” he asked her.

“I saw that he understood your signal, which means you have something going on. I believe I can advise you better.”

John looked at her impressed and waved his guy off. “Ok, tell me more,” John said. He paid close attention to every word she said. The more she talked, the closer he got, “Closer,” she whispered, “come closer, darling, when you get your empire, call

me, I can make you an emperor.” Their faces were mere inches away from each other, she blew gently on his lips.”

“We should discuss this more up in my room, I’ll have some champagne brought up,” he said excitedly.

“Mr. Strahan, I’m a different type of working girl, I determine my pleasures and these treasures come with a price you can’t yet afford.” She smiled at him teasingly, yet not so brazen to stop his advances. “You and I have plenty of time to work out an arrangement,” and kissed him softly on his cheek. “I have a meeting in New Orleans in the morning and must go, can you arrange transportation for Mr. Kelly, he’s undoubtedly found himself at your mercy.”

John suspected she was being humorously sarcastic, ‘she’s a clever fox,’ he thought, ‘does she really know what’s going on?’ He shook it off as a coincidence and politely invited her back at her convenience and gave her his personal card. “The next time we meet,” he paused, “I just may have a proposition for you.”

“Very well, Mr. John Strahan, I’ll be looking forward to meeting you again.” Her smile was inviting but coupled with her big brown eyes piercing into his soul, was irresistible. He couldn’t help himself, there was something about her he had to know, something he had to have.

“Can I offer you a ride?”

“No, I have Mr. Kelly’s car; he’ll need a ride when he wakes, though.” She put her hand out to him for a gentleman’s kiss goodbye, and said, “Au Revoir, Monsieur Strahan.”

“So, you speak French,” he said.

“Studying, perhaps I’ll be more fluent the next time we meet, I must be going,” she took her hand back and began to walk toward the mansion’s main entrance.

John followed behind and when they got to the door, he asked a valet, “Mr. Kelly’s car for the lady, please.” The valet

hurried off to get the car. John turned back around, “Do you have a number, how can I get in touch with you?”

She replied, “I’ll call you in a couple days. Until then, don’t do anything unwise.”

“Whatever do you mean?” he asked.

Her car arrived, she got in, “your uncle,” she said, and gave him a wink before driving off.

John turned to the valet, who he didn’t know from Adam, “Wow, what a woman.” The valet hadn’t a clue what he was talking about but shook his head in agreement anyway.

Blake returned home the next morning to find his car keys and note from Vivian in his mailbox, “Darling, a man that doesn’t know who he sleeps with is no man that can be trusted.” Her note referenced his inability to remember what he did or how he found himself naked in a room at the mansion, which she arranged with a couple girls back at the mansion for future dealings with him.

The next checkmark on her plan was to find a stooge to take the fall and give John his empire. She went back to her roots in the French Quarter, where there were many in dire consequence. Henri was in his early fifties with cancer and no insurance. His wife and three kids would soon have nothing. Vivian remembered everything about her past and knew who had the heart and nerve to pull a trigger. “Mr. Henri, how’s the cancer?”

“Oh, Ms. Vivian, how you been girl?” he wheezed as he spoke with his broken Cajun accent. “Momma’s going to be homeless soon.”

“Would you like to leave her ten thousand dollars?” Vivian showed strong compassion in her face and the security that ten thousand dollars could do for his family, had his full attention.

“What you say?”

“Would you be willing to let the state of Louisiana care for you during your final days for your family to be taken care of? If you’re willing to take a bad man’s life, your family could be

taken care of. Someone's going to get paid, it might as well be you."

Henri didn't see that coming. "You all grown up girl, why you want to take someone out?"

"For money, for power, for revenge, does it really matter?"

"I suppose not, well, I guess I'm your man."

While hanging around the old neighborhood, she remembered the ridicule of the other kids. She also remembered the group that finally accepted her and help protect her after Maw-maw died. A small handful of runaway girls turned street walkers, helped protect her from the dangers of being a girl on the streets, down in the quarter. They all had their own hard luck stories of abusive families. Vivian had a strong connection to them and felt obligated to help them.

"Sasha, crazy girl," she hollered out the car window. Standing on the corner, Sasha squinted to see Vivian behind the wheel of the Porsche she borrowed from a professor at Loyola.

"Is that you, Vee?"

"In the flesh."

"What are you doing back here?" Sasha was pleasantly surprised.

"I come to see my girls. I'm working a thing in Mississippi and if it pans out, I want to get all my best girls to come live with me in a mansion."

"You're so funny," Sasha laughed.

"No, seriously, I got something going on that will change all our lives. I can get you out of here and give you the world girl."

"Baby, you can do that?"

"How would you like to make a thousand dollars in one night and be treated like a lady?"

"Sugar, sign me up. Who else did you talked to?"

“You’re first, I don’t have time right now, but I want you to talk with Casey, Candy, Tanya, and Lydia, see if all ya’ll want to get out of this shit hole.” She gave Sasha her number and a hug. “Call me, I’m serious, I’ll know in a couple days,” she said before leaving to go back to the school. She hadn’t needed to go to class for the last six months, she was guaranteed to graduate. Her professor wouldn’t dream of screwing up his tenure by letting photographs of him and an underaged student surface.

Vivian’s next step was to use John’s disdain for Robert and encourage him to commit to her plan to use Henri to solve his problem. Three days after offering Blake up to the Castle Rouge den of deceit, Vivian called John and left a message on his machine, “Darling, it’s Vee, I am free to call on you anytime, give me a call 504-772-1332.”

John screened all his calls through voicemail. He called her right back, “Vee, I am so pleased you called.”

“Johnny, I’m going to start calling you Johnny, I have an answer to your problems, invite me over, let’s talk.”

“Of course,” John said excitedly.

“Send me a ride, I’ll be waiting at the small craft harbor in Biloxi.”

“What are you doing down there, I thought you were back in New Orleans?”

“I’m a working girl, darling, I have things going on. You better hurry, I’m on my second drink, and you know how I like my bourbon.”

Within twenty minutes, a black Cadillac pulled into the parking lot in front of the restaurant, John got out of the passenger side, and his driver parked the car. He stepped inside and saw Vivian at a window table looking out over the harbor. He walked slowly but straight for her table. She swiveled in her chair and offered her hand as she gave him an inviting smile, and a wink. John did as he was expected and took her hand to kiss it.

“I’m having a drink; will you join me?” she asked.

“John got the bartender’s attention and motioned toward her table. A waitress made her way to him at her table. He sat across from Vivian, “Jack Daniels straight please.”

She wasted no time after the waitress left, “Do you want your uncle gone?”

“That’s pretty blunt, Vee, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“It’s efficiency darling. Do you want to hear a story about a man that inherited millions after his uncle was taken from this cruel world?”

“I’ve heard about a story like that, what’s your version?”

“I heard of a man who had nothing to lose. He was in a bad way with his health and could be easily persuaded to do just about anything to help his family while he still had time left above ground. He pulled a John Wilkes Booth on the uncle and the nephew inherited his wealth. Is that the story you heard?”

“Yeah, that’s highly illegal.”

“So is blackmail and extortion, and Robert’s been doing that for quite a while now, hasn’t he? I’m sure he’s taught you a few things. I can help you get to that next level.”

“I have a man that is willing to take this secret to his grave, which is coming sooner than he expected, in exchange for giving his family a little security. Afterward, he would claim that Robert hired him as a server and shortchanged him on his salary and he just snapped. You would just have to provide his wife ten thousand dollars and your problem is solved.”

“You really do know me,” he laughed. “I am blown away that you see things the way I do. Yes, I can come up with ten thousand dollars.”

“There’s one more thing, darling.”

“What’s that?”

“Darling, the ten thousand dollars is his price, my price is a job. Not just any job, a position of authority and responsibility. I want to manage your girls, all of them.”

“That means you’ll be around here all the time,” he smiled, “Ok, I’ll give you, my girls.”

The waiter brought John his drink and before long they headed back to the mansion.

Vivian looked around identifying blind spots and camera angles as she pretended to admire its beauty. “Are you ready for me to start?” she asked.

“Sure,” John said, “I’ll introduce you.” They walked through the kitchen to the back of the mansion, entered the recreation room, walked around a pool table to a bar hidden away in the back of the room where the girls from day shift were hanging out in swimsuits, shorts or something sexy. “Girls, you no longer work for Ms. Felder,” John announced, “she’s being promoted, you now work for my new house manager Ms. Vee.”

Everyone stopped, he had never addressed them before in a group. “Yes, my name is Vee, and we are going to have so much fun and make so much money,” stopping only to look around at everyone. Her words were powerfully optimistic, how could they not feel inspired? Besides, Ms. Felder was a nag. “We’ll have plenty of time to talk, I want to chat with each of you within the next few days but until then, I want you to know that your life is fixing to get better.”

Vivian’s personality was captivating, all the girls couldn’t wait to find out more about her. She walked on John’s arm like a southern lady and the girls were in awe at her ability to control him. John had always treated and talked to them insignificantly and Ms. Felder demanded they act as privileged guests around the Strahan’s, in servitude for their generosity.

They walked back out toward the main lobby. The entrance to the dock and casino was to the right and to the left, staircase leading to a grand room on the main floor of the mansion. From the grand room were two staircases, one on each side of the room that spiraled to a balcony looking over the grand room. On the second floor, double rooms and suites were to the

left, single rooms to the right and conference rooms and office spaces lined a long corridor in the middle leading straight back to the courtyard. Castle Rouge was originally built as a hotel but being so far off the beaten path, killed the first owner's dream of success. Vivian saw the mansion as a floor plan, compartmentalized areas that would be zoned for surveillance. "I'll need a budget darling if I'm going to bring in bigger fish."

"What do you have in mind?"

"New carpet, new drapes, better lighting, and shiny things. I need to evaluate each of the girls and that may require additional salary, adding girls, or letting some go. Our girls are going to be professional, and they will put us on the map. I plan on surrounding you with beautiful women."

"I am surrounded by beautiful women," he said.

"But are they loyal, do they take care of you?" she played into his sexual desires.

"What kind of budget do you need?"

"About forty thousand dollars should cover the upgrades."

John thought about it, shaking his head up and down. His uncle spent twice that much for one statue and ten times as much for a painting. "I'll get my uncle's lawyer to set you up with a credit card and bank account."

She continued holding his arm and turned toward him, "We're bonding, aren't we?"

"Yes, I suppose we are." He smiled.

"Ok," she looked around to make sure no one could hear, "make reservations for the opera in New Orleans. That will be our alibi. During the opera, I'll have someone make your problems go away." This would be her moment of truth. If he makes the reservation, the plan goes forward.

John didn't hesitate, he pulled out his phone and called Ms. Felder, "Please make reservation for the opera for me and a guest and call me back. A moment later his phone rang, "Saenger



Theater, New Orleans, tomorrow evening at eight o'clock good enough?"

Vivian took out her phone and dialed a number, watching John's eyes, she spoke into the phone, "c'est bien," was all she said then hung up.

"Now, where were we," she reminded him, "You are well on your way Johnny Strahan, you can almost afford me now," teasing him, then laughed. "Let's celebrate, you can show me your room now." Never missing a chance for a drink, she passed by the bar and poured herself a drink, with one ice cube. "Do you want one darling?"

"Thank you," he said.

John was nervous with anticipation and the unknown. Vivian was mysterious and exciting, and he could not help letting her be in charge.

She saw his collection of jazz and blues vinyl records and put on a Billie Holiday album. As 'I'll be seeing you' started to play, John was amazed she handled that old stereo and phonograph so gracefully. John loved his jazz and blues, the only thing good he took out of New Orleans. Then in the best of terms, she rocked his boat. She was everything wild in bed that he imagined and more. Everything about her made his head explode. She was mysterious, had a smoking fine body, smart, funny, and beautiful. John sat back on four pillows, feeling like he owned the world. He could not think straight for twenty minutes. She used him as a sexual slave, and he was ok with it. "Honey, I'm going to need a wardrobe, too. Where did Ms. Felder shop? Because I don't want to go there." With her business in bed done, she was ready to get back to work. "Maybe you can show me my room now?"

"Ok, how about I show you the room layout and let you choose your own room?"

"That would be wonderful, darling."

He walked with her downstairs to a hallway behind the reading room, to a small room where they kept the guest register. The room was barely ten by ten with nothing in it but a table. On the table was a large leather-bound book containing the guest register and floor plans. She opened it up to the second floor and identified a large room at the end of the west hallway. She took both keys to the room from its corresponding wall hook and asked, "Who do I need to notify in order to have a meeting with the house staff in the morning?"

"I'll have Ms. Felder's assistant come up to your room," John said. "I'll find her after I show you to your room."

"No need darling, I can find my way around. I'm going to need to know where things are anyway."

In her imagination, she saw that room being a secret monitoring center, apart from the normal surveillance, where she could coordinate hidden camera footage. The register was kept back there, out of sight, because even the names of the people who've stayed the night in the mansion was a secret. She added the little room to her list of upgrades.

First things first, she was tired and ready to settle in for the evening. Tomorrow, she planned on meeting with the staff then shop for a wardrobe to include a nice evening gown for the theater, then called Henri to give him his instructions.

Meanwhile back down in the casino, Robert got word that John let Ms. Felder go. Robert didn't let John get too involved with the casino but gave him a lot of control over the affairs of the mansion. His delegation wasn't for his faith in John as much as it was that he needed the help. The casino and restaurant were all Robert could handle on his own. Even though he let John run the mansion, he was unhappy with his decision to let Ms. Felder go. John lied to the other girls that she was promoted in hopes that they would accept her absence more favorably and after a couple weeks would forget about her altogether.

"I hired Gladys, you can't fire her," Robert chastised him.

“Uncle please, not in front of the help,” he said while nodding his head toward an adjacent door. On the other side of the door, he told him, “I didn’t fire her.”

“She said you let her go.”

“I was reassigning her to take over the marketing.”

“Wasn’t she doing a good job?”

“I love Ms. Felder, she’s a wonderful lady, I just thought she could do so much more for us with her expertise with social gatherings and advertisement as the Director of Sales and Marketing. It’s a promotion.

“Did you fail to tell her that? Or perhaps, you’re full of shit and you’re trying to cover your tracks?”

“I feel terrible if I didn’t explain it to her right, I’ll find her and clarify everything. I would hope that she would welcome a promotion.”

“Do it quick son, the clock is ticking and she’s in tears. What are you going to do about her house management?”

John knew he had to be careful explaining to Vee that last time he got hooked on a girl, she robbed him blind. “Do you recall the young lady that accompanied Blake Kelly here the other day?”

“Beautiful and charming, yes I do.”

“She’s working on a business degree at Loyola and has ideas that can generate revenue for the mansion rather than being the big negative on the old balance sheet.”

“Really, like what?”

“Can we let her settle in, and I’ll have her give you a presentation in a couple days. I’ll just screw up her thoughts and words if I try to explain.”

“No doubt. Ok, but you go find Ms. Felder and make things right.”

“Yes sir.”

John left, irritated on the inside, but calm on the outside, thinking to himself that he was not going to have to put up with him very much longer.

Vivian unpacked her small handbag that contained her makeup, toothbrush, a spare bra, stockings, panties, deodorant, and perfume, all the essentials. She laid her pants suit over the back of a chair and brushed away the day's wrinkles. This would be the last time she would have to wear it, tomorrow she planned on dropping a lot of money on a new wardrobe. On the end table next to the chair was a house phone. She picked it up expecting to hear a dial tone but instead, a girl answered on the other end, "Yes ma'am, how may I be of service?"

"Sweetheart, what's your name?"

"Tiffany, ma'am."

"Tiffany, darling, do you have any bourbon?"

"Yes ma'am, I can bring you a bottle, there should be some glasses on a table next to the loo."

"Thank you, Tiffany."

Shortly after hanging up, a knock came to the door. Vivian opened the door boldly without looking through the peep hole wearing nothing but her panties and bra. Ms. Felder's former assistant stood shocked, not expecting her to answer the door undressed and unabashed. "Come in," Vivian said, "are you the one that'll get the word out for a meeting tomorrow?"

"Yes ma'am, my name is Sadie, Mr. John said that I work for you now."

"That's wonderful, Sadie. How old are you?"

Sadie was a little nervous, Vivian was straight forward and unashamed, she held a conversation with her in her underwear as if it were normal, Sadie couldn't have done that. "I'm twenty-five."

"I'm not an old lady, as you can tell, I know you're used to Ms. Felder and her more laid-back approach, but as of right now, we're kicking it up a notch. You're actually older than I am

but I'm not going to hold it against you, we're going to get along fine. In fact, all the girls here are going to be doing better than they ever had before, and we're going to have a lot of fun doing it."

Vivian was very upbeat, which calmed Sadie's nerves.

"Don't mind me, I was just getting ready for a nightcap and bed." No sooner did she say that Tiffany showed up at the open door with a bottle in her hand. "Speaking of the devil, here it is. Come in, come in, shut the door, and have a drink."

"We're not supposed to drink while we work," Tiffany said.

"You can now, you work for me."

Sadie and Tiffany looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and grabbed a glass off the table. "Do you ladies do tricks?"

Sadie said, "Ms. Vee, I must say, you are very straight forward, it's a little hard to answer."

"I know what the problem is, it's how I'm dressed, isn't it?"

Tiffany nodded with an awkward smile.

"Ok, I'll tell you what, take a big sip," she did. "Me being the only one in her underwear is awkward, right?"

They nodded.

"The answer to this dilemma is for you to strip down to your underwear so I don't have to be the only one." They were not expecting that. "Look girls, you're going to have to lighten up a bit. We're beautiful women surrounded by a world of men who want nothing more than to take advantage of us. We're not going to let that happen. It'll be us taking advantage of them for a change. Don't worry, I'm not going to rape you. We're just girls getting to know each other. So, do you girls do tricks?"

"No ma'am, but some of the girls do," Tiffany said.

"Let me help you," Vivian slowly started unbuttoning Tiffany's blouse. "How old are you?"

“Nineteen,” she said.

“Good, you stay away from the men for a while, watch me handle them and learn. How about you Sadie?”

“I just do admin stuff, I don’t really associate with the other girls except for what Ms. Felder had me do.”

“Do you need help with your top?”

“Ma’am, I’m not wearing a bra.”

“OK, first off, it’s nice that you’re all polite, but for Christ’s sake, quit calling me ma’am. Call me Vee. Second, Sadie’s not wearing a bra, therefore, no bras,” and she took her bra off and threw it on the chair with her suit, then poured herself another drink and sat cross legged on the bed. It was extremely uncomfortable for Tiffany and Sadie, not that they were ashamed of their bodies or intimidated by hers, hanging around naked with strangers just seemed too weird, but after a couple drinks, they were laughing and joking, telling stories as their inhibitions faded.

“Now, that wasn’t so bad, was it? Vivian asked. While the other girls are wondering what’s going on, you’ll have the confidence to help them accept my leadership, now that we’ve partied naked together like sisters, right?”

“I’m going to be in trouble when I get back down to the kitchen,” Tiffany said.

“Tell them to talk with me,” she kissed her on the forehead, “Ok girls, I got to catch some z’s. Have all the girls meet in the main lobby at six and bring me a milk carton or box to stand on.”

Sadie said, “I don’t think these girls have woken up before nine since I’ve been here.”

“Perfect, six o’clock it is,” Vee said.

She went over her plan in her mind, checking off each step. She needed her financial support next and a Joint account with John would make it easy for him to deposit funds and her to withdraw them. Not only would the account serve the house management, but it would also serve as part of her scheme.

Knowing John didn't remember her, made her game so much sweeter. In addition to his bankroll, the ill-gotten money she planned to bring in was going to end up being a golden egg for her and a golden spike for him.

Her staff meeting in the morning was critical, she was looking for a team of loyal girls, to her and themselves. Vivian was always an early riser and rising early often reminded her of the sunrises and John's broken promises years ago.

She then thought of shopping for a wardrobe, then Henri's part in the plan, and finally phase two, collecting blackmail accounts before finally drifting off to sleep. Vivian slept hard in the darkest part of the night and woke up without an alarm at four forty-five.

She took a nice long hot shower and stepped out into the air-conditioned room which helped wake her up. She laid a towel in a chair and sat naked in front of the vanity mirror and put on her make up. All the while building up the character she was to portray. In her teens, she practiced looking into a mirror for hours working on the perfect expressions to be used at the right times.

## Chapter Three

“Good morning, everyone, thanks for starting our first day together with enthusiasm. Allow me to introduce myself and state that exciting things are coming our way. We’re going to enjoy the benefits of being the grandest party on the gulf coast. We will become the place everyone wants to come, and you,” she paused, “are going to be an amazing part of it.” My name is Vee. My official title is House Manager, my purpose here is to make each of you successful and Castle Rouge a lot of money. Mr. Strahan has given me much latitude when it comes to managing you girls, and I have already seen promise.”

She gave them a moment to reflect on her opening remarks then, “Our new management is looking to expand, there’s many opportunities for each of you to make a real contribution to Castle Rouge’s success. There is far too much life out there to be sleeping your life away, so we’re getting an early start on a chance of a lifetime.” She realized her oration had turned into a speech, so she slowed her presentation, increased her Georgia accent just enough for it to be cute and laid out her charm. “We have great plans for the mansion and great plans for you. I want to sit with each of you in the near future and discuss opportunity, freedom, success.”

She paused for a moment to look around for the box to stand on. She spotted it off to the side and stepped up, “Can everyone hear me?” she spoke clearly but not loudly. “Can I have all the girls in the service industry on the left, chaperones to the right and anyone who fancies themselves in management in the middle.” Once she had their attention, “Castle Rouge has been financially strapped and a liability to the casino, we’re going to change that and transform it into a profitable nightclub, but not just a nightclub, a membership club. “We will soon be the most profitable resort on the coast. We are going to be the go-to place for anybody that’s anybody. There will be stars and superstars



and lots of money. My personal goal is to at least double the money you are making now.” She gave them another moment to think about their income, “Now, who wants to have fun, who wants to make money?” For so many of the girls who felt used in their lives, suddenly felt they had someone looking after them. She gave them quite a pep talk.

The group in front of her was the one she had most concern about because they would be the ones with the highest degree of descent. She had to have full support from the people she put in charge, some of them may not make the cut. She talked with the service people first so they could get back to work, “No one appreciates the honorable and selfless work you do more than someone whose lived it. You have my full support. We’re going to make new schedules and hire more people so you can enjoy a little more time off. I want everyone to be salaried, from here on out, Castle Rouge is paying for your time off.”

She let the management group return to their scheduled days next with a task to come up with three ideas to make Castle Rouge a better place to work and live.

Next was the heart and soul of her plan. She had already decided she was bringing in some of her home girls from the quarter but and hoped she could get at least half of the chaperones already there to become players. She only gave herself a few hours to interview them all, so she’d still have time to go shopping, for at least a gown to wear to the theater.

As she interviewed the girls, she dug deep into their psyche, played on their fears of sexual and emotional abuse, gave them hope for the future and courage to face what may come. Girls that had a hard home were more determined to make things right. Vivian asked Sadie, “Darling, will you schedule each of the girls a half hour and send them to my room for a private interview.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What did I say about ma’am. Ma’am sounds old, if you must address me by anything other than my name, you can use, Madame, it sounds more formal and respectful, but I wish you’d simply call me Vee.”

At seven o’clock her first girl showed up. “Come in, have a seat,” she pointed to one of two chairs that sat across from one another in the middle of the room. A small table next to each of the chairs had a bottle of water and a tumbler with some Makers Mark bourbon with just one ice cube in it, just the way she likes it.

They sat and Vivian opened the conversation, “I must know that I can trust you,” she started, “I intent to make a lot of money and give a few chosen girls the opportunity to join me. I’m putting a group, a team, a family together. The girls I choose will become rich and free, they’ll have my complete support and all I ask is their loyalty. Does that sound like something you can get behind?”

“It sounds exciting, what kind of stuff would we have to do? She asked.

Vivian didn’t want to give too much away but having someone’s trust isn’t so simple as a few questions. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Gabrielle.”

Vivian said, “That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Before I get into what you can expect, I need to assess your potential level of trust. We’re talking a lot of money and some actions we wouldn’t want to advertise. Normally, to establish trust, I get personal. Can I ask you some personal questions?”

“Sure.”

“Are you willing to have sex for money?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Would you take your clothes off, if I asked you to?”

“Why?”

“I would never ask you to do something I wouldn’t do myself and if I was needing someone to do something, I would want that person to trust that I would not hurt them and believe my reasons must be important enough for me to ask.” Vivian paused for a moment, put her hand out to Gabrielle to take, “would you take your clothes off?”

Gabrielle was confused, “I don’t know if you’re coming on to me or if this is a test.”

Vivian said, “I guess it doesn’t matter, unless you choose differently for each circumstance.”

Now Gabrielle was really confused. She knew it was a test but didn’t know if she really wanted her to get undressed or if she just wanted her to say yes, or no. She looked into Vivian’s eyes and was not afraid, she stood up and started unbuttoning her blouse.

“That’s ok, sweeties, you don’t have to get undressed, I just needed to know you would if I asked. I may ask you to sleep with a fat disgusting tub of lard, or another woman, I may ask you lie or steal, whatever it is, I can assure you it’s all part a grand plan.”

“You can count on me.”

“Vivian then asked about her childhood, brothers, sisters, history of abuse or broken hearts. She learned Gabrielle was a lot similar to herself and the girls she grew up with. “I have a good feeling about you, and who knows, maybe one day you can take your clothes off for me.”

Vivian asked, “Were you abuse, where you cheated on, were you hurt?”

Gabrielle was hesitant to talk about it but opened up because trust had to start somewhere, and Vivian gave her the confidence to admit it. “Yes, I have.”

“I know what it’s like, believe me. Would you like the chance to get a little payback and make a lot of money in the process?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Can I trust you.”

A little more inspired now, Gabrielle she said, “Yes, you can trust me.”

Vivian sat and said, “Have a drink.”

Gabrielle looked down confused by the two drinks and looked back at Vivian who grabbed her bourbon, “one’s for celebrating, the other is for not celebrating.”

She took her cue and reached for the bourbon.

“From now on, we choose who we sleep with, and we choose what it’s worth. From now on, we’re the boss. Honey, we’re going to weaponize these bodies. Men will sell their souls for it, and if we see the faces of the people who have harmed us in them, all the sweeter our revenge becomes. Do you still trust me?”

That was something about Vivian all the girls wanted for themselves, her confidence. “Yes, I trust you,” all hyped up, Gabrielle felt alive for the first time in a long time. Vivian stood up, then Gabrielle stood up, Vivian gave her a hug and held her embrace while she told her quietly, “I’ll double your pay, you stay loyal to me, and we’re finally going to enjoy life for a change.”

That embrace solidified a connection each of the girls would have with Vivian. Each was personal and different in their own way, but all of her girls trusted her. She spent five hours getting to know each of the girls. Out of the ten, three were guarantees and one was on the fence. The ones she didn’t choose her cut as chaperones but transferred to the beverage department as cocktail servers. So, even the girls that weren’t chosen, gained by continuing to work without the need to sell their bodies or their souls. The pay increases didn’t hurt either.

Vivian had great taste in clothes, she studied all the fashion magazines and with her brand-new debit card, tackled the finest shops in town. From here on out, she vowed to never wear another pantsuit. John knew how much all this was costing him, and that Robert would object. He was ok with both. Vivian, believing she knew how all this was going to end up, rested at night imagining that moment when John figured it all out. She wondered if she'd be satisfied.

The day went as planned, now her alibi would begin. John and Vivian left for New Orleans at five, a driver dropped them off at the theater around an hour before curtain. Vivian was wearing a Versace, Silk, Black and Burgundy Dress that glorified her perfect figure. John was wearing a long dove tailed tuxedo and strutted like a rooster, cocky and awkward, while Vivian drew attention for her grace and beauty. She was friendly with everyone and sure to create memories. Vivian was certainly not one to be forgotten.

She held John's arm and pointed out people she had recognized from previous events and photographs. She made it a game to come up with a back story for each of them and at one point had John laughing out loud. "Stop it, he said, people are looking at us." He laughed.

"Not for long darling," she looked at her watch. "You should be getting a call from someone anytime now. I intend to enjoy the show until we get that call, what do you say?" The Phantom of the Opera was one of her all-time favorites.

Back at Castle Rouge, Robert was walking around the restaurant and kitchen, preparation in the kitchen between seven and nine in the evening was an indicator to how well Robert's evening was going to be, everything had to be right and him being an obsessive micro manager always made his staff nervous. Henri put on a white cook's jacket that was left hanging in a linen closet for him and walked into the kitchen looking for Robert. He had absolutely nothing on his mind but to find Robert and put one into

his heart and say a prayer for the family. His body was hurting, and his mind was almost gone. He didn't even think he would last long enough to go to trial.

'There he is,' Henri saw him at the vegetable prep table and started walking toward him, focused on nothing but his mission. He accidentally bumped into the table when he got there, which startled Robert, he turned around to see Henri lift his hand and pull the trigger of his Luger he brought back from the war. It put a hole, square in the middle of his heart. Poor man bled out long before the ambulance could get there. Henri immediately dropped the gun to the floor and calmly walked out of the kitchen to the restaurant and had a seat. He even asked if someone could get him a drink of whiskey.

The kitchen staff was in panic, all they saw or heard was a loud crack and stainless-steel bowls crashing to the floor. It was a little chaotic till people figured out what had happened. Robert lay on the floor gasping for his last labored breath, gripping his chest and passed out.

John got the call while they were still in the lobby of the theater. "This is Gladys, your uncle has been shot, I'm sorry, but we need you here."

"Hold on Ms. Felder, you said my uncle's been shot?" He held the phone away from his face but loud enough to make a small scene, he loudly stated, "Vee, we got to go, something terrible happen to my uncle."

They ran out of the theater comfortable that plenty of people would remember their scene, putting them far from the scene.

John didn't know what to really think. He had always been a talker, but now it just got real. He worried about what Henri would tell the investigators. Vivian could see the worry in his face and let the noose feel tight around his neck for a while, she was finding pleasure in his fears. John wondered if it were a coincidence or design that Vivian came into his life and jumped

right in to make his life better. She had to be an angel, but he had a weird feeling that he didn't know her, but he dreamt about her. Afraid of her to the extent of excitement.

Having to wait for the driver to make it back up to the front of the theater didn't hurt. John would be out of communication for a little while. Vivian would use the drive back to Biloxi to lay out the next phase.

"Robert had markers on dozens of people," she told John.

"How do you know that?"

"Come on, he's been up against the local unions and police for years. How do you think he kept himself in business? He had to have had something on them, some leverage. You need to find what he had, and meanwhile, I'll start working on a new collection of data."

John was suddenly all ears.

"You wanted it Johnny, you got it. Let's not blow it." She stared into the eyes of a boy who had just settled a score for his father and was afraid of the world again.

John signed, put his head back on the seat. Vivian gave the driver a cd to play Andrew Lloyd Webber's Phantom of the Opera. "I came all the way here for an opera damn it, I wouldn't want to go home unsatisfied. Turn it up Gerald, I need a drink, and pulled a half pint of Jim Beam from her guarder."

"Where'd that come from?" John asked.

"Close your ears, Gerald," then looked at John, "Congratulation Johnny, you are now the man," she whispered in his ear. "You need to give Henri's wife the money as soon as you can. You cannot afford for Henri to talk."

John reached in his coat pocket and pulled out a stack of bills in a white envelope, "Got it right here, I came prepared."

She opened the bottle and took a sip, swirled it around her gums like mouthwash and swallowed. Then handed the bottle to John.

Vivian then called Henri's wife and asked her to meet them at the Stucky's, just outside of Slidell. "Ask Gerald to stop at Stuckey's, will you."

John was easy to confuse, he noticed sometimes she talked directly to Gerald, and other times she asked him to say something to Gerald but didn't think too much about it.

The driver parked along the curb facing the front of the building, they waited for Henri's wife to show. She drove up in an old beat-up Plymouth Duster and parked on the side farthest from the door. She stood outside her car looking around for Vivian, but John got out of the car, walked up to her, "Are you Henri's wife?" he asked.

"I am."

He handed her the envelope, and said, "I'm sorry," then turned back away and returned to the car. The light from the sign in front of them lit their transaction and caught the moment he handed her the envelope with her brand-new mini digital camera. After opening the file, she was surprised to see how clear it was. She caught the hand-to-hand exchange and the expression on her face as she took the envelope. It was a look of pure sadness and shame. The envelope in plain sight, his hand to hers, that's one picture Vivian would save for a rainy day.

They returned to Biloxi just past ten p.m. and met with a horde of police and lawyers, both for and against the estate. The Harrison County Sheriff's Department was first on the scene till the Biloxi Police department came and took custody of him. "Fine, let the city pay for this mess, and handed Henri over to Captain Fortman. After shooting Robert, Henri calmly sat and waited for the police to arrive. He appeared sad and remorseful to the staff who actually started to feel bad for him. Henri told the police he had a dispute with Robert over the hiring salary he was promised and snapped, a claim he would make many times while being interviewed and interrogated. His employment paperwork showed a starting salary of one thousand dollars a week crossed



out rewrote six hundred dollars a week, which backed up Henri's story.

She told John, "Now we watch the lawyers, some will squirm, others will be calm. It's the calm ones that know where Robert kept his secrets. You talk to the lawyers and search for Robert's secrets, and I'll begin collecting our own, we're going to need our own insurance policies now." John looked at her knowing he was out of her element. He thought that with Robert out of the way, he'd be on easy street. He began to realize that life was complicated, and he really needed Vivian.

"Ok, we can do this," he convinced himself.

John met with the lawyer handling Robert's will and was assured the inheritance was intact and his position was secure. He then asked him, taking a chance he knew something, "What kind of influence did my uncle have on people." Mr. Peter's didn't care too much for Robert either and was glad to have him gone. "John, my boy, your uncle had three safe deposit boxes full of documents and photos, tapes and recordings, a mountain of evidence worth more than money."

Robert spent half his life gathering incriminating evidence on people to include evidence on his own legal staff. Mr. Peter's embezzlement scheme from a previous client was among the stash of documents. "Mr. Strahan, your uncle's possessions are now your possession in accordance with his last will and testament. As such, I can have his safe deposit boxes released to you, and of course offer advice. You'll need advice when you see what you've got. I just need you to sign this release. John didn't even think about it, he signed the papers thinking everything was going to be taken care of, not realizing he gave Mr. Peters power of attorney which he used to destroy the evidence against himself before turning the information over to John. Mr. Peters was now a free man.

It was after midnight by the time the coroner wrapped up and had Robert on the way to the morgue. The police had all they

needed for now. John was asked to make himself available for questions as the case is being built against Henri.

Vivian now had plenty of time to focus on the next phase. Before that, she reminded John she didn't have her own transportation. Seeing all the green in his future, he allowed her to purchase any car she wanted. She chose a jet-black Corvette. A symbol to make Men jealous and women envious. It wasn't as comfortable as a Cadillac, but it told a bold tale.

Vivian got a call from Sasha sooner than she thought. "Girl, I got Tanya, and Candy. We're all in, we're ready. When can we start?"

"Wonderful, we're going to party tonight. One last night in the city, wherever you want to go."

Sasha said, "Can't we party there?"

"We will definitely be partying here, but for tonight, I'd like to kick it up like we used to, to say goodbye to that lifestyle, just us. Let's crank it up like we used to at Doogie's, a dive bar that had a knack for attracting great street musicians, probably because people paid for their drinks.

"You're on girl, see you there about ten."

When they got together, they swore off men, got loud and rowdy and attracted big crowds. Before long, a bass player showed up in the corner, then a sax and a trumpet. Before they knew it the streets were jamming with jazz and the girls were hooting and hollering. Vivian missed the comradery and kinship with her sisters of the night, but not the lifestyle. She hated having to fight for everything, especially her own things. At Castle Rouge, she felt liberated and was determined to free her friends from their cursed spell. "Sasha, I want you and the girls to meet Ms. Baxter, my mama, she can teach you all to be sophisticated ladies, so when you work for me at the Castle Rouge, you can make a hell of a lot of money. We can all be rich. She is good too, she showed me how to woo any man with just a look. I didn't

have to say nothing, they just melted in your hand. What do you say?”

The girls were drunk and probably would have agreed to anything so now, all she had to do was convince Ms. Baxter to do her part.

Vivian’s New Orleans crew would be her sword. Their gratitude for getting them out and away from such a potentially sad story, to one of glamour and extravagance, their loyalty was unquestioned.

“Why did you come back for us? You had it all, you were out.” Candy asked.

“A Friend doesn’t abandon a friend, and a friend is the best thing you could have in case of an emergency. I plan on increasing my status and wealth while ruining the lives of all the poor bastards that tried to ruin mine. Are you with?” she excitedly replied.

“Vee, that’s the most fairy tale shit I ever heard. Hell, yeah, I’m in.” Candy’s been in her clique of runaways for most of her life, she had more than her share of bad experiences with humanity’s sinful ways. Her pain went deep, and Vivian knew it, just as she knew it with all the girls. She paid attention and did her homework.

“Tanya,” Vivian asked, “Do you remember that time, that sick ass barber wanted Sissy to shave his balls?” Her old accent started coming back and she reminded herself she would have to do a better job controlling that.

They looked surprised at each other and busted out laughing at the same time. “Yeah, or the time, Tranny Tee got caught with your teacher in the isle of the library.” More laughter.

“Well,” Vivian said, “We’re going to have more fun than that. If you saw the man that just stole your purse, step out into the street, and get run over by a bus, that’s karma, we’re going to spread karma.”

Tanya said, “Yeah, those boys going to Castle Rouge are loaded.”

Vivian had to stop her there, “Hold on now, before you start thinking the old ways of taking things from people, there will not be any of that. At the Castle, we never take, we make them give. There will be no stealing, none. We can’t afford petty changes keeping law enforcement focused on us. We’re going to be busy taking everything they own, not just what’s in their pockets.” Vivian looked around to everyone and calmly asked, “Girls, I love you all, can you do that? How much hurt should the judge get that took Pinky away from us and she ended up dead? How about that sailor than went crazy slashing up those people on Rampart Street? Will you put your trust in me?”

Sasha suddenly became sober; a final drunken tear fell from her face leaving a streak through her cheap foundation. “Kiddo, you turned out good. We are all proud of you, of course we do.” She gave Vivian a hug that reminded her of the time Vivian’s Grandmother died and the state took Vivian away.

MS. Baxter would have her hands full with these three. Vivian barley needed to ask when Ms. Baxter volunteered. “Have you been reading my mind, mom?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied.

“You’ve missed it a bit, haven’t you,” referring to the past she never talked about.

“No, honey, more like fighting it, but I’m growing too old and need to live it through you if I may.”

“Thank you, mom.”

Ms. Baxter was a nature mother figure. She couldn’t have children of her own after an incident with some college boys but fostered three children at separate times. She thought she was helping these girls, as she did Vivian, to land a good job and rich boyfriend. Vivian offered to pay her, but she refused the money, her needs were being met by having their company.

The girls hanging around Ms. Baxter's for a week nearly drove Mr. Baxter insane. Watching his wife teach girls how to be ladies and how to use their young bodies as sexual weapons was observed from a distance with a degree of embarrassment.

While her crew were getting massaged, dressed, washed, and walked, she was renovating the mansion. She wasted no time, and with plenty of money, she installed all new carpet, door locks, and cameras. Plastic covered all the furniture, sectioned off and blocking access to sections of the house at a time, but after a week, all the changes were made. All the rooms that had red carpet would be heavily videotaped with recording. Rooms with green carpet were neutral and safe for privacy. Rule number one is never do or say something incriminating while you're standing on a red carpet unless you want it on record. Of course, to everyone else, the green carpet represented restricted staff rooms and quarters. The rumor was that the green zone was heavily guarded to keep people away. Ninety percent of the mansion had red carpet. Toward the end of the camera installation, Vivian had Tanya trick the architect into a photograph he would later regret.

"What am I doing?" Tanya asked Vivian.

"You get him loosened up. Hand him a bottle of wine and ask him to pour you a glass. While he's uncorking, take your top off and step next to him for a photo. Tell him, this is for my scrapbook, I have hundreds with all my friends."

He didn't think about it, "Ok," and held the bottle of wine in one hand, two glasses and an arm around her with the other, she's leaned in chest first with her lips on his cheek. "Click" and soon as he heard that, it dawned on him how incriminatory that must look. Immediately after the photo, Tanya put her top back on and walked away sharply. "Bye darling," she was gone. He stood there wondering what the hell had just happened when Vivian approached him.

"Darling, can you provide me with the originals and copies of the floorplans?"

He was taken back a bit. “No ma’am, the originals belong to the lean holder, Mr. Strahan.”

“I see,” she quietly spoke. “Well, I wonder what Mr. Kodak has to tell Mr. Strahan or your poor wife, who’s devoted her whole life to you. Would your little princess still look up to you?” She let that sink in just a bit.

He thought about it for a moment, “Well sometimes city hall loses plans, I think we can work something out,” he asked, “but, why hide the plans?”

“There are strange things happening around here, we’re protecting ourselves even from ourselves. We think Mr. John plans on changing this place into an orgy farm or something, we’re worried about the girls’ safety. No one can be trusted. You give me the floor plans and I give you, her camera.”

He agreed and rolled up the plans and gave them to her. She called Tanya back and took her little cannon quick shot and gave it to the man. “Is there a chip in there?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, “I don’t think you need a chip,” and showed the photo in the phone’s gallery. “Tanya, was there a chip?”

“I don’t think so ma’am,” she said it with teasing hint, enough to make him always wonder if they still had a copy.

“There you go then, the plans for the camera. Now remember, we hire you specifically on your honor that you’ll forget all about these cameras, and we may need you to come out occasionally if we were to have any issues with them. Hey, how about coming by in the evening for a drink?” she asked.

“No thank you, the last drink didn’t turn out so good. I might have to quit.”

“Don’t be silly, we’ll have a good time, you can invite the wife.” That was that last thing he needed. “Seriously, I’d like to talk with you more, who else have you installed cameras for?”

Vivian never missed a chance. She knew he had to know how to get his hands on their video recordings. She wanted him

working for her, she needed more stuff on him. “I have to brief Mr. Strahan on the upgrades, and I want you to be there. I’m going to tell him the main floor and all angles within the casino are covered and say nothing about the rooms upstairs. You will concur and nothing more, because so help me god, if another one of my girls gets raped, there’s going to be serious fireworks around this place.”

All the doors upstairs now had digit keypad door locks. New carpet throughout the mansion, and a marble tile dance floor in the lobby made for a wonderful ballroom. She had two thousand dollars of her budget left; John told her to keep it. He was stoked about the new look. The lighting coupled with the red carpet and the many golden colored fixtures, made the mansion sparkle like a fine burgundy wine by the fireplace and John was feeling a great open house in his future. He hadn’t had a chance to celebrate his uncle being gone yet and was itching for excitement.

He wasn’t aware that Vivian was too, except hers was more calculated.

## Chapter Four

Ms. Baxter performed miracles with Sasha, Tanya, and Candy. They weren't your typical debutants; they could be introduced to anyone and hold their own. "Girl, you look like a million bucks," Vivian told Sasha.

"Thanks, Vee. For everything, I mean it, I'll make you proud."

"I know you will, and Really, you're smokin,' I might have to try and tap that," Vivian laughed, then Sasha laughed.

"Look," Sasha said, "There come Candy and Tanya."

Suddenly Vivian realized her three homies were gorgeous in their evening gowns, while the other girls at the Castle wore uniforms. Though the uniforms looked ok, the evening gowns added thousands to a customer's eye. Starting tomorrow, all the chaperones will throw away their uniforms. From then on, it was high fashion and gowns inside and bikinis at the pool.

People came from everywhere for the grand opening. Many came for the glamour and social notoriety; some came to gage whether Robert's blackmail was over. So many were relieved of his death but now feared the bastard nephew held their secrets.

There had to be a hundred people there, drinking at an open bar celebrating the new look. The death of disco allowed for the waltz or big band to become fashionable again. A small orchestra began playing Fur Else and the lights over the ballroom brightened. Suddenly the main lobby looked ten times bigger. The lights shined off the banisters and balcony's polish like an invitational arrow up to the second floor.

"Tanya," Vivian said, "Can you walk with Mr. Johnny, and take my place for a minute, I have staff to attend to," then turned to John. "I'll meet you out on the dance floor in ten minutes mister," and patted him on his butt.



Vivian slipped off and disappeared to the registry room. She let herself in with her master key code. On the wall inside the room, a huge screen monitored all the cameras in the private rooms and conference rooms on the second floor. This monitoring station was only for the mansion, the casino had its own. This was Vivian's operation center. Kat was her security engineer. He was Sasha's little transsexual friend from the neighborhood. He dressed and looked like a beautiful young girl and has put many of them to shame.

"Here they are, we can see everybody from here," he said.

"Thank you, Kat, I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Thank you for the job, Vee, just remember, I can be useful with some of these guys too."

"I know honey, but for now, I need you here, we'll get you some help so you can come join the party. You're going to be a gold mine when the time comes, I'll let you know who and when, meanwhile, let's get some ammunition."

"Kiss, kiss," she smiled, turned, and walked back out of the room.

Vivian stopped a server and asked her to bring two glasses of bourbon with only one ice cube to the dance floor and gently placed her hand on her cheek. Everyone wanted to be the one Vivian touched. She was always graceful and soft, and every touch said, 'I care, I love you, everything is ok.' She put everyone at ease.

The orchestra stopped and people quietly left the dance floor. The lights faded to yellow, and a girl dressed in satin stepped up to a microphone, a classical guitar started playing in the background and she started singing Ella Fitzgerald's Cry Me a River.

Vivian took a sip from her drink and gave the other to John. They stood together and looked on enjoying the girl's performance. She did a wonderful job and would have made Ella proud. "What a beautiful voice, don't you think?"

John wasn't influenced by music the way Vivian was, maybe that's why she was so powerfully persuasive, her soul was filled with spirit. After her song, the orchestra resumed and began to play *La Composita*, "I believe you owe me a dance," she told John.

John got nervous, 'Oh shit,' he told himself, 'the tango.' He put out his hand and she took it; he pulled in tight and stepped out in time with the music. John took a few lessons but was hoping for a waltz. It all started coming back to him and before he knew they owned the dance floor. Only two other couples dared to be compared to them on the floor.

Being so close to her filled him with emotion. He was captivated by her beauty, her smell and presence and felt comfortable, like he'd known her forever. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"How do you make me melt. I can't think straight when your around, have you put a spell on me?"

"Darling, magic isn't a spell, magic is in the heart, you either have it or you don't. We must have it."

After the dance she excused herself one more time to retrieve her friends. She returned a moment later, "Johnny, darling, this is Sasha, Tanya, and Candy, the three new girls I hired last week. I want all the girls, the chaperones, to take their lead from them. Together, we're going to give you a Harem. Imagine being surrounded by all this sex and beauty."

"I thought we'd talk about us."

"No honey. I can't be tied down right now, there's way too much to do," Vivian continued to set her proposal, and she was just a single affirmative answer away. Johnny, these girls are her for you. This whole parade is for you. We're going to own this town and these girls are going to make it happen. If you have an enemy, we will find their weak spot and turn it into an asset." Vivian turned to the girls, "Show Mr. Johnny how much you appreciate him."

They smiled at him as they approached and surrounded him. Six hands all over his head, face and chest, little kisses on his cheek and a lot of sensuous whispers. "Take good care of the boss ladies, have him home before sunrise."

In the back of his head echoed, 'sunrise,' he's heard that before, 'sunrise,' who says it that way? He's heard that voice before, but where?"

Candy took it upon herself to take John all the way home. As long as girls gave themselves to him, he couldn't refuse. They became his weakness which entertained Vivian. The next morning Vivian talked with Sasha, "We got Kat working in surveillance, can we get Gidget?"

"What are you going to do with Gidget, she's only fifteen."

"Yeah, I know," Vivian said. "She's been turning tricks, hasn't she?"

"Yeah."

"Clean her up, make her look young and innocent, we'll get her a job cleaning rooms and when the time is right, let her catch one of these rich ass bastards. Rape of a child could put someone a way for a very long time and leave them in a prison filled with people that hate pedophiles. But you have to work with her and teach her how to act like she's being raped, for the camera."

"Oh girl, I get it. You're a genius, that's like a death sentence for a pedophile, if he's sentenced to prison."

Vivian replied, "Of all the people I want to ruin, they're at the top of the list."

Sasha told Vivian, "Candy took John to one of the rooms. She thought you wanted her to show him an extra good time."

"What room?"

"I'm not sure."

Vivian asked, "What color was the carpet?"

"Red. It was the big hallway."

“Perfect. Do you want to see something?”

“Yeah, what you got?” Sasha asked.

Vivian then told her, “By the way, Kat decided he wanted to play too.”

“Damn it, that boy won’t stop till he’s just like us or he gets aids.”

“You know there’s a bunch of sick ass people out there and I hope to ruin each of their miserable lives like they tried to ruin ours. If Kat feels like he deserves a little revenge, should we let him have some too?”

Sasha admitted, “He deserves the same revenge as we do, I guess, well, I’m not going to feel bad for none of them, I just don’t want him to get hurt. He doesn’t know how cruel these people can get.”

“That’s why we have all the cameras,” Vivian said as she pointed to the big screen. “I’m prepared to show the world their dirty little secrets. To keep their secrets safe, will cost them big time.”

Sasha told Vivian, “I told the others, if anyone could rise out of the French Quarter’s ashes it was you. You’re my hero, you really are.”

“Thank you, Sasha, but I’m not a hero, I’m a hungry woman with a big appetite, and unfaithful and evil men are on the menu.”

“Amen, sister.”

“Surprise,” Kat said, “I’m working here too.”

“I can see that,” Sasha said. “You do what Ms. Vee says now, she’ll take good care of you.”

The evening went on without Vivian. She tucked herself away with Kat for hours studying the people in the cameras. Her fantastic memory helped her identify who’s who. “There,” she proclaimed, pointing at a man on the screen, “Who is that?” She was pointing at the head of the central bank. “Don’t know Ms. Vee.”

“Thank you sweetie, for not calling me ma’am.”

Kat replied, “I kind of like being called miss.”

“Well, ‘Miss,’ could you please find out everything you can about him for mama, referring to herself. Kat was sneaky and good at finding information about people. He may have been young, but he was a wiz on a computer and claimed to be able to hack into anybody, including most government systems. By the end of the evening Vivian knew all she needed to know about Charles Adams III. A wife, two kids under ten, a hundred sixty-thousand-dollar annual salary, five-bedroom house and three cars, all luxury sedans. Mr. Adams wouldn’t risk giving that up for anything. “Mister banker man is going to learn to appreciate his wife and life real soon,” she told Kat. “Has anyone ever done to you what this sick bastard wants to do here?”

Kat replied, “When haven’t they?”

Tanya was crossing the marble floor on her way to the front of the room, where a small section was roped off with velvet red ropes. “Please,” she asked, “can someone please play, preferably sing, My Way by Frank Sinatra?”

John returned to the ball room and was approached by Tanya, “I believe you owe someone a dance.”

He said, “Vee said I owed her one.”

“Yeah, and I’m here to collect on Ms. Vees’ behalf. I asked them to play this song for you. After all, look at this place, you made this happen.” Tanya built up his ego so much he’d go to bed satisfied without having sex.

Meanwhile, Vivian approached Mr. Adams who was sitting in a booth with two of the regular chaperones. Vivian stopped at his table and waved a cocktail waitress over, “Hello Mr. Adams, my name is Vee, I’m part of the new management and on behalf of Castle Rouge, I’d like to offer a complementary suite,” and handed a program card for the door to room 24, at the end of the hall, naturally it had red carpet. “Darling,” Vee

addressed the waitress, “Please get mister Adams a bottle of anything he wants.”

Mr. Adams couldn’t believe his luck.

Vee waited twenty minutes for him to put two and two together and talk the house girls into going to his room. She brought Kat a cup of coffee, “Room twenty-four is our mark. Zoom in, turn up the mic, even our own girls don’t know about this yet, and right now I only trust my homies.”

Kat repositioned himself in his chair, “I’m on this, they had three cameras in each of the even number rooms, and two in the odd numbered rooms. They waited for him to make his move. He brought both of the girls to his room, and he did not disappoint Vivian. She was watching from her station and celebrating with Kat, she had him full frontal with two girls. “Single frame, black and white of this shot,” she froze the tape, “I need that photo, can you make it happen?”

“Yes, ma...my pleasure,” he caught himself.

Vivian took another glance at all the cameras. “Kat, sweetie, if you ever see the BPD, FBI, or any other acronym, make sure you record everything. I’m giving out bonuses for every law enforcement type we get something on. You have to be prepared.”

Vivian left the back and came out to the front in time to see John go in for a kiss from Tanya. He spotted her and stopped. She just smiled at him like it was his birthday and made a V with her fingers and put her tongue in the middle for a little sexual inuendo. She winked at him and nodded her head to the rooms up above. He glanced up, she waved goodbye and began mingling with some of the guests.

Silver membership to the club was one thousand dollars a week, membership simply gave you access to the premises, other wealthy and influential people, a fair share of complimentary drinks and reservation priorities. However, they also offered Gold and Platinum plans ranging in the thousands for members to

reserve private rooms, automatic reservations for the restaurant, unrestricted beverage, and chaperone. The new house policy lets the girls personally choose whether they would engage in sexual favors or not. They were paid so well they didn't need to, which drove the cost up, and like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the demand for their company grew.

The evening was a smash. For the first time, the mansion took in more money than it cost to operate. In fact, their revenue easily paid for all the service industries employees pay to double and the escorts salaries to triple.

Vivian told Sasha, "That's why we did the banker first. We need our money managed. Next, we'll get the police commissioner, then some judges. Talk with Tanya, make sure she doesn't tell John shit."

Vivian called the bank and asked to speak with Mr. Adams the following day. The receptionist told her Mr. Adams was in a meeting and to leave her number. "Tell him my name is Vee, and ask him to call me, he has my card."

She was confident his curiosity would force him to call. She was right, he called from his cell phone, she stored the number on her phone, "Hi. Ms. Vee, how can I be of assistance?"

"Mr. Adams, I'm in need of a banker, and I've decided you have all the qualifications I'm looking for."

"I'm happy you think so," he said.

She continued with Georgia charm, "I would like to set up an account in my boss's name that I would also have access too. Can you help me with that?"

"Yes ma'am, I'll assign an account manager for you, her name is Ms. Singletary."

"No, you misunderstood, I want you to manage my account."

"Ms. Vee, I'm the president of the bank, I have people work for me to manager your account."

“Mr. Adams, I’m very well aware of your position, but you need to understand mine; I don’t quite know what to do with this picture that some private eye left in my mailbox.”

Mr. Adams suddenly became noticeably quiet, “What was that?” he replied.

“Come now, Mr. Adams, this picture tells me someone is out to get you, I think we need to talk.”

“What’s the picture about?”

“It shows you and a girl in a room, here at Castle Rouge, it appears you’ve been spied upon.”

“Yeah, ok, where?”

“Walk across the street to the café, I’ll be sipping on some coffee by the window.”

He wasted no time getting across the street.

His portly figure jiggled all the way across the street as he jogged for the first time in ten years.

“What picture are you talking about?” he asked as he took his seat across the table from her.

This picture was obviously taken inside the mansion and I’m not happy about it. I want to take it to the police so they can find the scum who’s setting up my clientele.”

“No, no, no, you don’t want to do that. I can’t have this go public; my wife will find out.”

“It’s funny you should say that Mr. Adams, when I first saw this picture, I thought to myself, how damaging it looks to your reputation and family.”

“What am I going to do?” He looked at her.

“If you are willing to take care of my banking needs personally, I’ll find the person who took these photos and make it all go away.”

It was at that minute he realized what was going on, he had no choice, he had to play her game or lose everything he held dear. “Ok, I concede, what banking do you need?”



“I want an account in my boss’s name that I’ll have access to. I want to be able to remove funds from that account, but I do not want my name associated with the transactions. Can you make that happen?”

“Yeah, I’ll give you an alias.”

She said, “No, I think that alias should be my boss, John Strahan, after all, this is his money.”

Mr. Adams owes everything he has to his job at the bank, and he owes his job at the bank to his father-law. If he screws this up, he might as well step off the highest building in Biloxi, “Ok, we can do it, an account in his name that gives the appearance he’s making all the transactions. You realized you’re asking me to commit fraud?”

“Yes, but not necessarily in a nefarious way, Mr. Strahan is just too busy to deal with the operations of Castle Rouge and trusts me to handle everything. He’s going to be putting money into this account from his general account, so I can use it to manage the mansion. I would also like a personal account in my name only. I think you should show me a little gratitude for me bringing this matter to your attention rather than the police. Perhaps we can start off our new relationship with a donation into my account in the sum of twenty thousand dollars.”

“Twenty thousand dollars, you’re blackmailing me?”

Vivian softly laughed, “I love an educated man, you’re very astute. Let’s understand, I have needs, you have needs, if twenty thousand dollars buys you some piece of mind that your secrets are safe, is it worth it? Besides, it’s going to cost me to hire my own private investigator to find the guy that took these pictures.”

“I don’t have twenty thousand dollars,” he said.

“Please Mr. Adams, don’t insult my intelligence, you can have the money in the account in ten minutes. Do you want me to invest my resources to finding your original blackmailer or not?”

‘What a dilemma,’ he thought to himself. “Ok, I’ll deposit twenty thousand into the account.”

“What else?” Vivian prompted a response.

“The account will be in John’s name, but you’ll have full access.”

“And?”

He thought for a second, “Your name will never show up on any transactions.”

“Very good Mr. Adams,” she put her hand out to shake. “This handshake binds us together you know. We’re partners now. There will be times when you need me and times when I need you.”

That was to be her get away account. She wanted to start a new life far away after she completed her mission. She had a budget of forty thousand dollars a month, which was the maximum she could spend from her operating account until The Harem started making money.

Her first shakedown was small, a little sample of how she intended to get people motivated to help her. It was time for her to get her girls together. Before she could include them in any of the schemes and cons, she had to know she could trust them. “Sadie sweetie, have all the chaperones meet me in my room.”

“Yes Vee, including the three you introduced last night?”

“Yes everyone, oh, and bring me another bottle of bourbon,” she blew her a kiss.

When Sadie came back, she had the bourbon and all the girls in tow. “Gather around everyone, pull up a chair, sit on the bed, just get comfortable. Does anyone want a drink?”

No one excepted the drink, “Too early for me,” Gabrielle said.

“It’s ok. I work on a twenty-four hour a day schedule, some of that time is at rest but I have no set time, I am free,” she poured herself a drink, “honey can you be a love, and get me a

cube of ice,” and hand Sadie her glass. “Last night was wonderful, don’t you think?”

The girls arrived curious, and in her presence began to warm up to her. They all shook their heads and mumbled, “yeah.”

“Let’s get down to business,” she looked over to see if Sadie was coming back. “Awe, thank you darling,” as she took her drink back. She took a big sip, swirled it around in her mouth and swallowed. She then opened her handbag and took out a fistful of money and one by one she gave each of the girls, including Sadie, a thousand dollars.”

“Can I have that drink now?” Gabrielle asked.

“We’re celebrating ladies, anyone else want a drink?” Half the room was now drinking, and spirits were high. “Girls, the days of being taken advantage of are over,” she raised her glass and took a sip. “We will no longer sell our bodies at the expense of our dignity. From here on out, each of you are in charge of your own bodies and will not have to give it to anyone you don’t want to.” The girls were hanging on every word. “The money I gave you came from a man who appreciates us, and because we’re a team, I will share with you. Who wants to make more money?” she asked.

Excitement was high, they said, “hell yeah.”

Vivian chose to put it all out there for them. “Sadie, make sure no one’s in the hallway.”

She looked, “It’s all clear.”

“Girls, would you sleep with someone if I asked you to.”

The girls hesitated a second before they each said yes.

“Would you like to see some bad people get what’s coming to them?”

Again, they hesitated then said yes.

She looked each of the girls in the eyes and said, “We’re starting a club here at Castle Rouge, one in which we get rich, and we get even. Are you willing to join me and make things right for all of us?”

By now all the girls were fired up. She took this opportunity to introduce her friends from New Orleans. “This is Sasha, Tanya, and Candy. We go way back, and you can trust them. They are close friends of mine and experts in making men do what they want them to do, they will be my lieutenants.”

Sasha addressed the girls, “I can tell you now, that if you are in this room, Vee loves you and will do anything for you. We trust her with our lives. We are it, the front line, we are the ones that will make Castle Rouge the swankiest place on the coast.”

“I was selling my soul for twenty dollars a shot. Vee saved me,” Tanya said.

“Me too,” Candy joined in.

Tanya continued, “Vee saved us, she can save you too.”

Vivian added, “My vision is to create a social club for the rich, a club where we hold all the cards. The plan is to lure in depraved individuals and separate them from their money. If they want to play, they’re going to have to pay. We get them in a room, we do what we do best while being recorded and blackmail their ass. I plan on recording secret conversations with them to find out their secrets and use them against them. I need to know if you’re with me, if you’re loyal, if you want to make a lot of money. Are you tired of being used and abused, do you want to create a new life for yourself?” Vivian looked at each of their faces as she spoke, one hundred percent was what’s she was looking for and got it.

There were nine of them now, including Kat, in the Harem. “The club will be called, The Harem, but make no mistake, we are The Harem. On the surface, we’ll gush over Mr. Johnny as if he were the king of all playboys, but under the surface, I’ll need your loyalty if we are all to become rich. I need to know that I can count on all of you. I stand by my commitment that you don’t have to sleep with anyone you don’t want to, including me, but so you know, I couldn’t trust someone that

wouldn't make love to me." She just threw that out, knowing one of these days she may like a taste of that forbidden fruit.

The sound of 'The Harem,' rang in their ears. Gabrielle mentioned, "Is it an oxymoron for a Harem to have control over their own bodies?"

"That is what makes us so dangerous," Vivian said, "they don't control us, we control them."

Tanya spoke out, "I spent a lot of time with Mr. Johnny last night, I can tell you he's insecure, he needs people around him sucking up to him, and as long as you are gloating over him, he'll be the nicest, but most arrogant prick.

Candy concurred, "He's pretty insecure."

Tanya continued, "Vee has him right where she wants him, so if you have any dealings with him, make sure to talk to Vee."

"Thank you, Tanya," Vivian said, "how many of you noticed the changes around the mansion?" They all raised their hands or said yeah. "Areas with green carpet are our safe zones, there are no cameras or recording devices. You'll notice that only our private quarters have a green carpet. The areas with red carpet have cameras and recording devices everywhere. They are triggered with motion sensors, so if someone is in that room, they're being recorded. All of our business will be conducted on a red carpet. Our business is gathering incriminating evidence, we should look at ourselves as doing humanity a favor by investigating the moral decline of an already abusive lifestyle."

We also have panic buttons located strategically in all the rooms including our private quarters in case of emergency. I swear, if a guest harm any of my girls, I'll castrate them right there on the spot."

The entire room's ambiance had changed from a Disney version fairy tale to a James Bond action-adventure mood. "This is so exciting," Candy told one of the original chaperones and struck up a conversation with her. They talked about family,

where they grew up, experiences they had. Vivian looked around and they were all engaging with each other, sharing their personal stories. She took Sadie aside, “Sweetie,” she held both her hands, “I love you. You’re innocent, are you going to be able to stay by my side?”

“Of course, I will.”

“What about you, what’s your story?”

Sadie didn’t have a story that she would ever consider telling anyone; by all accounts external, she had no traumatic experiences to note. “I guess I don’t have one. I just started working for Ms. Felder to make money for school. I’ve never had a real boyfriend. I’m afraid of strangers but no one has ever harmed me,” a lie she couldn’t bear to bring to light.

“Well sweetie, you’ve been lucky. Everyone I’ve ever come in contact with has been beaten and abused, lied to, and cheated on, screwed, and taken advantage of in some respect. Don’t get me wrong, I love some good sex, but I don’t trust men, I trust women, not just any women, women like me who know what pain deep in the soul feels like.”

“I trust you Ms. Vee, I’m not going anywhere.”

Vivian turned to look at the crowd of girls socializing behind her. “Loosen up Sadie, go talk with some of the girls, let them teach you a little about men and your body, if you feel like living a little, they can help. We’re going to have fun around here and make some good money. Go, meet your sisters, we’re all one big family now. What do you say, are you with me?”

She looked at Vee and saw that sensuous and confident side of her that trademarked her irresistible charm. “I’m with you,” she excitedly replied.

## Chapter Five

Friday morning John got a call from the Biloxi Police Department, “Hi, Mr. Strahan, my name is Sergeant Stoddard, Detective Hightower asked if you could come down to the station to make your official statements in the account of your uncle’s death. “It just a formality, we have to cross the t’s and dot the I’s.”

“I have to go give a statement at the station,” John told Vee.

“Good, I’ll go with you. If they ask you who crossed out one thousand and put six hundred, tell them you have no idea. If you look in stash of blackmail material Robert had, you’ll see stuff there on Detective Hightower.”

“How did you know that?” John asked.

“Because darling, I remember everything. When Mr. Peters brought you the contents of the safe deposit boxes I was by your side. Detective Hightower’s dirty and we can use Robert’s documents to remind him that a little influence can go a long way. We’ll get him to work for us.”

They each gave depositions stating that they were at the theater in New Orleans, got the call from Ms. Felder about Robert being shot and rushed home. That John personally hired Henri for a thousand dollars a week before he had an interview with Robert. That was the last time he saw or talked with Henri.” Their depositions were all that was needed to close their investigation, they had eyewitnesses, a confession, a motive, everything.

“Detective Hightower,” John asked, “Did my uncle settle up with you before he was shot?”

That took the detective by surprise. “What do you mean?”

“John looked around to make sure no one could hear, “I know my uncle had some incriminating evidence against you.”

“Oh that, yeah, me and your uncle were square.” He lied and suspected they knew he lied, but until they could prove it to

him, he figured it to be a hollow threat. “What brings that up?” he asked.

“We may have a need for someone with your credentials.”

“Mr. Strahan, what are you saying?” he sounded a little frustrated.

Vee stepped in, “Mr. Hightower, we’re all intelligent people here, Robert was blackmailing you, we know all about it. We are in a position to give your life back to you.”

Detective Hightower may not have been the sharpest knife in the drawer, but how she put it, sounded like an opportunity, “I’m listening.”

“Come visit the castle as our guest, enjoy the comforts and a night out on us. We’ll celebrate a new relationship together, what do you say?”

Detective Hightower was no stranger to corruption, he saw the writing on the wall and knew they had something planned. “Yeah, that sounds good, how should I dress?”

“Anyway, you’d like, Mr. Hightower, don’t go out of your way, business or casual, it’s not important,” Vee said and gave him a smile.”

The detective took her bait, “What about the pictures Robert had of me, will you give those back?”

“Absolutely. We don’t want to blackmail you; we want you on our team.”

“I’ll be there about ten.”

“It’s been a pleasure, darling,” she said with a little taste of her Georgia accent, “We’ll start with dinner at eight, just ask for Vee.”

The way Vivian manipulated her accent exited John. Without examining the difference between her occasional Georgia accent and French accent, he was captivated either way. “You sometime have an accent but it’s not always the same.”



“Yeah, I’ve been told. Habits from living in Atlanta for years as a child and three years of French at Loyola, sometimes they just come out.”

John nodded his head, “Well, they’re both wonderful.”

Detective Hightower didn’t miss the passionate expression of her accent either; a lustful daydream would accurately describe his train of thought and at this point, he’d follow her smell blindly into a dark cave. He secretly looked her up and down imagining her without her perfectly fitted dress, “What are you wearing?”

“Darling, are you flirting with me?”

The detective said, “No, I’m a detective, I’m trained to see the little things, but I can’t place your perfume.”

She smiled at him and winked at John, then stepped toward Mr. Hightower, and turned a three sixty ever so gracefully in front of him. He smelt, “Sweet Chrysanthemums,” she turned further, “no, it’s roses. No, it’s sweet chrysanthemums.”

She stopped in front of him, “I spray a little of one on my left and I spray of something else on the right, that way I can be two different people at the same time, and together as something special, but they have to be compatible. Who would you like me to be?”

Detective Hightower bit his bottom lip, “Mr. Strahan, I don’t know how you get anything done with her around,” implying she was too hot to handle. “No offense Ms. Vee, but you’re smokin.”

They left the station, and on the way, back John asked, “Did he bite?”

“Yeah, he bought.”

“How do you know?” John asked.

“Because he’s sold himself for less in the past and would have nowhere to run if the photographs of him got out. Also, you didn’t see the look of anticipation in his face when I suggested a working partnership?”

“No, I don’t think he had anything on his mind but sex.”

Vivian replied, “The photos put him in a position between being arrested or being turned over to his criminal element. There’s no place he can hide, he needs us.”

John said, “Looks like you did your homework.”

She smiled and gave him a nudge as they walked to the car, “If there was one person you wanted revenge over, who would it be?”

“Robert, and he’s already gone,” he said.

Gerald had been waiting in the parking lot for John. He used to drive John around when he was going to school. Robert and John both had looked down upon him and treated him much the same. Vivian spotted the feeling of shame and guilt in him, the inner anger that keeps one’s soul on fire. He didn’t want to work for John, but he made it no choice. His economic needs far exceeded his means.

Vivian got comfortable in the back seat, raised her right foot just enough for her to slip off her shoe. John became mesmerized, her smell blew up to his face as her motion caused a breeze. She tried explaining parts of her plan to John, but he had a hard time concentrating, her physical presence had all his attention.

“Johnny, I’ve Mr. Adams in the bag, we’re getting Dick Tracy, next, we’ll need a judge.” She said it loud enough on purpose for Gerald to hear.

John replied, “My uncle had a judge.”

“We need one at the circuit court.”

“Hobbs is a district judge.”

“Save him for another time, we need another,” she said. “Hey Gerald, got any judges you want us to burn?” she hollered out.

John looked surprised and riled up about her getting Gerald involved, he was just a driver. “Vee, calm down now.”

“Mr. John Strahan, the son of the late Robert Strahan, owner of the Castle Rouge, remember why you hired me, I’m going to make you richer, I’m going to get you laid, I’m going to make you anything you want to be. Do you want to be president?” she toyed with him.

“Ok, I’m sorry,” he said resentfully. “Gerald, do you know of a circuit judge?”

She squeezed his crotch lightly, “We’re going to have a little fun later Mr. smarty pants. Give Gerald a break, he’s been loyal, he’s part of our team.”

John didn’t want to hear that he’s been an arrogant ass, but that’s where he felt the conversation was headed. “I’m sorry, bad habits. Robert taught me a different way of treating people.” She commanded with presence and desire; John couldn’t help being aroused. He’d have to go back many years since he was so controlled by anyone. “Ok, what do we need the judge for?”

“We need his influence in the courts in case any of our dealings have to go down that route. We need lawyers, judges, politicians, bankers, and investors. We’re almost there.”

“Yeah, I know of one,” Gerald said. “The dirty bitch is married to the coach of my daughter’s softball team. She ruled in favor of the Homeowners Insurance so they wouldn’t have to pay damages when our dog bit an intruder sneaking into their house allowing lawsuits against victims by the criminal.”

“Perfect,” Vivian said.

“Gerald, I’m sorry I snapped at you,” John said.

Vee was impressed, “Darling, that is so nice of you to acknowledge, now give him a raise. If he were one of my girls, I’d give him a raise.”

“Ok, Gerald, do you want to be one of Vee’s girls?” trying to be funny.

She poked him in the ribs.

“I wish I could,” Gerald said, referring to how well she cares for her girls.

“Well now,” John said as he stretched back in his seat and put his hand together behind his head, “what’s next baby?”

“Gerald,” Vee addressed him.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Do you promise to keep everything you here us talking about a secret.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good, welcome to the family, I may ask you to do something illegal in the future, are you ok with that?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“There you go,” looking at John, “doesn’t get any easier.”

John took a moment to reflect on the position he was in and realized that he worked for Vee. He was afraid to make decisions, his uncle would not approve of anything he did, it was best to be behind the leader so John relaxed and gave Vivian all the ammo she would need.

“Darling, tonight Mr. Hightower will agree to use the resources of the police department to investigate people. The banker will give us a list of customers with large accounts. We in turn choose our targets and invite them into the Harem, and we suck the souls right out of them. We’re going to offer him five thousand dollars to meet with Mr. Adams and deliver us a list of potential customers.”

“Naturally, we record everything. In the conference room upstairs, at ten o’clock, Mr. Hightower will show up, by ten after, he will have already accepted your five-thousand-dollar offer, and we’ll have it on video as evidence. The same thing he got caught for the first time.”

Vee called Mr. Adams, “I’m sending a man by to get some information from you, please have it ready, just the list that we talked about. Can you do that?”

Kat call Vivian, “The security system people are here.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Vivian arrived and introduced herself, “Hi, I’m Vee, we’ve got a lot of your locks installed here recently, but we have additional security needs.”

He shook her hand, “I’m Vinnie, what do you have in mind?”

I want to be able to program membership cards to act as credit cards to keep track of expenses. We’ll need programable software for financial management of a couple thousand accounts and POS equipment. Is that something you can handle?”

He thought for a moment, “That not within the purview of our company’s services, however, I am a programmer and can work on it on the side if you’d like.”

“Ok, I’ll lay it out for you, I need three levels of access, each with a different credit limit. Their credit card/membership card will need to be able to be programed for access to various rooms and services here at Castle Rouge, we’ll need to track costs associated with the card like a credit card.”

Vinnie said, “Yeah, I can come up with something. Are you only using it locally?”

“Just local, just here at Castle Rouge.

“So, you want club membership credit limits and service access privileges set for each level and they have to keep financial track of expense.”

“Great, I’m going to leave you with Kat, he’s my point person,” giving Kat a wink, “I give him all the criteria and between the two of you, I’d like to see something workable by the end of the month. Am I asking too much?”

“That is a tough deadline, but it can be done. You know, this is not going to be cheap.” Vinnie said.

“If it were, it probably wouldn’t work. We’re talking about tracking a few hundred thousand dollars a month, it has to work.”

Vinnie nodded, “We didn’t talk about compensation.”

“How much could it cost, I just had an entire security system installed, I’m sure I can make it worth your wild.”

“I’ll work up an estimate and give you a call.”

“I’ll give half up front the other half when it’s done.”

He put his hand out, “I’ll call as soon as I can.”

“Thank you, by the way, any work you do for me comes with a nondisclosure agreement, no one is to know the who, what, where, how, when, or why’s about any work you do for me except me and my man Kat.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Vinnie left and Kat had questions, “What’s going on? Who are the cards for?”

I’ll give you the short version, I have to explain all this to the girls later and don’t want to have to do it twice. We’re going to start a club. We’ll offer three levels, Silver, Gold, and Platinum. Each level will receive limits to their services. Customers purchase monthly memberships and receive all the amenities that come with that plan. The cards will be credit card keeping track of all their expenses and if they go over their allowance, we can shut it down.”

“That’s smart, I like it. How much is the membership?”

“I’m still figuring it all out, but I’m thinking a thousand dollars for the Silver, ten thousand for the Gold, and twenty-five thousand for the Platinum.”

“Holy crap, who has that kind of money to throw away?”

“Sweetie, you’d be surprised.”

“What do you get for membership?”

“I’ll tell you tonight when I lay it all out for the girls.”

Sadie assigned each of the girls a preset number in her phone and texted them all to meet in Vee’s room at eight.

Sasha asked Sadie to bring a bottle, “I know my girl, she’s going to want to party.”

“Noted.”

Everyone was one on time. That's when you know you got their attention. Vivian greeted them each as they arrived. "Your attention everyone," she said, "It is time to lay out the plan for the future of Castle Rouge's Harem. We are the Harem; we will make the rules. Look around you, meet and greet your sister. Get a glass and have a toast with me, champagne or bourbon, your choice."

"I've got a lot of news. First off, we are the Harem. We are not for sale unless we say so and our price is sky high. Sure, we can take these suckers for a thousand dollars a night, but we're going after the entire bank account. We have the skills to secrete their secret which will make us rich, if a little sexual persuasion is required, you each have the opportunity to accept or deny. If you'd like to make a little extra, that's up to you to. We're basically going to be hosting a big expensive party. Basic membership will be a thousand dollars a month."

Sasha did the quick math and said, "We could easily get six or seven hundred people in the Castle Rouge, that's a lot of money."

Vivian said, "we're only going to allow a few hundred invitations per night. Platinum members get priority, then gold, then silver for reservations in the lounges, restaurants, and access to the mansion's facilities. Members also get to bring guests. The bigger the package, the bigger the benefits. Silver is the basic membership, it allows access to the ballroom, theaters, lounges, bars, and restaurant, they can bring one guest, alcohol not included. The Gold plan will be ten thousand dollars a month." She had to wait for oohs and awes to subside, and Platinum would be twenty-five thousand dollars a month."

Gabrielle said, "What do they get for twenty thousand dollars?"

"Everything in the Silver and the Gold plan, plus its unlimited. I expect to have about six or seven Platinum members, they will be our main targets. The one's with the most and the

most to lose.” Vivian stopped and made eye contact with everyone in the room, “Has anyone noticed, our private quarters’ has green carpet. Green carpet areas are the only areas without cameras. If you’re standing on a red carpet, you are in at least one camera. You need to know that, and that is our secret. That is why we’ll be making most of our meetings in my room. For our privacy. We want to collect as much damaging information on these creepy bastards as we can. We don’t have to force them into anything, we allow them to bury themselves, they always do, and we’ll be there to get it on film or tape.”

Sasha asked, “How can you tell them apart? Which members are which?”

“You’ll get to know them, but until you do, their membership card is also an ID that you should all get in the habit of asking to see. Their card will be silver, gold, or gray, if they have no card, they must be a guest. If you are asked to chaperone someone, that means you party with them, keep them company, act as a date and pretend to enjoy their company as arm candy, that’s all, company only. Anything other than, you can negotiate with them, I just highly recommend you make it expensive; we want our clientele to be worth taking. All the rooms upstairs have cameras and microphones, so remember, if you’re going to screw someone, make it good for the camera.” She looked over to Sadie and held her glass up. Sadie saw it and knew to bring the bourbon. She was catching on fast, Vivian liked that.

When Sadie caught Vivian alone, “Vee, can you teach me more?”

Sadie surprised her. “More what sweetie?”

“Your friends are scaring beautiful. I’ll bet they can take any man they wanted, they’re like little Vees.”

“Oh, so you want to be a New Orleans Lady?”

“I’d like to be just like you,” she quietly admitted.

“You’ve been drinking, good for you, but now you have to be able to trust yourself,” she leaned over and planted a kiss on



her. “Have a good time honey, talk with Tanya, Candy, and Sasha, they love talking about themselves almost as much as they like talking about other people. Listen to their stories, they can teach you things too.”

Sadie lost her inhibitions somewhere between Hell and Yeah and kicked it up proper till she passed out. Vivian tucked her into her bed and rejoined the party.

Vivian told Kat, “You’ve been sitting there quietly all night. Your homies know you, but the Mississippi girls don’t. You should go talk to them, share makeup tips, or waxing secrets, whatever, just let them know your one of them, you ain’t no different from them except, well, you know.”

Vivian was messing with him. Kat was cute for a boy, and he knew it, Vivian always supported him in a sisterly manner. Kat wasn’t old enough to drink but in Vivian’s opinion age was just a number. “Someone, get this sister a glass.” Because he felt like he was born a girl in a boy’s body, and wanted to transition, Vivian felt sorry for the struggles he had to face and teased him with feminine pronouns when she remembered to, to help make him feel more accepted. It didn’t take a lot, nor did it take a long time before Kat was wasted. They put him in the bed alongside Sadie.

Tanya and Sasha looked over to the two innocent bodies, passed out drunk, and had an idea. “How funny would it be if we took their clothes off and had them pose for the camera?”

“You are so mean. I love it, but let’s save the blackmail for the creeps. Besides, Kat’s underage and Sadie doesn’t deserve it, she’s too innocent. It would have been funny though,” she admitted.

The girls packed in close around Vivian as she continued to explain all the nuances and rules for the club. “Remember girls, we don’t have to be pressured to do anything. I would never ask you to do something I wouldn’t do myself and we can’t voluntarily pull off a sting, it wouldn’t have been worth it. Rule

number one, sex for money is your choice, other than that we use it for blackmail. Rule number two, no stealing. We're going for big scores; petty crimes can destroy everything. Rule number three, we look after each other like family. Look around you in this room, we are the Harem, rule four, the Harem's business stays with the Harem, we never ever talk about what we do with anybody but ourselves. Five, green and red carpet." She paused and took another sip, placed her glass down on a little table, then reached over to take Gabrielle's hand. "If you haven't noticed by now, I'm a toucher, I'm a lover, I love you all."

Vivian drank more than most, and even though alcohol had to have influenced her emotions, the girls could tell she was still in full control of herself.

"What about Mr. Johnny?" Tanya asked.

"Good question," Vivian said. "Which brings up rule number six, the unwritten rule, we treat John like he's God's gift to women, the king of the Harem, but don't talk about the marks unless he asks you directly. His mind is usually elsewhere and the least he knows the less confused he will be. He has agreed to give us everything we need; I would like you to keep in mind what we're doing. He knows he's supposed to come to me about work. Remember, he's a man and can't be trusted, at the end of all this, we girls will be the only ones standing. Let me handle John Strahan. For your part, stroke his ego, screw his brains out if you wish, just leave the talking to me."

"The next step is to promote the club and sign up some members. We are going to start having a party here every week, from Thursday through Sunday. There will be a cover charge each night until we close for members only next week. Our job will be to mingle with the guests and promote membership. We won't be pushy, just let your body do all the talking."

Tuesday was the youngest of her girls. She just turned twenty-one, but she had a three-year-old at home with grandma. She was eager for this new life she was being promised and

walked up to Vivian. “I’m sorry Vee, everything sounds so great, we’re going to kick some ass and make some money. Can I ask what kind of money? I have a little boy.”

“Good question, darling, What’s your name?”

“Tuesday.”

Vivian replied, “Well Tuesday, that’s a good question.” Then turned to the group, “Listen up everyone, we’ll have two levels of chaperones. Level one chaperones that chaperone for a thousand dollars a week, level two chaperones that are working an assignment for two thousand a week. Sometimes you may be level one, sometimes you may be level two. Oh, yeah, we’ll have bonuses too. Each of you gets your own private suite, meals, housekeeping and medical. Level one chaperones act as arm candy and dates for the big spenders, at events or dinners and are basically escorts. If you’re level two, you’re actively involved in a case, which may require considerable contributions. Is a thousand dollars a week enough?”

“It’s more than I’ve ever earned, but what if a customer makes a proposal? After all, that’s what we were doing until now.”

“Good point,” Vivian said, “Some of these tricks may have been customers before, if they make a proposition, keep in mind, we are not a whore house, we have a purpose now, but if you want to make extra, make it very expensive. If any of them get too rough, we’re keeping an eye open plus there’s the panic button. Stay protected, stay on the red carpet, if anyone threatens you, we’ll have their balls in a vise. Remember, we’re here to make things right. Whether your level one or level two, you are all getting bonuses, big bonuses. I plan for each of you to be able to retire in a couple years.”

Gabrielle said, “I would have had to sleep with ten guys a week to make that kind of money, now I’m getting paid to not sleep with them, and the rotten jerk bastards that treat their women like trash get what’s coming to them. I love this country.

Vivian pulled Tuesday closer, “If you want to get your own apartment for you and your son instead of staying here, let me know, I know people.”

She looked at Vivian, surprised that she knew how she thought. “Thank you, Vee, can I talk to you again in about a month about it. If my mom can continue watching him, I’d like to stay here a while.”

“Darling, take all the time you need, if you need help, you’ve got a big family here,” she opened her arms to the room. Vivian then opened her arms to Tuesday and gave her a hug.

Vivian realized she was getting tired and asked everyone to either go back to their rooms or at least keep the noise down so she could catch a nap. She walked over to her bed and pulled the curtains opened enclosing her bed, took off her dress and climbed under the sheets. Sadie and Kat were curled up together on the other side while Vivian lay naked under the sheets just inches away from them. She slept for an hour and woke to an empty room except for Sadie and Kat. She got up and got dressed, touched up her makeup and walked down to the kitchen at four in the morning.

The kitchen staff was busy making bread and pastries. The night shift cleaned and made baked goods. Cakes and cookies, pastries, and bread took too much time and resources to be done during the day, so all the baking was done at night. Vivian was treated to the next day’s decadent rewards and colorful conversation with the baker.

“I hear you’re going to clean these girls up,” Mora said as she cut her a piece of velvet crumb cake.

“These girls don’t need cleaned up, they just need guidance,” Vivian offered.

“No Ms. Vee, they need cleaned up. Mr. John let them girls sell their asses right out in the open and in the casino. It’s the devil’s playground out there I tell you, you got to be careful.”

“That’s ok, there’s a new devil in town now, so they better watch out themselves.”

Mora’s been cooking and baking for the Strahan’s since Robert bought the place a little better than ten years ago. “You got to watch out for Mr. John’s mother. She usually stays in her room at the back of the house but occasionally gets drunk and causes a scene. She hated her house being used as a brothel and she’s really going to hate it being turned into a night club.”

Vivian laughed, “Yeah, I can see that. How did she take it when Mr. Strahan was killed?”

“She drank more, not because she was missing him, I think she was celebrating. Some folk thought that fella that killed him might have been her lover, because she sure never showed Mr. Strahan any.”

“Really,” Vivian uttered. “Yummy,” she said as she took another bite of the cake. “Thanks for the cake, Mora, it was lovely, I guess I better get some rest, I hope you have a good evening, or morning.”

Vivian returned to her room and woke up her two sleeping beauties. “Time to get up,” she said as she gave them a brisk shake. “You crazy kids need to go and climb into your own beds. Now go get some rest, I’ll see you sometime later.”

They got up, and left Vivian all alone.

Vivian looked at the bed, then at the door, and for a moment, wasn’t sure what she was doing. Go to bed, go out and get a drink? She wrestled with loneliness and tonight was no different. Deep down she didn’t trust people, anyone that meant anything to her in her life had abandoned her. On the flip side of that coin, her alter ego loved associating with people and manipulating them. She took off her dress and threw it over the chair then climbed back into bed. She drifted off asleep while reminiscing about her youth. She envisioned John back in New Orleans when she was twelve. She thought of the days in summer

when she watched the sunrise with him in the park and tears returned to her early morning face as she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Six

Vivian was awakened by the ramblings and pounding of a crazy woman. John's mother was on the loose again and pounding her cane on the doors of everyone in staff quarters. She ranted on, "Ya'll took my man, and are taking my baby, I'll be damned if you're taking my house!"

She ran into the hallway to find Mrs. Strahan, skunk drunk and in a rage. John's mother had no idea Vee was little Johnny's Vivian, from New Orleans, but Vivian knew all too well the bitch that took her little Johnny away. Coy and cunning, Vivian slowly walked up to her and calmly put her arms around her, whispering, "Everything will be alright, darling."

There was something about the tone in her voice or her magnetic presence that gave John's mother a calming feeling. Vivian talked her into coming to her room to calm down, relax, while she placed a call to Mr. Peters, "I need your legal expertise, John's mother is a drunken danger to herself and everyone around her, she's up on the second floor threatening people and causing a ruckus. Can we force her into a rehabilitation center of mental health facility? Can you make that happen?"

"Yes ma'am, but they no longer have involuntary commitment unless the person is a direct threat to themselves or someone else."

"I'm saying she's at that point."

"Vee," Mr. Peter's said, "It's only fair to let you know, Mr. Strahan doesn't control me. He can't coerce me the way Robert did."

"I'm surprised Mr. Peters, were you under the impression our communication here at Castle Rouge was not being recorded. Look around you, cameras everywhere. Let's cut to the chase shall we, can you get Mrs. Strahan legally removed from the property and deemed a hazard to herself and others or not?"

He conceded, “Yes, I’ll make it happen, I’ll also expect a little compensation.”

Vivian smiled at him and laughed, “Yes, of course, this is business.”

Mr. Peters told her, “All we need is for John to sign the papers and a judge will order her to be placed into a rehabilitation center up north for three months.”

“I’ll have John call you.”

She called John to inform him that his mother had gone drunken insane. “Darling, this might qualify for parental abuse if you don’t seek remedy for her dangerous behavior. She attacked the girls with her cane, calling out for the damnation of our sins. I’m scared, all the girls are scared, but I have a solution, Send her on a vacation, a rehabilitation center upstate. She can leave tomorrow, just call Mr. Peters; he has the details.”

John cried out, “Winner, winner, chicken dinner!” Where do I have to sign?

That burst took Vivian by surprise. She was expecting, ‘oh no, not my poor mother.’ John was physically joyful to hear that his mother had been sent away, which made Vivian wonder what she didn’t know about their relationship.

No sooner than she got John’s mother out of the way, her phone rang. “Ms. Vee, it’s Vinnie, I got good news, I found just the system for your membership cards.”

“Great, when can you have it set up and ready to issue?”

“The software can be loaded tomorrow, and by Monday we could have all the peripheral hardware setup. We can run a couple days of samples as trial period and test run, by Thursday we can be ready to issue cards.”

“That is good news, let’s make it happen.”

Vinnie said, “Don’t you want to know how much this will cost?”

She spoke softly into her phone, “Darling, I care about results, if it cost me a little extra, I’m ok with that. Right now, you



are on my good guy list, I believe you'll try to stay on it to, so if you think the system is worth it, send me the bill. Get together with Kat and let's rock and roll." She wanted to yell, 'Damn! This day is turning out all right,' as she went through her check list.

She felt ahead of the curve and decided to dedicate some time to her girls. Sadie was almost always nearby and provided Vivian with greater gifts than bottles of bourbon or maintaining schedules, she became her closest confidant. "Sweetie, get the girls together, we're going shopping."

They used the casinos limousine and drove down to the Edgewater Mall on the beach in Biloxi. The girls stayed fresh on fashion, something Vivian enforced, by always choosing the best. "Girls, we are going to be dancing, wining, and dining with some pretty wealthy clients. Dress like you are trying to impress a king, smell better than everything around you, speak like you're giving God advice and confidence to believe he takes it. Stay in pairs and meet me here at Victoria's Secret in two hours. There's two thousand dollars on your debit card. It's a pre party bonus, we'll get plenty of them."

The girls broke off in teams, something Vivian always advocated, "Never go alone."

Sadie stood beside Vivian at Victory Secrets, "What are you doing girl, go spend some money, have fun, go shopping."

She looked at Vivian, "I am, I'm shopping with you," and touched a pair of silk knickers hanging on a rack.

Vivian smiled, "So you want to be sexy?"

"I wished I looked as pretty as you and the other girls."

"Sweetheart," she looked at her and took her hand. "You need a makeover, if we had more time, I'd have my mama teach you all about beauty, but here we are." She took her hand and hurried to the salon. They let her hair out, gave it a few swirls, and properly showed her how to apply makeup. Sadie was a little older than Vivian but felt more like a daughter and looked up to her.

Tuesday was closest to having spent the most, but then again, ‘you can’t look like a princess in rags,’ her grandpa used to say. She took her opportunity for extravagance.

By noon, the following day, the boxes of membership cards arrived and were ready to be issued. The cards were the member’s ID’s, complete with a photo, a debit card for services and purchases, and could be coded for access to any of the digital door locks on the second floor. Vinnie’s software could track everything the card is used for.

The girls were ready for the weekend party to begin. This party was an open house for the club. News of the grand opening passed among the social circles to all the major players. While people with connections received VIP reservations via email, the general public would have waited in line, if there were more than four hundred, to ensure the desired occupancy wasn’t exceeded.

Vivian estimated four to five hundred people would show. Addressing the senior security staff, “We only want to let three hundred people in at a time, not including the ones we invited. Can you get one of those clicker counters to keep track of the people?”

The night watch captain assured her they could keep track of how many were let in.

She then got together with the girls, “We’re going to have to be able to manage the people we accept, therefore everyone that expresses interest in becoming a member, send them to my table. If they’re ok, I’ll send them to Kat’s table for registration.”

“How are we to keep track of the invited and the public?”

“We’re going to give the public tickets for two drinks, and once they use their tickets, they’ll have to pay full price which they probably wouldn’t be able to afford and will not be hanging around long. Meanwhile, we’ll give our invited guests a gold lanyard to wear around their neck so they can enjoy an open bar. They’ll be in the VIP section with John and I so it should be pretty easy to keep track of them.”

Vivian looked gorgeous, she wore a flaming red gown and with her jet-black hair accenting her frame, it was impossible not to look at her as she walked around the room, and certainly the focus of any group she was in. “One last word before we take their stations,” Vivian said, “Enjoy yourself, make them want you, break some hearts, and have fun, but remember, we’re a member’s only franchise, we’re trying to get them to become members.”

Throughout the evening, the Mississippi State University Orchestra played in the ball room at the head to the dance floor and engaged many older, more refined guests. Behind the ballroom a passageway led to four exceptionally large cocktail lounges that catered to their own flavor of music and ambiance. Two chaperones circulated each lounge handing out membership forms for interested customers. Vivian had to approve all the members, silver, gold, or platinum. After filling out the form they were escorted to Vivian’s table by their respective chaperones. Vivian explained the differences between memberships and capitalized on the egos of the platinum queries. Sadie helped Vinnie register all silver memberships while Kat registered the gold and platinum members.

Chaperones began bringing people by one at a time and each time, Vivian had to excuse herself from conversation to greet a new member. Vivian occasionally apologized to her guests for the interruptions, until the point came where all of her time was devoted to enrolling members.

Dean Bixby hated interruptions, hated that he had to come down to the coast and be shaken down by the nephew of the guy that was already shaking him down.”

“Mr. Bixby, you sure seemed to be displeased this evening, are we not taking care of you, is it my interruptions,” Vivian said.

“No, I just can’t use the school’s orchestra anytime I want, I have a board of trustees to answer to. I thought my debt was paid when Robert died.”

“Yeah, I know you did, and that’s why I’m giving this back to you,” and handed him a floppy disc with Robert’s blackmail material on it. That’s it, you are a free man,” she smiled.

The dean didn’t know what to think. “That’s it, all of it?”

“It is,” Vivian said.

“And you still want me to do something for your girls?”

“Yes, of course, but because you want to, because we can come to an understanding. You see, I envision making a considerable donation to your school and you get my girls scholarships. If that’s something of your interest, I believe giving you back Robert’s marker was a good business decision.”

His mood changed, “Well, Ms. Vee, I must say I prefer doing business with you as opposed to Robert.”

“Yes Mr. Bixby, I hope to hear a lot of that tonight.” She excused herself again to interview for a platinum referral. His name showed up on Detective Hightower’s list, provided by Mr. Adams and Vivian already had information on Jason Barnes, an insurance investigator. “Mr. Barnes, welcome to Castle Rouge and the Harem Club. I wouldn’t have guessed you could afford to throw your money to the wind on our club, you strike me as someone more conservative with their money.”

“That’s not a very good selling technique you know.”

“Why are you here? We both know you’re not interested in the club.”

“I assure you I am interested in the club.”

Vivian figured that he was looking for an angle to take her down. “Ok, if you’re serious and have twenty-five thousand dollars, for a one-month membership, step right up.”

Mr. Barnes asked, “What do I get for my money?”

“You get access, you get reservations, you get guests and food and drink, and for you, maybe even some company.”

“Sounds like a lot of money for a little self-indulgence.”

“The people with the money think it’s pretty good,” she replied. She knew he was fishing so she threw out some chum.

Vivian looked at a painting on the wall and asked, “Have you even taken half the value of a painting to declare it stolen?”

Mr. Barnes was awfully familiar with the scheme. Robert had evidence on Mr. Barnes and now he knew that she was aware of it. “Ok, I’m in,” he said.

“No, Mr. Barnes, save your money, I’ll grant you gold membership, but I have limited spaces for platinum.

“But platinum access gives me a greater access to other platinum members. I would really like access.”

“I cannot have you working freelance on this establishment, but if you want to make an investment to Castle Rouge, we could work something out.”

“Work something out?”

“Yeah, a job. The kind of job only you can pull off.”

He acknowledged her implication and accepted the proposal. Vivian waved Sadie over, “Sweetie, please get Kat to put Mr. Barnes on the roster for platinum membership, and please ask a waitress to come see me.”

Robert’s files had evidence of him committing insurance fraud, so Vivian knew she had him. Now she’ll cash in. She put her hand on his chest as if she were stopping him from leaving and said, wearing a big smile, “Mr. Barnes, now that you are entitled to all The Harem has to offer, there’s something I need from you.”

‘Here it comes,’ he thought to himself. “Vee, what could I possibly do for you, what God hasn’t already done?”

“I’m sure you mean that in a nice way, but seriously, I’m offering you a job. You like making money, don’t you?” She went for the jugular, attacked his weak spot, greed.

“Well yes ma’am, it’s one of my favorite things to do. What do you have in mind?”

“I’ll put this right on out there, I want you to sell three of Mr. Strahan’s paintings and approve the claim that they had been stolen, we split the money.”

“I like doing business with you much more so than with Robert, he was a prick, all the time. I accept your proposal.”

Vivian put her other hand on his chest, leaned forward and said, “Enjoy yourself, the bar is open, we’ll talk later, and be nice to my girls, they are not for sale,” and gave him a wink.

Off he went and Sadie brought a teacher up next who is applying for gold, “Vee, this is Thomas Franks, gold.”

She stood up from her booth, “Can I call you Tommy?” Vivian asked.

“Tommy’s fine.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a high school teacher.”

“Are you married, have kids, maybe a dog?”

“Yes, yes, and yes. Why?” he questioned.

A lump in her throat formed, she told him, “Oh, darling, you have a chance in this world to be somebody, make a difference, is a shallow life of decadence and desire worth what’s in your life today? I cannot be responsible for your family’s broken heart, though I will take your money, I’m just giving you a chance to think it over, it’s a lot of money for something you already have.”

“Are you declining my membership?” he asked.

“Not at all,” Vivian said, “I’ll grant you gold, who knows, maybe you could even apply for platinum.” She hated to see people fall off a good path, but the choice had to be theirs.

By the end of the evening, they had accepted five platinum, ten gold, and thirty silver memberships. John made his rounds around the casino and found himself back at Vee’s table. “I am so sorry for not spending more time with you here, but the

casino won't run itself. Imagine, not long ago, my uncle did everything he could to relegate me to the mansion and away from the casino, now I see why."

"That's alright, I've had a ton of company tonight," she replied.

"So, it went well?" John asked excitedly.

"It did indeed, we signed up about two hundred thousand dollars' worth of memberships, we have two fish on a hook and a few in a net, the next couple days will be bigger. We've made our money back and more, which reminds me, I should ask Mr. Adams to set up another account in your name to skim the profits to."

"That's sound great. You really did good Vee." John said.

Vivian had been working hard on controlling her accent, the right amount of Georgia and the right amount of French, at the right time. She often has conversations with herself in her room for practice. Her home girls were the only ones that knew that secret. "Darling," in her most seductive Georgia accent, "I'm going to be giving the girls a little bonus. I'm telling them that it's from you, I mention it because they may try to express their gratitude and I didn't want you to be surprised or confused. So, if they come on too strong." She gave him a wink, "It's ok to indulge, just don't hurt yourself, they're pros."

He laughed slightly, "I'll try."

At the end of the evening, she gathered all the girls together in her room. Gabrielle asked, "Excuse me Ms. Vee, why don't we meet in the lounge, why do we always meet in your room?"

"Because we can talk freely here. Always be aware of the cameras." She started her meeting by handing out cards, "these are debit cards for an account that has been set up for you, there's a two-thousand-dollar transfer made to it for doing such a fine job tonight, not bad for a party. Tomorrow should be even bigger and better."

Everyone was joyfully engaged in conversation with the exception Tiffany, which did not escape Vivian's attention. Vivian waved her over. "You should have a happier face," she said.

"I feel out of place. I want so desperately to fit in and be one of the girls," Tiffany admitted.

Vivian witnessed the dying of innocence so often and it broke her heart each time. "Tiffany, sweetie, I think you may be a little disillusioned about all of this."

She replied, "I've never done anything, I've never had someone; I want to live on the edge, if need be, but I want to live."

Vivian asked, "What your head wants can kill you, what your heart wants can heal you. What is it that's missing in your life?" Tiffany blinked and blinked again as tears started forming in her eyes. "An identity."

Vivian opened her arms to her, "come closer," she gave her a big sisterly hug. "I can help you find the angel within you, or demon. By the time you figure out which, it'll be too late to take back. Are you sure you want to go down that road?"

"I'm ready."

"Honey, I'm just asking you to think a little before making that commitment, believe me, I know all too well the pain that comes with the demons."

She looked into Vivian's eyes, "Vee, I was nobody, I might have well been dead, I'd rather live one day than die a hundred."

"I understand. How many times have you had sex?" Vivian asked.

"I had a boyfriend in high school."

"That's not what I asked, this lifestyle often finds us sleeping with gross, fat, smelly old men that treat women worse than pets."

"You're indestructible, I want to be like you."



Vivian had a weak spot for the young and innocent. “Tiffany, I want to protect you from the evil, but baby I’m part of it. I’d just as well get you drunk and have sex with you.”

Tiffany paused for a moment. “Would you?”

Vivian gave herself credit for trying to save her but couldn’t pass up the opportunity to secure another loyal relationship. She was already thinking of how to use her in her plan. “When I send everyone away, be in the bathroom, when they’re gone, I’ll call you to come out, that way the other girls won’t know what you’re doing. If you want them to know, that’s your business. It doesn’t matter to me.”

Vivian made love to her and opened her eyes to a different form of passion, one that required mutual trust. While waiting in the bathroom, Tiffany had her reservations and thought that she might feel dirty or ashamed, but afterward, to her surprise, felt part of something, she felt accepted, she felt happy.

“Sweetie, you should go and get some rest, if you think you’re ready, tomorrow you can join the chaperones, but you be careful.”

“Thank you, Vee, I won’t let you down,” then hurried out the door.

Vivian knew she was innocent and vulnerable, and tried hard not to believe she took advantage of her, but ever her expert ability to influence couldn’t prevent her guilt. Ultimately, she decided to accept, that was who she was.

As she sat at the foot of her bed, she reflected on her encounter with Tiffany and realized her greatest fear was loneliness. Abandoned in a cruel world at a young age changed her and she knew it. She didn’t want her weakness to control or influence her and thought the only way to prevent it was to eliminate the trigger. She decided to ask Sadie to live with her. She was already dependent on her. In the darkest part of the early morning Vivian called Sadie on the phone and woke her up.

“Hey girl, sorry if I woke you.”

“That’s alright, is everything ok?”

“Yes, I was just lonely and wondering if I could talk you into keeping me company.”

Sadie was a little shocked, Vivian was the strongest and most confident woman she knew, her being lonely never would have crossed her mind. “Sure, I’ll be right there.” Sadie hurried to her room thinking she was probably just drunk and needed someone to talk to or hold. When she got there, she expected Vivian to open the door naked or at least in her underwear, she had no inhibitions, but was surprised to see her in jeans and a tee shirt.

“I’m concerned I’m not spending enough time with you,” Vivian started, “or perhaps my insatiable desires may conflict with your sense of decency.”

“No, Vee, I am perfectly happy.”

Vivian took her hand, “You have been so good to me, and I realized I need you more now than ever. Would you consider moving in with me? You can have the other room; we don’t have to get intimate, unless of course you want to.”

Sadie adored Vivian, she wasn’t a lesbian, but thought if she were, Vivian would be the perfect partner. “I’m honored, Vee, you know I love you, but I can’t compete with these girls, I’m just an average girl who wants to be the best assistant to you that I can be.”

“That’s why I need you, my life is complicated and believe it or not, you help keep me focused.”

“Your fling with Tiffany doesn’t have anything to do with it, does it?”

“You know about that?”

“Yeah, I saw her hide away in your bathroom. It’s ok, I knew the moment we met, and we were hanging out together in our underwear; you were going to sleep with Tiffany. I could see it in your eyes. I’m ok with it.”

“Well, it wouldn’t help to apologize, that’s who I am. One big ball of passion. If I weren’t so charming, I’d be a slut.”

Sadie laughed, “That’s so you, honest, blunt, and unabashed, I think that’s what I like about you most. You’re not afraid to be yourself.”

“So, what do you say,” Vivian asked, “Will you be my roommate?”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“Is there anything I can do for you, anything you need?”

“Yes ma’am, as a matter of fact there is,” Sadie said while fidgeting with her watch.

“What’s that?” Vivian inquired.

“I’d like to document all our journeys and experiences and write a book. Lord forbid we ever get pinched for any of our adventures, the book and movie rights could pay to keep us out of court and could make me somebody.”

“Sadie, honey, I’ve been a bad girl most of my young life and if there’s one thing that I’ve learned about information is, be the one collecting it, not the one providing it. Wait, I have an idea. I’ll allow you to write your book, I’ll even help you and give you interviews, but you have to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“I haven’t told you what it was.”

“I trust you, Vee.”

“Tomorrow night I want you to be part of a setup.”

“Ok.”

Bradley Turner is a labor union boss giving John fits about the pay raises we gave our employees. Tomorrow night he is bringing his wife here and is considering being a member just so he can spy on John.” She pulled a small vile from her handbag, “Can you put two drops of this into his drink at the bar, then drop the bottle into his wife’s purse at some point after without them noticing, do you think you can do that?”

“What is it?”

“It’s a little something to make him sick, he’ll be forced to leave the party early, when he does, we call and tell him our cameras caught his wife spiking his drink. Whatever happens after that is fate.”

“So, you want to get them fighting and cause marital problems? That sounds like fun.”

“It’s a little more than that, but yeah, that’s the idea.”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“It will get really ugly if you get caught, you’ll need to practice. So, you want to write a book, do you want to be a part of it, you want to be a spy?”

Sadie enthusiastically said, “Yes.”

“Now listen to me, all this will play out on red carpet, so there are cameras everywhere, we’re going to do a couple things. Get a rubber band, put it around your wrist, put the vial under the rubber band on the inside of your wrist. Now you can tilt your open hand and put the drops in undetected right on camera and it won’t be seen. Sometime shortly thereafter, show her the powder room, where you exchange cosmetic tips or something, and drop the vial into her purse. There are recording devices in the restrooms but no cameras. I’ll have Sasha and Tanya meet you in there, for distraction.”

“This is awesome, I feel like double-o-seven., except more bad ass.”

Vivian really liked and needed Sadie and it bothered her that she would use her this way, but that shallow feeling of guilt set in, and she compensated by having a little fun with Mr. Turner. His sins were many and watching him destroy himself was a greater pleasure than sex. She told Sadie, “Sweetie, in a comfortable French accent, something closer to home, “wear these,” and handed her a pair of white silk gloves, “white rubber band.” Mrs. Turner’s prints need to be on this not yours. When asked to open her purse, she will see the vial and pick it up out of

curiosity, she'll hold it to her face and say, what is this, this isn't mine."

"These gloves are gorgeous," Sadie said, "I can see this whole plan playing out in my mind and it's awesome, but what if things go wrong?"

"If something doesn't feel right, walk away, excuse yourself and walk away. There will be other opportunities, and one more thing, there's no money in this for us, this is to cause him emotional pain and let him know he's not in charge of his life. They say people have to pay for our sins, we're just the messenger."

Sadie suddenly felt cautious, moral clichés brought back bad memories from childhood, "Is this a religious vendetta?" Sadie reluctantly asked.

"It's a vendetta alright, but it's not righteous. I owe it to all the little girls and the few boys growing up on my home streets. Streets I was ashamed of as an orphan. Life was hard enough on those streets, to be alone as a child on those streets was a different level of hardship, but no more. I want to help lift them out of there. God's not going to do that, we are."

Sadie's fear of judgement has been spared for now.

Saturday evening's affairs started with an orchestra's tribute to the Nelson Riddle Orchestra. Long gowns and tuxedos filled the ballroom from Seven to Ten. Ballroom dancing on the marble dance floor would soon become a fad for the rich. Afterward many would migrate to the lounges where age had a way of separating for their social needs. Vivian and Sadie would stay in the main ballroom, meeting and greeting guests, the other girls would pair up and make rounds in each of the lounges. Tiffany's first day as a chaperone was expected to be clumsy and confusing so Vivian paired her with Candy. She was smart and quick with a response and can go toe to toe with anyone.

Vivian drank a lot by many people's standards and was aware of it. It didn't change her perspective, but she knew it, and

compensated by encouraging others to loosen up. Maw-maw used to tell her, “If you want to take someone’s money in poker, get them drunk.”

Candy walked with Tiffany to the bar and poured two glasses of white wine. “Here’s to your first day on the job,” they toasted.

Tiffany wasn’t a wine drinker and asked, “Are we supposed to be drinking on the job?”

“Of course, we can drink. We’re professional dates and sometimes you drink on a date, but this glass is only for show. It makes others think you’re having a good time, that sooner or later the alcohol will affect you, so men tend to hang around like vultures in the desert. You can trade it for anything else you like.

Just before ten o’clock, Mr. and Mrs. Turner entered the restaurant and were seated in the back. His only reason for going there was to stir up trouble. Candy and Tiffany waited a couple minutes for them to get comfortable then approached their table, “Good evening, Mr. Turner, and Mrs. Turner, welcome to the Harem may I get you a drink?” Candy asked. Tiffany just stood beside her smiling.

“Whiskey neat,” he looked at his wife, “vodka tonic.”

Tiffany and Candy walked away. Candy called Vivian, “Company has arrived.”

Vivian told Sadie, “Come with me, our company is in the restaurant. Are you ready for this?”

“Yes Vee, I can do it.”

Candy ordered their drinks and Sadie met her at the bar, took her place and returned to the table with the drinks. Vivian and Tiffany joined her for the greeting. Sadie put his whiskey in front of him and Mrs. Turner’s vodka tonic in front of her. Vivian then introduced Tiffany. “Mrs. Turner, this is Tiffany, she’s a PhD student at Ole Miss earning a little tuition money for the summer.”

“That’s wonderful, I went to Ole Miss.”

Tiffany began an engaging conversation with her, lord knows Mr. Turner had no interest in her stories. After a few moments and many smiles, Sadie asked Mrs. Turner, “Have you seen our powder rooms,” expressing excitedly, “The VIP powder rooms are to die for.” It’ll take about twenty minutes for the meal; it’d be the perfect time to show you. Sadie, Tiffany, and Mrs. Turner headed toward the powder room where Sasha and Tanya were waiting. Vivian sat across from Mr. Turner; she could see over his shoulder that they went into the powder room. When they came out, Vivian got the head nod from Sadie and knew she made the drop. “I have disappointing information to share with you, Mr. Turner. I’m sorry, but my lawyer knows your lawyer and they talk. It appears that there are contestable issues with regard to your last will and testament. You didn’t hear it from me, but your wife has her own plans. Please try and enjoy your evening.” Vivian got up and walked away.

He sat at the table stunned and confused.

It was shortly after dinner Mr. Turner started getting nauseous and they made their way out of the restaurant. On his way home he threw up and had his driver take him to the emergency room at Singing River Hospital.

After the doctor’s examination and test, cyanide poisoning was the verdict, which required them to notify the police. He had just enough to sicken him but not quite enough to kill. “Cyanide!” he shouted, “what the hell.” When detective Hightower arrived, Mr. Turner told him, “I was warned that my wife was looking into my death and my will. I don’t think it’s a coincidence. Can you investigate?”

A complimentary call from Vivian allowed Detective Hightower to be Mr. Turner’s first visitor. After a brief interview with Mr. Turner in the ICU, he approached Mrs. Turner in the lobby. He introduced himself and asked her if she’d empty her purse.

“Why on earth would I do that?” she asked.

“Ma’am, your husband’s been poisoned and it’s standard procedure to eliminate suspects and we need to be able to eliminate you from that list, the sooner the better.” She had no reason to suspect anything, she hadn’t done anything, so she emptied her purse out on the counter. The little bottle of a mysterious liquid rolled out. She picked it up and looked at it from the left and the right and put it back down. “That’s odd, I’ve never seen that before.”

Detective Hightower took a glove out of his jacket pocket and picked the bottle up with it and put it in an evidence bag. “I’m sorry Mrs. Turner, I have no choice but to take you down to the station till we find out what this is. I’ll give your lawyer a phone call myself when we get down to the station and until then,” and he read her Miranda rights.

By midnight, they signed seven more platinum and ten more gold members. “Girls,” Vivian said, “We’re not taking any more platinum or gold members this evening. If someone is interested, tell them to come back and try tomorrow.”

The evening ended with much less fanfare than the previous night. Vivian thought about the look Mr. Turner must have had, when he learned his wife tried to poison him. ‘Check,’ she said to herself, ‘that’s one.’

Sasha, Tanya, and Candy gathered around Vivian in her room after everyone left. Sasha said, “I got some big fish on the line baby.”

“Me too,” said Tanya.

“Remember girls,” Vivian said, “the targets are ours, just make it expensive and get it on camera.”

“Yeah baby, who’s your daddy now,” Candy jumped in with a mocking reference to all the asshole johns she’d ever had. “You go girl. I didn’t meet anyone tonight which reminds me, if you teamed up with Tiffany, keep an eye on her, she doesn’t know what to do when people start putting their hands all over her.”

“For sure,” Tanya replied.



Sadie interrupted politely, “I’m sorry girls, can I borrow Vee for a moment?”

“Sure.”

She walked with Vivian to the far side of the room, “What’s the matter?”

“I’m just a little confused. The rumor is Mr. Turner was poisoned.”

“It’s not a rumor, sweetie, he got a touch of poison.”

“But you told me it was something to make him sick; I could have killed him.” She was nervous and scared, she felt used and mistrusted.”

Vivian softened her voice and gripped her hand firmly but with a soft comforting embrace, “I’m sorry honey, If I would have told you that Mr. Turner sexually abused his stepdaughter and her mother knew all about it but did nothing and that his daughter later committed suicide because of the shame, would that have made a difference? If you knew it was poison, would you be able to give it to him, and more importantly, would you have been able to only give him two drops? I couldn’t, I’d have given it all to him, but we didn’t want him dead. The only way to make it work was for you not to now.”

“He did those things?”

“And more. Mr. Turner is a piece of shit, and we’re not done with him yet. Ruining his marriage is just part of it, he’s still going to have to answer for a secret bank account in the Cayman Islands.”

Sadie past met her in the present, as she chocked down a memory, “Oh my god, where do these people come from. I do think I could have done it. If I knew what he did, I probably would have given him all of it.”

“That’s why I couldn’t tell you, that’s why it had to be this way.” Vivian then put her hand under her chin and lifted it, “where you a victim?”

Sadie looked at Vivian and couldn't help herself, tears formed in her eyes and Vivian watched the effects of Sadie's heart stop, then Sadie let loose. All her pinned up emotional baggage from childhood surfaced and she began to sob. Vivian held her, telling her, "It's going to be alright. I got you; you don't have to hurt anymore. Get it out sweetie, don't keep it in, I'll take care of you."

It was everything Sadie needed. She too lived a life of secrets and shame. She never felt her mother's support like she was depending on Vivian's at the moment. Vivian's firm hold on her and her loving voice whispering in her ear, gave her comfort, "Do you want to stay with me tonight?"

"I do stay with you."

"No, I mean, do you want to stay with me tonight?" suggestively.

Sadie looked at the head of her bed. "I think I just want to be held."

Vivian put her hand to Sadie's face, "I'm here for you," and wiped the tears from her face. "Now, it is time we start healing, ok?"

Sadie composed herself a bit, "Ok," then got up and went into the bathroom to rinse off her face with cold water.

## Chapter Seven

Sunday afternoon rolled around. The final day of the weekend bash started with Vivian waking Sadie up. Sadie had the back room of Vivian's suite, but last night she slept like a baby in Vivian's arms. Vivian didn't take advantage of her, though she enjoyed the intimate embrace. "Wake up sweetie," she whispered in her ear.

"Thank you, Vee, I'm sorry about last night."

"Never be sorry for how you feel, baby."

"Well, thanks for being there for me."

"I love you. Now, get out of bed, we got a big day ahead of us, today is the grand prix. By now, the word has gotten out and everyone in town is going to want to be a part of it, tonight we lock in our memberships."

"Vee," Sadie asked, "I would like another chance to redeem myself. I think I can do better."

"Ok, I have just the thing," she continued talking while rolling up her stockings.

Sadie couldn't help but notice Vivian's smooth white legs and forced herself to stop thinking about it. "What do you want me to do?"

"Do you recall detective Hightower?"

She nodded, "Yes."

"During the renovations, I stashed the three paintings from the Den, three awfully expensive paintings. They were scheduled to be taken to the museum in New Orleans for safe keeping because we were opening the mansion up to the public. However, the paintings will never make it there. They will be stolen by our new friend, Detective Hightower, and given to our insurance adjuster, who in turn will endorse our insurance claim. We'll get both of them on record. When he comes around this evening, I'll let you handle the detective."

Sadie was excited, "What do you want me to do?"

“Tell him to go to the laundry room, in the back of the house, on the top shelf in the closet is his prize. Get close enough to whisper so it’s not obvious on a recording. That’s it, approach him from the side looking sexy, when he turns your way, tilt your head slightly and smile big. Introduce yourself as his chaperone and tell him where to go. Easy, Yeah?”

“I was hoping for something a little seductive or dangerous.”

“Don’t let the simple or easy things fool you, sweetie,” You are going to be facing a man that I have targeted, he’ll continue to do things to bury himself, he carries a gun, has shot people before, so we have to keep that in mind. He’s already a dirty cop, do you think he cares about the law at this point? Is it sounding more exciting yet?”

“I didn’t think of that.”

“Trust me girl, like a chess match, I know the next move. He will collect the paintings from the laundry, give them to Sergeant Stoddard, who will take them to Mr. Barnes to be sold on the black market. Do you remember Blake Kelly, the man that accompanied me here that first night here? He expressed interest in one of them.”

“Yeah, handsome, young, wants to be president or something.”

“I got him thinking he slept with some girls but can’t remember. You can pretend to be one of them if you want, just to torture him a bit, practice being evil.”

“So, who’s the mark?” Sadie asked.

“All of them, sweetie, all of them. We catch everything they do on camera.”

Sadie asked, “But we’ll be on camera too, won’t we.”

“That’s inconsequential, when their sins are about to be made public, they will do anything to keep it a secret. I’m not afraid of my sins, I’m an open book. Besides, I’m having Kat edit all of our identity out. When the house of cards falls, we will be

on the beach in St. Thomas, or maybe Paris, I always wanted to go to Paris.”

“France, can I come with you?”

“How can I function without you, of course you’re coming with me.”

Sadie later saw the detective walk in from the casino up to the main entrance. She triangulated her point of approach so he could see her coming out of the corner of his eye. “Hello Detective Hightower, my name’s Sadie, I am your chaperone this evening, if there’s anything at all you need, you just let me know.”

“I’m looking for Vee,” he said.

“She asked me to meet her here. On the top shelf of the closet in the laundry room is what you’re looking for. Shall I show you the way?”

“No thank you,” he said unpleasantly, having to deal with someone other than Vivian concerned him. He went straight to the laundry like he’d been there before and into the closet, took the paintings that were wrapped in brown paper out to the back dock.

Sadie made her way back to Vivian, “He sure struck me as rude. He didn’t say it, but whatever it was, you could feel it.”

“Yeah, Maw-maw called them, demons, we called them heebie-jeebies.”

They watched on camera as Detective Hightower left the back of the castle at the loading dock. “A thief on the camera, later the sale on camera, then the insurance claim. That’s a lot of crimes. Three blackmails, and a hell of a lot of money wrapped up in one little sting.”

Sadie confessed, “Thanks for taking me under your wing. I was lost.”

Vivian smiled really big, “I am so happy for you, I remember when I first decided I wasn’t taking any more shit. Its liberating, isn’t it?”

She pleasantly smiled back, “I feel free.”

“Good, feel free to go make some money. Go on out there, find Tiffany and you two, go find a thousand-dollar man. Drink his drink and eat his dinner, dance, and drink some more. Make him want to give you things. Even an apartment you’ll never use can be rented out. You did good girl, have a good time.”

Vivian then met up with her home girls. “This was our last night for an open party. From here on out its members only and may the fun begin,” she toasted.

Sasha asked, “Vee, all four of us are together again, let’s dance like we did at Pinkies. Let’s hang out like we used to one more time.”

Vivian said, “Ok, after the orchestra leaves, we’ll meet in the Hearts lounge, well party there for a bit, but I still have memberships to approve and gave Sadie some time to herself.”

“At least we’ll have some time together,” Tanya said.

John forced himself to stay away from the casino for most of the night so he could meet and socialize a bit with some of the elite members. “What a party,” Commissioner Graves told him.

“Thank you, we try.”

“What is this event setting you back?” he asked.

“Are you checking to see if I can afford it Commissioner?”

“No, just seems expensive.”

“It is, and I’m not worried, my general manger is doing a smash up job, I should introduce you.” John lacked the confidence to stand up next to, much less in front of, authoritarian figures. John waved Vivian over just as the orchestra started to pack up the instruments.

“Commissioner Graves, Vee, the brains behind the Harem.” He then whispered, “Thanks,” as he announced his departure. “I’m leaving you in better hands, I must make my rounds,” then walked off.

“Commissioner, where is that lovely wife of yours?”

“Ethel’s not feeling well, do you know Ethel?”

“No darling, I just know she loves you and it would break her heart if you were untrue.”

“How charming,” he said sarcastically. “You know your boss is in way over his head, don’t you?”

“Yes, he is, he’s young and dumb and probably doesn’t have a lot of integrity, but he’s a bit cocky because his uncle gave him a handful of J. Edgar Hoover on a dozen or so people.”

“Are you saying he has a file on me?”

“Mr. commissioner, I haven’t the slightest idea who he has information on. All I know is he tells me who he’s worried about and who he’s not.”

“How does that affect me?”

“You’re not on his worried list, that’s why he asked me to entertain you.”

The commissioner had no way of knowing if Robert or John had incriminating evidence on him. He knew he had skeletons in his closet and wasn’t sure if anyone else knew.

“Let me suggest, we toast to the Harem, all the important people on the coast with flock here, but I’m afraid it’s rather expensive, even for a Commissioner.”

“How much is membership?”

Vivian got a nibble, “It’s a good thing your wife’s not here, she would talk you into the platinum membership which is full unrestricted access. You really should take the opportunity to become a member, starting next week its members and guest only.”

“How much is the platinum?”

“Twenty-five thousand dollars.”

“A year?” he asked.

“A month.”

“A month!”

“It’s an exclusive club, but don’t let it bother you, the silver membership should be alright for you, it’s only a thousand dollars a month.”

“Surely you can’t be collecting that kind of money just for a membership.”

“Best fraternity there ever was. I was under the impression you were considering a run for the governorship?”

“I thought about it.”

“To lobby on behalf of Castle Rouge and the Harem, we could probably figure out an equitable way around the membership issue. If you run, you’ll need friends,” she looked around the room.

She leaned in, “Do you want platinum? I can give it to you.”

“If you were to run for governor, Mr. Strahan could donate money to your campaign, you pay your monthly membership and keep the difference.”

“That’ll only cover one month. What am I to do next month?”

“Darling,” Vee said, “With the clientele we have, if it takes you longer than a month to find opportunity here among the deepest pockets on the coast, you wouldn’t make a good politician.”

Vivian had his top of the food chain mentality calculated to a tee. His ego wouldn’t allow such speculation. “If I consider it, it’ll have to be platinum, my wife will never go for basic membership. Hell, what am I saying? I’ve already decided I would run, go ahead, and sign me up.”

Vivian kissed her finger then pressed it into his forehead, “That’s your stamp of approval, enjoy the evening on me, anything you need, just show my girls your kiss.”

She walked away like a runway model; all Calvin C. Graves saw as she walked away, was her long legs leading to her perfectly shaped ass.

The night seemed like one little battle after another and by the end of the evening, she had far exceeded her goal. The Harem ended up with a total of fifteen platinum members, forty-



one gold members, and they stopped at a hundred silver memberships. She already decided she had room inside for a total of 460 people to comfortably occupy the Harem at a time. Silver members could bring one guest, gold and platinum could bring up to three guests. Special considerations were approved of by Vivian only.

Vivian had Kat and Sadie busy processing bonus credit cards for all the staff. Of course, her chaperones got a lot more than the others. Vivian made sure every server, every cook, every cocktail, ushers, and bus boy got a bonus. She handed out fifty thousand dollars' worth of credit cards as the employees left for the morning. As usual, the girls met in Vivian's room for debriefing.

"Wow, what a night," she said. Sadie had a case of Vivian's favorite bourbon waiting in the room for her.

After congratulating everyone for their hard work, she said, "Lock the door girl, let's party. "Gabrielle," the stereo's right behind you, play something Jazzy," but Gabrielle had her on favorites and played some ZZ Top. Sadie helped Vivian pour drinks. "Next week will be different, gold and platinum members will probably be looking for companionship, be ready. Remember the worse they are, the more important the target, so be safe, we're not going to be angels next week, we're going to be spiders, and we're going to catch some insects."

Sadie thought, 'That's quite the analogy.'

The atmosphere roared with confidence. The money rolling in so quickly put the girls in a dream like trance. They've all lived life from a defensive standpoint, now they can stand on their own and face anything. To say that Vivian had a mysterious power of seduction was an understatement. She stood in the middle of her room and changed clothes as if she were alone, absolutely no inhibitions whatsoever, and the girls admired that most, they wanted to be like her.

They partied on throughout the night, till everyone was overly satisfied and wore out. Some left and some stayed. Vivian woke up with four girls in her bed the next morning. She rubbed her eyes and the back of her neck, “Wake up girls, is everyone alright?” The sight would have been too much for John to see.

For the next four days, the Castle Rouge was preparing for full club privileges from the members. The place was thoroughly cleaned and shined, liquor stocked, entertainment arranged. Vivian hired a full-time pianist. The girls worked in pairs to practice their responses to different scenarios. At six o’clock, Friday evening, the doors to the Harem were opened to members and guests only.

Vivian’s prep speech was simple, “In order for a member to go upstairs, they must be personally invited by the chaperone. Be careful, cautious, and safe, the web awaits.”

People mingled in the ball room listening to a pianist play a piece by Henry Mancini. Unlike the grand opening, there was no main event in the ballroom to kick off the party. Compositions and scores of a mellower nature softly echoed off the walls and around the corners toward the lounges where it faded and replaced by the themed music from each lounge as people neared their entrance. No more than fifteen minutes from its first customer, the Diamonds Lounge tagged their first fish. Tuesday introduced herself to Enrique at the bar. She noticed his gold membership card, making him a potential mark. “My name is Tuesday, one of two chaperones here in the Diamonds Lounge, are you enjoying yourself so far?”

He asked her, “Do you like blow,” and showed her a baggy that had to have at least two ounces in it.

“We can’t do that here, but there are the rooms upstairs.”

“Ok, baby, let’s go, the night is young but the clocks a ticking.”

“I’ll have to get permission to leave the lounge, if you wait just a bit, I’ll get approval,” she waited for his acknowledgement, “I’ll be right back.”

Tuesday found Vivian, “I got a prick with some coke, wants to go upstairs.”

“We don’t want this to be a drug den.”

“He’s holding a lot. He has too much to be an ordinary user, he’s got to be dealing.”

“All right, but only if you think you can handle it. Be safe in there, we’ll have a guard in the room next door watching on camera.”

“What do you want to get out of him?” Tuesday asked.

“See if you can get him to incriminate himself our anyone else. He obviously works for someone. Anyone carrying that much coke is in distribution, and who he works for is most important. We want to be able to use this audio and video against him. Sounds like the kind of guy who’d whack somebody rather than being fingered as a snitch.” She then told Kat, program her key card for room 12. He typed in a few things on his laptop, swiped her card into the reader, “there you go, room twelve.”

Kat went to room 14, next door and took Rex, the security man beast with him. Vivian spent a little time checking in on them but for the most part let them do their thing. Tuesday worked on Enrique, stroking his ego till she got him to spill on his operation. She pretended to be snorting as much coke as he was and would brush it off to the floor when he wasn’t looking. She may have gotten a buzz, but he got blitzed. She got him to open up and even more, she tagged him for a twelve-hundred-dollar trick. As his racing heart started to calm, she nodded at the camera and Rex burst through the door.

Enrique jumped out of bed naked and froze, starting at this huge man. “Put you pants on man,” Rex told him.

“Who the hell are you!” Enrique gathered the nerve to say.

“Security, and we don’t allow dealing drugs here.”

Detective Hightower arrived on que,” Well, well, amigo, this looks like twenty-five to life. You must have at least fifty grams here, distribution will put you away for a very long time.”

“It’s not for distribution, man, that’s for me, all for me.”

“Individually packaged one-gram bags is distribution. But I have an alternative,” Hightower said.

“What?” Enrique’s been shaken down before, so he thought he knew what was coming.

“If you were to sell all of your ‘stash’ and give us half, that would be the least you could do for doing business on our property.”

“I can’t give you half, man, it ain’t mine.”

Detective Hightower raised his voice a little bit, “I’m not concerned about who’s it is, tell your boss you were robbed, keep your half of the money, or knock off a liquor store to get the money to replace it, whatever, makes no difference to me, but there are three things I know. Either, you’re going to play ball, or you’re going to prison, or Rex, here, is going to cram you into a suitcase tied to something heavy and he’ll drop you in the river.” He tapped his foot and looked into the location of a camera and smiled.

“Ok, man, I’ll do it.”

Detective Hightower turned to let Rex take a picture of the two of them together. “Now, if you’re thinking of splitting, if you’re thinking of telling Jefe’ that we screwed you, he’s going to see us doing business.”

There was no way out for Enrique, and he knew it. “Come on honey,” Tuesday said. She acted like she was the one getting busted for prostitution, which convinced Enrique she was not part of it. “I can help you, I’m pretty good at pointing out people that like to party, you can probably sell all you have here tonight.”

Enrique asked, “You can give me my money back, so I can just pay my way out.”

“I should charge you more almost getting me arrested, but I feel bad for you, so I’ll give you two hundred dollars back. Hell, I could be making money right now.”

He understood her point. “Two hundred will help.”

“Over there,” she said, “see the guy with the Gray Jacket. He’ll buy some for sure. Before they knew it, Enrique was on camera selling cocaine to twenty or thirty people.

Vivian let Detective Hightower keep the money, which was also captured on camera.

“Vee,” Sasha stepped up behind her, “There’s a Mr. Barnes to see you in the Spades Lounge.”

“Do you want to handle it for me?”

“Yeah, baby, what do you need?”

Vivian pointed out that Mr. Barnes used the detective and his sergeant buddy to steal three paintings from the house and sold them on the black market and filed a false insurance claim. He owes us about four hundred thousand dollars. If he’s sold the paintings, give him this bank account number to deposit the money to, if he hasn’t, just get an update from him.”

“What if he doesn’t want to talk to me?”

“I’m sure he won’t, but he’ll have to and that is part of the show. It will make him uncomfortable to have other people know what’s going on, but as my direct representative, he’ll deal with you even if he doesn’t want to. Use your charm darling, if that doesn’t work grab his crouch, and if that doesn’t work, tell him I will be waiting for my banker to call and tell me the deposit is made. Advise him to remember our deal.” Then show him this photo of the detective walking out through the dock with the paintings under his arms. If he gives you shit, tell him another photo shows him getting in your car, with your face looking right at the camera, or call me, I’ll meet him if I need to.”

Sasha went back to the Spades Lounge where she found Mr. Barnes sitting smug in a booth. Grinning like he had a secret. “Is Vee coming?”

“No, I’m sorry, she asked me to talk in her behalf.”

He looked a little confused, “I don’t know you.”

“I’m Sasha, Vee’s oldest friend and confidant. She asked me to check on the status of the deposit,” and gave him an exaggerated wink.”

“Well, ok, Sasha, tell her I have good news.” He looked around, “I sold all three together for one million dollars. Five hundred thousand dollars should show up in her account as soon as we provide it.”

Sasha said, “That’ll make Vee very pleased,” and handed him the number. He took out his phone and made a call. A moment later Vee received a call from Mr. Adams. John Strahan is suddenly five hundred thousand dollars richer. Vee laughed to herself; the insurance was due to pay John two point eight million dollars. The Van Gough, Picasso, and Renoir were hard to come by but meant nothing to Vivian, just another tool in her box. Sasha was disappointed she didn’t get the chance to screw with him. He caved too easy, she thought, but then again, white collar criminals don’t have the same fighting spirit as the thugs she grew up with.

Vivian knew her girls and knew they had a hunger for life. A good party, good friend, good music, and sex, they were living the dream. The platinum member typically had more money than sense, the prestige was everything. The gold members craved status almost as much as the ones who could afford platinum memberships but being able to shell out a thousand dollars for company was still within their means. Vivian drew the line at the silver members and discouraged her girls from spending too much time with them as she would explain to the girls, “Silver members are basically your typical, yet more affluent party goers, reckless and irresponsible. For our purposes they are a liability and more trouble than they’re worth. The gold and platinum members, on the other hand, can obviously afford to play a more expensive game. They are our target audience. Concentrate on them but be nice and polite to everyone.

Vivian witnessed five rooms seeing action at one time in Kat's recording studio, he referred to as his web, the first night, not including room fourteen, being used for surveillance. Mostly rich married men in unhappy situations, or just 'downright cheating scum' as Vivian would say. The girls made big money that night. The Harem received a treasure strove of audio and video evidence as she began to weave her web. Vee analyzed the footage and decided which clients would become assets, with the advice of her homies.

The police commissioner would be making his announcement to run for Governor in the Heart Lounge at midnight. Wealthy donors where aware of his announcement and came like bees on honey. They filled the room hoping to inject themselves into the world politics at the state level. Someone they knew may soon be the governor; there is a lot of pressure to be on the inside rather than the out. Little did they know they were being preyed upon. They assumed in their pompous minds that they were advancing their clout. The promises and misrepresentations they gathered on tape that night was a gold mine. Vivian found out which agencies were controlling local and state regulations and turned that information into a psychological weapon.

John returned to the casino to help his floor manager. He became just as obsessed with controlling everything happening in the casino as his uncle was, except, Robert was smart enough not to gamble in his own casino. Vivian met John in the Spades Lounge. It was clear to Vivian that John's attention to the casino was damaging him and realized that put her on a time limit. "Darling," she said with a slight Georgia accent, "That's Mr. Graves," pointing at a tall balding man, "he's going to announce his decision to run for governor."

"Oh, yeah? We should meet him."

"Remember, you have to introduce me, not me introducing you," enabling his misogyny to show.

They stepped up to their table, “Hello Mr. and Mrs. Graves, My name is John Strahan, welcome to The Harem. This is my right-hand Ms. Vee.”

“Welcome,” Vivian stepped forward and took Mrs. Graves arm. Smiling, looking slightly up to meet her eyes, “Mr. Graves,” she said with a slight French accent, “would make a wonderful governor, no?”

“Oh please,” she said, “Stop feeding his ego, in his mind he’s already the governor. I thought he was a pain in the ass before, but I suppose there are benefits.”

Mr. Graves looked at Vivian and wanted to say, ‘cantankerous isn’t she.’ My wife is a member of the Daughters of the Revolution,” he said.

John questioned, “The American Revolution?”

Vivian chuckled and almost spit her bourbon, “Seriously?” She laughed again and looked at Mrs. Graves, “That’s why good men cannot exist without good women.”

“I like that, can I use it.”

“Absolutely darling. They shared a laugh, how about a little bubbly?”

Vivian waved to one of the cocktail waitresses, “Bring a bottle of champagne to Mr. Graves table, and a bourbon, one ice.”

“Yes ma’am,” the waitress left.

“You and your husband were featured in Time magazine a year or two ago, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said, “you keep up with our events?”

Vivian read a lot and remembered most of it. “The DOR is historic, and the articles about your family’s donations to the Library of Congress were impressive. A lot of especially important people know much more about you and your life now because of that article, how does your husband feel about it?”

“He’s ok with it all, but now that he’s running for office, the other members are counting on him to win. We need the state level support to advance our nonprofit.”



“Really,” Vivian said, “It looks like you got your hands full,” jokingly toying with her sense of self-absorption. Their relationship would be a critical key in applying the right amount of pressure to the commissioner and possible future governor.

Later in the evening Vivian checked in with Candy. “Sasha, Gabriel, and Tanya all have someone up there, there’s even a priest.”

Vivian asked? “A Priest?”

“Yeah, they went up the elevator so people wouldn’t see them walking upstairs.” Candy said.

Vivian asked, “What about Tiffany?”

“She’s been dancing all night.”

“Don’t let her drink too much.”

John tried to appear that he was on top of everything happening, but knew Vivian was the lightning rod making everything happen. He was forced to hang around. “It seems that there is a lot going on Vee, what do I need to know, how can I help?”

“Johnny, sweetheart, we are getting down and dirty. We have a lot of people on the hook right now, law enforcement, judges, lawyers, preachers, teachers, bankers, and insurance agents. We have thieves and drug dealers, and of course, you can’t forget about the union. We need to maintain a little peace, ease up a little on adding new players. For now, we need to play party host and let everyone get comfortable, relax a bit, and slow things down.”

John has seen his uncle deal with some pretty shading characters, but he didn’t have that kind of nerve. He was more than happy to take her advice. “I don’t know how you do it, Vee, I couldn’t operate without you. Give yourself a raise.”

“Sweetheart, you might be able to afford me now.” She laughed, then he laughed.

John gave her a kiss on the cheek, “thank god for that,” then left to go back to the casino.

Vivian's seen that bug before. He had a gambling addiction that would one day ruin him, but she needed him to hold it together a little while longer. It was also a reminder for her to start preparing for her escape. She knew her time in this game was limited and so much depended upon timing.

The enjoyment of revenge was a short-lived climax to years of disillusion and pain. There was a life to pursue when the house burned down, and she didn't want to be caught in her own web. She went to Kat's recording hide away. She and Kat were the only ones with access, a camera at the door allowed Kat to see her approach.

"Vee, there's shit happening everywhere. Drug deals, admissions of crimes, freaks and cheaters, and outright filth. What are we going to do with all this?"

"Keep recording. Even if we don't use it, I can sell it. I have good news," she paused.

Kat anxiously questioned, "Well, what is it?"

"We have the money for your operation, if you still want to have it."

He was excited and jumped in her arms. At five foot four and a hundred twenty-five pounds, Kat was a small young man and always on the receiving end of that joke. He dreamt of being a girl, which was all he ever wanted, and now it looked like it might actually come true, he began to cry in silent happiness. "Thank you, Vee, of course I do."

"I'll make the arrangements, you're going to Stockholm baby," and smiled back at him. "Now for a little work. I need you to work with Vinnie, get him involved but keep awfully close tabs on him. If all of our tapes were recovered a month from now, I'd like to know that all the incriminating evidence of us had been deleted and wiped clean. Vinnie's signature needs to be on all these recording, like you and I were never here."

"Are you going to throw him to the wolves?"

“That’d be interesting, no, he’ll end up being the messenger and will get off easy. You only have a month, start going through all the footage and clean it up and from here on out keep up with it daily without Vinnie knowing. A month from now, you’ll be in recovery as a new woman and the Castle Rouge will be history.”

“What about the girls?”

“They’re all coming with us if they want, but some may choose to stay, everyone has the right to follow their heart.”

Kat was overwhelmed with hope, he saw nothing but joyous celebration and happiness in his future. He felt he owed it all to Vivian and determined he’d do anything at all for her.

Vivian left the room and went for a stroll through the casino. High stake poker rooms were filled with platinum and gold members, throwing away money like it wasn’t theirs. The sound of the slot machines reminded her of people throwing their lives away for a chance to hit it big. She felt bad for the girls wearing themselves out to make a living among the rude and cruel drunken sots. Vivian approached the bar and handed the bar tender her credit card, “Run a five-thousand-dollar tip on this and split it evenly with the cocktails.”

She met John having a drink with Mr. Peters. “Good evening Mr. Peters,” she addressed him.

“Good evening, Vee,” he replied. “It’s quite a transformation from Robert’s tight control.”

“Yes, John has done a wonderful job with the casino.”

“I was actually talking about the mansion.”

John added, “Mr. Peter’s tells me that my inheritance had been finalized and after we settle any tax liabilities the casino will be officially mine.”

“The casino, what of the mansion?” Vivian asked.

“It’s officially part of the estate that Mrs. Strahan controls,” Mr. Peters said.

“So, Mr. Peters, if she is incapacitated doesn’t ownership shift to John?” she asked.

“No, but because she is incapacitated, John can manage it in her behalf until such time she recovers or passes away.”

“That’s good, let’s hope for a speeding recovery.”

They both knew she didn’t mean it, but it wouldn’t make a difference anyway, Mrs. Strahan had debts to pay for her role in taking John away from her. Watching her lose her castle and home would be almost as sweet as watching John lose his.

“John,” Vivian said, “before you turn in for the evening, I have another issue to discuss with you, now if you excuse me, I have to get the Harem closed up for the evening, I’ll be in my room in an hour, come see me,” she whispered to John.

“Are you two in a relationship?” Mr. Peters asked.

“No,” John laughed, “She a man-eating tiger, too wild to tame, but she sure is hot.”

Mr. Peters agreed.

John showed up in Vivian’s room at four thirty in the morning. Vivian and Sadie were going over bank ledgers and making plans to shift money from the Castle Rouge account to two offshore accounts, one in John’s name and one in hers. John knocked on the door. “Come in darling,” she said and glanced up at his entrance. “I have two surprises for you,” Vivian joyfully spoke with an evil gleam in her eye, and she stepped forward to his arms. She gave him a hug like a sister would and said, “Two hundred thousand dollars will be transferred into your Cayman account in the morning.”

“That’s great, what’s the second?” he replied.

“The second surprise is more of advice. I’ve seen inside both your and Tanya’s hearts. I know there’s a little something there with you. I could see it when I looked into your eyes.”

He said, “Well, Tanya’s is definitely sexy.”

“She’s also a rocket in bed,” she responded. “My advice is for you to settle your life down, enjoy someone’s company for

a while. Consider seeing only one, Tanya. Let her take care of you. I love her, but Candy will just use you up.”

John was a little bit relieved. He thought Vivian was impossibly beautiful, and it intimidated him. He felt a fearful awareness that he knew her. Spending more time with Tanya sounded like a fairly good idea to him. “Yeah, maybe I should talk to her,” he said.

Poor John. He couldn’t have calculated Tanya’s devotion for Vivian. Vivian needed Tanya to keep track of John while she dealt with other matters. She advised him, “Never promise to stay unless you mean it.” Which was a clue he would fail to see in time.

Sadie brought Vivian a drink and asked John if he wanted one, “Yeah, a beer would be great, thank you,” he said.

“So,” John wondered, “Are you two, you know and nodded his head.

Vivian smiled at his ignorance, “Darling, I love everyone,” and put her hand around the back of Sadie’s neck but looked at him, “I know you remember our interlude.”

Suddenly John knew not to challenge such thought, but said, “Just interested, seems exciting, and erotic.” Sadie blushed.

“Do you want me to ask Tanya to join you?” Vivian offered.

He thought to himself, ‘three girls, one me,’ “Yeah, just the four of us.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, this is just you and her.”

“You mean, you want to watch?” he asked.

“Funny, but no, I have something to do, and you need to slow down a little, give Tanya a chance. Get to know her and don’t let her down, and don’t promise her things that you can’t deliver.” Another subliminal clue.

“Yes mother,” he sarcastically answered, “I’m a gentleman always.”

“Good,” she said, then called Tanya. “Hey baby, I have John in my room, do you want to keep him company? I have a thing I need to do.”

“Sure, I’ll be right there.”

She walked down to the end of the green carpet wearing nothing but her nearly see-through nightgown and fuzzy slippers.

Vivian opened the door and said, “Girl, you look delicious,” licked her lips.

“Thanks, baby.”

John had already built himself up psychologically before she showed up looking like a dream, “Folks, I got to go,” Vivian said, “come on Sadie,” and Vivian walked gracefully back to the door. John watched Vivian’s hind side sway as she walked away thinking, ‘god, that’s one fine ass.’

## Chapter Eight

The week had passed and another big weekend for the Harem was coming. Vivian subcontracted Vinnie to help Kat with the recordings and slowly phased Kat out of the surveillance leaving Vinny in charge of the secret videos. He questioned the need for all the cameras, “Why do you take the chance to record everything?”

“I like playing it safe, if any of my girls get in trouble with a client, I want to be able to stop it before they get hurt, not after. Darling, can you put aside any legalities? I’m just trying to keep my girls safe.”

“Of course, Vee, we won’t let that happen.”

Confident that she satisfied his query, “I’ll need you to basically take over for Kat. I have another job for him.” Vivian was giving Kat a chance for his own assignment. He’d been begging to be more involved and now he was being given his chance. A DEA agent by the name of Daniel Flaherty, on assignment to Miami, has been following Enrique’s boss Pepe Alejandro Gonzalez, more commonly referred to as Gonzo, all the way up the coast. Daniel joined the Harem in an attempt to infiltrate Gonzo’s organization but didn’t count on his desire for young men to get in the way.

“Make him beg to tell you his secrets,” Vivian seductively suggested. “Get him talking about his job, stoke his ego, something will come out.”

“What’s my opening? How should I start that conversation?”

Vivian said, “After making special contact with him, when he’s all excited, tell him a bull shit story of how you killed a man in a bar with a broken beer bottle in Mexico, or how you were abused, anything that will get his attention and bring out his vulnerabilities.”

“This is really fun, thank you Vee, I won’t let you down.”

Kat was uniquely qualified for this mission. Daniel joined the DEA for the excitement, the adrenaline rush, till he became addicted to money. He had an on the edge personality that took him to many extremes including his sexual desires. Kat had everything Daniel was weak for.

Kat walked behind Vivian as she approached him at his table. Daniel saw her coming out of the corner of his eye, he turned toward her, ‘Wow, what a knockout,’ he thought to himself. He stood as she arrived, “Good evening Mr. Flaherty,” and handed him a drink.

He looked at the drink, he looked at her, “Thank you, this looks like a Whiskey Sour, how’d you know?”

She said in her sexiest Georgia Peach accent, “Darling, if there are two things I know, it’d be men and alcohol,” she raised one eyebrow and smiled, “I’d love to stay and chat, but I have a meeting, my associate, however, will help you anyway he can.” She gave Kat the other Whiskey Sour and left.

Kat was dressed in drag; he was wearing a beautiful dress with thin gold strands spanning diagonally across his hips. His makeup looked to be professionally applied. He’d been on hormone therapy long enough to give him a B cup and a glow about his smile. Daniel said, “She said he, you don’t look like a he.”

“Well, I don’t feel like one either. Are you upset?” Kat had a soft voice as it were, but he’d seen Vivian on video so often, he couldn’t help but to pick up some tips.

“No,” he said, “I’m actually intrigued. I wouldn’t mind seeing a little more.”

Kat looked at him, “You know, New Orleans is a city where the women are women, and half the men are too. Are you ready to ride that train?”

Daniel looked at him up and down, as if were sizing up an opponent, is there somewhere we could go?”

“We do have access upstairs if you wish.”



“Can we get room service?” Daniel asked.

“You’d be surprised what that gold card will get you,” he snickered.

Kat took Vivian’s advice. After looking deeply into Daniel’s eyes, right when the expecting mood shifted sexually, Kat said, “I used to have a little sister, I adored her. She was funny and cute, but she’s gone now.”

“What happened?”

“She killed herself.”

Daniel said, “Oh, my god, I am so sorry.”

“I mention it because, I killed the son of the bitch that caused it. Have you ever had to do that?” Kat asked.

“Actually, I have,” Daniel replied. “What happened?”

“My stepdad abused her when she was eight. She never saw her ninth birthday. Before she hung herself, she told me what he did. I waited for him to fall asleep, and I cut his throat in the middle of the night. I was ten. They took me away and put me in a home for troubled kids. That’s when I started wearing girl’s clothes, to honor my sister who never had a chance in life. Turns out, I like being a girl.”

“Oh my god, that’s a terrible story. Are you alright?”

“That was a long time ago, I’m fine. Have you ever killed someone?”

“I’ve had a few firefights in my line of work.”

“What’s that, where you a soldier or a cop?”

“DEA sweetheart. You don’t have to worry about me, unless you’re transporting massive amounts of drugs across the border.”

“No offense, but I think they’re winning. There’re drugs everywhere.”

“Not for long,” he stopped and looked in Kat’s eye, “I’m almost ready to nab a king pin.”

Kat repositioned himself. Knowing were all the cameras were, help him get perfect shots, or the cameras, “Do you know how they’re getting in?”

“Oh yeah. They have a sweet system set up; it took over two years of dealing with them to get the trust needed to be in this position.”

Kat sat up and grabbed his drink, “what system?”

Daniel would have never discussed a case with other agents because he didn’t trust them, but for some reason Kat seemed so totally harmless that his ego couldn’t prevent him from boasting. “A Venezuelan drug lord has a distributor up here by the name of Gonzalez who smuggles product in from Cuba. A small craft from three or more ports along the gulf would meet at designated coordinates and hand off their packages from boat to boat out in open water, far from witnesses and cameras, until they finally arrive at the small craft harbor in Biloxi.”

“How did you find out?” he asked excitedly.

“Does this stuff really interest you or are you just being polite?”

“It’s fascinating,” he put his hand on his leg. “I’m sitting with an action hero, tell me more.”

“Ok, anyway, I followed one of their guys to the Marina just by chance one day and noticed a twenty-six-foot Robalo, flying a rainbow pennant from the main mast. I’ve been all around the water and boats my whole life and a rainbow pennant from the mast was a new one on me. So, I watched as two jokers went from one boat to another and traded seat cushions. That’s when it dawned on me, the Coast Guard said that the Robalo was the most popular boat for pirates to seize. I watched even further while the boat left the marina as quietly as it came. The harbor master must be on the payroll. The rainbow flag tells him which boats to ignore. So, about a year ago I intercepted a shipment in Tampa and talked myself into a job with the cartel for protection and have been following the trail ever since.”

The more Daniel talked, the deeper he dug his grave and the more he drank. “Come to find out, harbor masters all up and down the coast were paid to ignore boats with the pennant. The same boats have the same cushions, the drugs are stuffed in the seat cushions in sealed bricks, and one boat would transfer the cushions out at sea, and the product leap frogged all the way up here.”

Kat kept him talking even while he went down to satisfy him. “Why do you do it? You catch one, two more grow back. Why not make your own claim?”

That was his magic question, “I am, this information is going to make me rich,” he paused for second, “yeah, this ain’t about a bust. It’s about a payday.”

“How’s it going to make you rich?”

Daniel looked at Kat in a moment of awareness. He realized that he’d been divulging much more than he should have, but when he saw the excitement in Kat’s face, he couldn’t help himself. He envisioned Kat being his lover and potentially a partner. “Can I tell you something I’ve never told anyone?”

Kat put a serious look on his face, “Honey, you can tell me anything.”

“You have to promise to keep it a secret.”

“Of course, I keep secrets better than a priest.”

“I’m getting paid a lot of money to keep the Coast Guard chasing bad intel, but as soon as I find out who Gonzo’s buyers are, I’m going to rip him off, bust the buyer and make it look like it was Gonzo’s fault to his boss.”

“That sounds dangerous, isn’t his boss going to be upset about you busting his clients?”

“Oh, yeah, but not at me, I still have a position with the DEA to maintain, it’s a big organization and sometimes you have to fire and replace people. He’ll be pissed alright, but he’ll take it out on Gonzo.”

Kat hated the vulgarity in which he conducted himself with him. He knew this information was a powder keg and decided it was time to get out while he could.

“Ok, honey, I hate to say this, but our time is up. I’m only allowed two hours away from the lounge. We have to settle up.”

“What do you mean settle up?”

“Daniel dear, I am a paid professional, no different than the other girls, Ms. Vee’s going to be expecting me to come back with some money. If you can’t afford it, I’ll use my own money, but I can’t go back empty handed.”

“Oh, I got you, how much?”

“The girls get a thousand, but she doesn’t expect as much from me, I usually just set clients up with the other girls, there’s not a big demand for someone like me down here.”

That put Daniel on the spot as he pulled out a wad of money from his wallet. “I want to see you again, but a thousand dollars for a couple hours is too rich for my blood.”

Kat gave him five hundred dollars back, “At least you can see me one more time till I can figure something out.”

Kat left him in room sixteen alone and went back to his room to take a shower. Daniel thought about his conversation with Kat and knew he should’ve kept his mouth shut, but ultimately decided he was harmless. ‘The world of drug lords and cut throats, is too scaring for him and he probably doesn’t care for police much either, being a prostitute and all.’ Daniel thought the worst he could do was spread rumors. ‘Damn it, I hope he can be quiet, I’d hate for him to have an accident,’ he thought to himself.

“You did great. Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I’ve been with a lot of jerks like him. A good man is hard to find.”

Vivian said, “No, history is filled with them.”

Kat understood that to mean, all the good men are dead.

“Men can’t help themselves; lust and desire replace common sense and sex has extracted more secrets than torture. That’s also why Marilyn was killed, the CIA couldn’t trust that the Kennedy’s didn’t talk in bed. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you, you did good, we got some good stuff.” Vivian left Kat to his shower and went to check on the other girls.

Sasha and Tanya went to the Spades Lounge, while Tuesday and Tiffany hung around together in the Diamonds Lounge. The silver members had a thousand-dollar credit line on their card, while gold members had ten thousand. If they reached their limit each month, they would have to start paying as they go. If they didn’t use it all, they lost it. The amount of money rolling in was considerably greater than she had estimated. At the end of each weekend, Vivian found herself skimming tens of thousands from the operating account and stuffing it in her secret account. She kept enough going into John’s secret account to keep him blissfully ignorant.

The following month saw many members renewing their membership, and additional members were accepted to replace the ones who left. Monthly memberships kept a quarter of a million dollars coming in every month, additional sales and service profits were recorded, hard payments from blackmail sources, all of which added to Vivian’s war chest and retirement fund. John effectively recycled his entire financial portfolio through the casino practicing poker. Losing money in his own casino would come back to him at the end of the month as profit so his efforts gambling served only as practice. He hoped to get good enough to try his hand at other casinos. Vivian hoped to be able to execute her plan and make her departure before he started losing his money for real. Every week, she balanced her books, shaved off the profits and deposited them into her offshore account.

The first Friday of the month was treated as a grand opening for the benefit of new members. The biggest promotions

and entertainment were scheduled for the first weekend of the month. As the bulk of customers were arriving, Vivian met with Sadie outside the Hearts Lounge, “I have business in the Clubs Lounge, want to tag along?”

Sadie asked, “What are we doing there?”

“Do you remember that coke head we tagged a while back? Well, his boss will be here tonight to take possession of some photos we have of his boy and hear a story about a DEA agent out to blackmail him. This meeting starts our clock ticking, if it’s successful we’ll have a short amount of time to get everything in order to leave. His name’s Pepe Alejandro Gonzalez but he goes by Gonzo, he hates his name, so whatever you do, don’t call him Pepe.”

“This sound dangerous.”

“A little, we are dealing with some of the worst people you’ll ever meet or want to meet. They may seem cordial and respectful, but don’t let their appearance fool you, deep down, they’re ruthless, sadistic, and capable of horrendous act of violence.”

Gonzo arrived with two associates. And were escorted to their booth in the back. The atmosphere of the bluesy Clubs Lounge had Vivian feeling relaxed and confident. “Welcome senior Gonzo,” Vivian introduced herself, “please have a seat.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” Gonzo replied.

“I invited you here to make you an offer, a business offer.”

The clarity in her voice caught his attention, “A business transaction requires giving and taking, what do you have to offer?”

She smiled and cocked her head gently forward, then handed him some pictures of his boy, Enrique, doing business in the casino. “He’s a little bit sloppy, he should have known we have a lot of surveillance.”

“Yes, I’ll have to have a talk with him.”

She didn't show him the recording and photos of him with the detective for the time being. As he looked over the pictures, "This doesn't look like a business opportunity, if you're thinking blackmail, you're mistaken."

"Well, I am, but not you and not this. You see, we capture a lot of stuff with our cameras. I have tons of footage of all kinds of incriminating stuff. I have the police, the union, city hall, famous and rich people with a lot to hide on tape and it's for sale. Catching your boy only gave me the idea that I could offer you this opportunity."

"Now why would I care what these fools do?"

"Imagine having incriminating information on your enemies, would that give you a little security, possible leverage with regard to your business? The police commissioner who's running for governor, a future congressman for Louisiana, lawyers, bankers, detectives, even a DEA agent who has you in his crosshairs."

That got his attention. He took a sip of his drink, "Tell me more about this agent."

"Let just say, what I'm selling can not only protect you, but it can also make you many millions of dollars over time."

"I don't know how you know me or what you think I do, but I'm not falling for your little trap like this punk, and I'm certainly not one to mess with." He slid Enrique's photos back to her.

"Yes, there's cameras all around but, no one knows what we're talking about, all we did was pass a few photos and talk about the weather. There is a mountain of money to be made and the fact that the DEA is this close to you makes you the perfect partner. This is a great opportunity. I'm offering to sell you great power over a lot of very influential people."

"Why would you give that up?"

“I’m not giving it up, I’m selling it. I want to retire, I want to live a little, I want the cancer to go away,” and by cancer, she meant society, but all he would hear was cancer.

“How much?”

“Two million dollars,” she replied.

“That’s a lot of money,” he said.

“If you’re interested, we can go upstairs to a secure conference room to show you what I have, then you can decide for yourself. I’ll be selling this stuff to someone, it might as well be you, seeing where you have the most to gain.”

He thought about it for a minute, “Ok, I’ll see what you have, but not here. I have business back home, when I return in a couple weeks, I’ll call you and you can bring your evidence to my hotel room, I’ll look at it then and decide.”

“Fair enough,” Vivian said. She scooped up the photos, straightened them up and handed them to Gonzo. “These are for you.”

“And for what it’s worth,” he said, “if you want to sell me something for two million dollars, it better be worth two million dollars.”

“Of course. I’m sure when you see it all, you’ll know it’s worth much more than that.” They said their goodbyes and left Vivian and Sadie at the table.

“That was intense,” Sadie said.

“It’s about what I expected, I gave him enough to nibble, he’ll want to see what we have. If we sell him a stash of evidence, there will be no turning back, we’ll have to pick up and move on rather quickly before the shit hits the fan.”

“What do you mean?”

“We got everybody who’s anybody involved in this, except one player. I purposely left him out of the equation. Everything I give Gonzo; I’ll be giving to the district attorney. It’s going to get very crazy around here and we shouldn’t be here



when the shit hits the fan. I plan to be skiing on top of the world by then. I've never been skiing."

"What about the girls?"

"We're all going, this is our out. Time for us to move on."

Sadie said, "I mean, we're all on those tapes."

"Sweetie, I got that covered, Kat's going to doctor the tapes before we give them to anyone."

"What do you think Gonzo will do to Enrique?"

Vivian said, "You don't want to know. I don't think we'll be seeing him again."

Sadie told Vivian, "What we're doing doesn't seem real. This is truly a different world, but I've never felt more alive, it's a little scary."

Vivian took a sip of her drink, "I know it's a lot to take in, but it'll all be behind us soon; everything is going to be perfect. Are you ready for your next lesson?"

Sadie asked, "Is it as exciting and intense as this was?"

"I wouldn't say so, but just as important," she said.

"Ok, then, what's next?"

"While Kat is making the evidence presentable, our identities need to become a mystery. Tomorrow morning make sure my personnel file down in HR is in order and collect all the documentation from everyone else's personnel files. In the coming weeks, if someone were to look into our files, I want mine to be the only one with anything in it. All of yours and the girl's info need to be gone."

"Leave yours there but take ours?" Sadie questioned.

"Exactly."

"Why would you leave your file?"

Vivian waited before answering as she spied a cocktail waitress walking by and waved her glass, signaling for another drink, then looked back at Sadie, "We won't be here when the real damage is known, and we're going to make our identities hard to come by." Vivian confessed to Sadie, "before she left for

college, she had a fake ID made, and in her personnel file was the application of one Ms. Vanessa Wakefield of Yuma Arizona. She only used this fake ID one other time. “You see, by leaving mine here, they’ll just be chasing a ghost.”

Vivian was pleased with her plan so far, “Sweetie, let’s talk about something else. Do you want to find a stud to ride, just the three of us?”

This area of sisterhood was a little cloudy for Sadie, anything having to do with sex potentially could trigger bad memories. “You and I, who’s the stud?”

“You choose that’s half the fun. We’ll hit a casino on the beach, you find a guy, and we’ll go to his room and ball his brains out, just for fun. What do you say?”

“Ok, I’ll do it,” she declared.

Sadie would wake up later with a hangover in a strange room. “Morning sunshine,” Vivian said.

She didn’t recognize the room. “Where are we?”

“Sweetie, you got hammered, I had to get you your own room. Don’t worry, nothing happened, the guy wasn’t that good anyway.”

Sadie asked, “What time is it?”

“Ten a.m. Are you ready to go home?”

“Yeah, I don’t feel too good.”

“I’ll tuck you in when we get home. Drink a lot of water and rest, that’s all you can do.”

## Chapter Nine

While the party at the mansion raged on, Vivian gave John a copy of the Sun Herald. In the local section was an article about William Strahan being released from prison on May 17<sup>th</sup>. No more than two short articles away was an article about his mother being admitted to the Mental Health Facility up in Starkville. John lit a cigar, “Isn’t it odd that theirs an article about both my parents in the paper on the same day. Vee, I don’t know what to tell him if he comes here.”

“Don’t judge him but watch him closely, if my brother had locked me up, I’d be seeking revenge. Luckily, Robert’s already paid his price.”

John said, “I don’t recall talking with you about my father.”

“It was in the paper including the rumors about him being innocent, you need to read more.”

John was visibly worried; he paced the hall outside the kitchen for minutes thinking about what his father might look like, whether he’d be upset that he didn’t visit, whether he knew his wife wasn’t as innocent as he may have believed. The last time he saw him was fourteen years ago when he was ten, two years later he would leave New Orleans and move in with his uncle. Suddenly John felt all his demons coming home to roost.

There was a political battle in Baton Rouge between congressional candidates which allowed Vivian to parlay enough clout to get William released early. The timing was coincidental, but the results were impeccable, his father was being released while his mother was being committed.

Vivian was talking with Sadie at the front of the casino. “This, this is the spot John will reunite with his dad.”

“Why here?” Sadie asked.

Because John’s afraid of the truth and he’s carrying around a lot of guilt. The fact that he never when to see him while

he was locked up, tells you a lot. He's not really looking forward to seeing him, he'll wait for his dad to come to him. Yeah, this is where William will find him."

Vivian loved the attention Sadie gave her while she taught her things, "Mr. John needs a trip down memory lane. I want to give him one more clue."

Sadie hung on to every word. The inner fear of abuse in her own life was absent around Vivian, and she felt empowered by the girl power Vivian demonstrated. "What kind of clue?"

"I'm thinking about our last conversation before he up and left. I told him that my Maw-maw warned me that he'd break my heart. I'm going to see if I can bring that old feeling back."

"Aren't you afraid that he'll figure out who you are?"

Vivian laughed out loud, "Honey, I'm Vanessa Wakefield from Yuma Arizona, an identity that cost me three hundred dollars a few years back. He's going to remember me when I was twelve, he wouldn't have a clue how I turned out or what happened to me."

"You are like a god to me right now, you know that. I can't believe how cool you are. You're my hero."

"Slow down darling."

Sadie continued, "I'm sorry, I just find all this amazing. I'd also hate to see what you'd do to them if they physically hurt you." She thought about her stepdad.

"Sweetie, one tried."

"What did you do?"

"I cut a huge V in his belly as he tried to force my head in his crotch."

"That's the day I went from Vivian to Vee."

"So, Vee is for Vivian."

"As far as anyone knows, Vee is for Vanessa. I trust you to keep our secret. No one can know until John finds out first." Even though Vivian's homies knew, Sadie didn't know that. She felt special, being trusted by her.

Sadie admitted, “You surprise me every single day, you’re like a sexy magician.”

“I’m just a gypsy,” Vivian mysteriously suggested. “I can teach you a few things if you walk with me.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Ask sweetie, what do you want to know?”

“Why do you call other people darling and honey, but you call me sweetie?”

Vivian smiled and lifted her left brow just a little, “because, when I look at you, I want to just lick you all over. You truly are that sweet to me. I call other people darling or honey to be polite to them and make them feel comfortable. Merely terms of flattery, but no one is ‘sweetie’ but you.”

“Oh,” Sadie uttered, slightly embarrassed. She aroused herself looking into Vivian’s eye, “um, I’m flattered, and excited,” she humbly replied.

“What would you think of, if I were to talk dirty to you?” she whispered, “what desires would it stir?”

“Oh god,” Sadie said, “I don’t know where to start. Sometimes I see you in me, because I want to be like you, sometimes I think of you when I pleasure myself. I feel like I’m under your spell and can’t get enough, I think I love you.”

Vivian put both her hands out palms up, Sadie put her hands in hers, “Life is wonderful, and Love is grand, but what you’re describing, may be lust and that’s ok too. Lust is nothing more than passion and passion is a wonderful thing, but passion demands fulfillment. Love, on the other hand, is only something we strive for, always out of reach.”

“I love you,” Sadie said.

“Hey, save those words for the people you’re going to screw. If you truly loved someone, you could share that without words, just a gentle touch and eye contact. If you want to tell me you love me, tell me with your eyes and your touch.”

That wasn't exactly what Sadie expected, she wanted to hear a reciprocal, 'I love you too,' yet she received the feeling of reciprocal love just the same. Her body language was speaking in code that only she understood. Sadie felt it hard. After that night, Sadie felt more alive and confident, but credited it to being emotionally supported by Vivian. Her life had changed, and it was Vivian that changed it. She knew it made no sense, but her feelings rarely made sense, so she chalked it up to love.

The 17<sup>th</sup> came without a phone call from Louisiana. John didn't know if his dad had been released or not. He didn't want to drive all the way to Angola if he didn't have to. His phone call finally came, "Hello, my name is Sergeant Connolly, Louisiana State Penitentiary, William Strahan listed you as his next of kin. I'm calling to see if anyone has plans to pick him up at three p.m., otherwise, we're going to provide him with a one-way bus ticket to anywhere in the continental United States."

"He made no requests of me; therefore, I think it's his choice where he goes."

"Very well, we'll get him a ticket. Is there a message you'd like to leave?"

"Yes, please," he said, "give him my phone number."

In John's mind, his dad's decisions fourteen years ago made this his responsibility. He felt bad about his dad's position but felt worse about his.

Vivian sees John's selfishness not to include her in his life left at the scariest times in her life when she needed someone the most. Reuniting John with his father was meant to suck John's memory back to the beginning. While he's reminiscing, she gets in his head with little hints. Vague memories returned. She told him she had a pet duck when she was growing up, which reminded John of Woldenberg Park.

John's mother had a private room in the mental health facility, three meals a day, and a lot of medication. The Facility Administrator took a cash payment to keep Mrs. Strahan locked

up and heavily sedated. William's bus ticket was to Starkville Mississippi, to see his wife. The last he knew; she moved in with Robert. After that, all communication stopped. William was giving his brother a chance at life, being educated gave Robert much more potential. He talked William into taking the fall for his crime and in turn, Robert would take care of his family while he was away and have a lot of money waiting for him, when he got out. He only expected to be locked up for six years, and when he hit fourteen years with no communication, he knew he made a deal with the devil, and it was not going to end well. For all the Jesus talk he heard in prison, William remembered the story of Cane and Able the best.

He signed in at the lobby and a nurse came from the back. "I'm sorry, Mr. Strahan, Mrs. Strahan cannot see visitors right now."

"Why the hell not. I came all the way from Louisiana, don't tell me I can't see my wife!"

"Hold Mr. Strahan," not wanting to have an incident with him, "I'll go get the doctor."

She left with no further discussion and returned a moment later with the doctor. "Mr. Strahan, we understand you want to see you your wife, but this is not the time, we were not informed that you were coming so we hadn't prepared. She's in the middle of treatment and wouldn't even know you were in the room."

"Treatment? For what?"

"I'm sorry sir, you wife is an extremely sick woman, she's under constant supervision and care. Perhaps you can schedule a day, about a week in advance."

"The hell I will, I want to see her now."

"Mr. Strahan, she is under a court order. We'll need to get the court's permission, her therapy and schedule will have to be altered, all of which take a little time. Perhaps you can call us next week for an update."

William had just been mysteriously released from prison and couldn't see getting thrown right back in, so he left without causing a scene. He walked outside and saw a long row of windows about five feet off the ground. He looked back toward the door and didn't see anybody watching him, so he walked along the side of the building and looked in the windows. He got halfway down the for the building and saw her strapped in her bed. Her stone face stared at his vision through the window but couldn't make the connection. He saw her stare and knew she was in mental hell. Her eyes were so glazed from lack of sleep and barbiturates, and she could barely mumble his name, "Billy," she tried to say, as she attempted to reach with bound hands.

His heart dropped to the ground. He spent fourteen years in prison because of his brother, who was supposed to take care of his family, and this is how well he's done. Now that he's found what had become of her, he wanted to kill someone. He had many unanswered questions, 'why she didn't write, did she love Robert or was she just trying to get by, did she still love him?' He knew his brother's motives, but her thoughts and emotions had been a mystery all these years and now it looks as if he may never know. His years on the farm, a nickname given to Angola State Penitentiary, made him hard, made him angry. God can only take so much away from you before you start thinking, God had nothing to do with it, and if God had nothing to do with it, he wouldn't have anything to do with fixing it either.

He examined the window and could tell that he'd need a cable and a truck to yank the bars off. He looked back in at her and waved, trying to get her attention, but she kept staring off into space. He walked back out to the street, then toward the highway and thumbed a ride down to the coast.

Castle Rouge will be hosting a celebrity party for the next four straight days. Thursdays opened with laughter throughout the ballroom. Tables were set up across the dancefloor, white satin table clothes and a Silver wine bucket on everyone. Jackie



Tucker performed a live comedy show and was interactive with the audience. He was a funny looking man, which helped him be rudely hilarious making fun of his audience in a Don Rickles kind of way. Vivian's concept was to allow the celebrities to come and party at the Harem. 'Give them money, give them a stage,' that's their sole purpose, she knew they'd come. Great music, food and drink, entertainment, company, and good times. What more do people want, she was sure it would grab the spotlight like studio fifty-four.

Sadie asked Vivian, "How did you get Jackie Tucker to come?"

"You know who Jackie Tucker is?" Vivian was surprised. She assumed Jackie Tucker's generation was alien to a young female. "How do you know Jackie Tucker?"

Sadie replied, "He's only the funniest man on the planet. My mom pees her pants every time she watches his, Under the Armpit Tour."

John approached Vivian, "Sorry to interrupt, but I just heard a rumor that my dad's been released but I haven't personally heard from anyone. I'm kind of afraid that he may show up here and cause a scene of maybe something happened to him."

"Give him a chance, he's been through a lot. If you want, I'll place a call and see where his bus ticket was for?"

This was a rare moment that she actually felt bad for John. It didn't last long.

Vivian knew where Bill was, she's the one who coordinated and arranged his release. Money was pouring in that night. All the silver playboys brought a guest, exhausted the limits and were now charging the remainder of the evening's pleasures to their credit cards. Gold and platinum members could bring three guests each, all trying to impress somebody. The gold and platinum members had plenty of credit from their memberships, but the silver members outdid themselves spending. Within an

hour of the doors opening that evening, Candy, Tuesday, and Tanya found themselves upstairs with customers. Even Tiffany was headed up the stairs to room 22. “Make all you can make girls, there will never be a better time.”

John went back to the casino. Everyone knew where to find him, losing his ass in Little Dodge City, a nickname for the poker room John camped out in. If anyone were to come looking for him, he was sure they’d find him there. He didn’t want to wait or worry about his dad anymore and got into another Texas Hold’em mini tournament. He was a hundred thousand dollars down to his dentist and a building contractor from Alabama.

Vivian received a call just before midnight, the call John was expecting. When Bill was released, he was given an envelope. Vivian left him her phone number and name, his wife’s location, and condition, three hundred dollars and a note that read, “Don’t stop believing in angels, V.” She answered the phone, “Hello, this is Vee.”

“My name is William Strahan, are you the one that left me the package?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Why would you do that.”

Vivian walked out to the back garden where she could have a little privacy. “My name is Vee; I work for your son. He’s very confused right now and by helping you, I can help him.”

“I would like to thank you in person,” he said.

“Sure, I’d love to meet you. If you need a ride, I can get someone to come get you.”

“Yeah, I could use a ride, at the Waffle House on the beach near Biloxi Regional Medical Center.”

“I’ll send someone to pick you up, the car will have a Castle Rouge sticker on the side of it.”

Forty-five minutes later, Gerald returned with John’s dad. John was unaware of his father’s transit to the Castle; he was preoccupied and desperate to win his money back with one bad

bet after another. Vivian approached him and whispered in his ear from behind, "Let it go Johnny, your dad's here."

That was two things he didn't want to hear. He frustratedly turned to see his dad standing next to Vivian and immediately felt ashamed. After spending fourteen years in prison, the first sight his father sees of him is standing over a huge poker loss. He told his poker buddies, "I'll have to get you back later," and stepped forward to meet his dad for the first time. At ten, he never knew him, so it really was like meeting him for the first time. He didn't know if he should shake hands or give him a hug. Vivian saw his confusion and from behind Bill she signaled a hug.

It was awkward but John gave him a hug and said, "It's good to see you pop."

Bill was rough looking in many ways. His hard-physical life gave him a bulky frame, a few scars, worn and weathered, and added years to his appearance. Heavily tattooed and his sunbaked skin, could have confused him for a Mexican gang member. He stood in the middle of Little Dodge City in his fourteen-year-old jeans and shirt, looking slightly out of place among the fare thee well onlookers wondering what John was doing with a character of such lowly appearance. John could feel the eyes upon him and felt ashamed for a different reason. Vivian and Bill both felt his embarrassment. It made Bill sad, but it made Vivian angry. She was witnessing his disregard for family, friends, and loyalty firsthand and tied that with her own memories of his abandonment and convinced her that her revenge was not only justified but was going to be righteously enjoyed.

"You look like you turned out alright," Bill said in an attempt to reconnect with John.

"I tried. You look good considering. Was it hard in there?"

"Things are hard everywhere, son. I'm sure neither of us had it good. How's your mother?" He didn't let him know that he'd already been to see her.

“She ok, I guess. They have her in a mental hospital up state. You know she went crazy after Uncle Robert died.”

“Robert’s dead? How’d that happen?” Vivian’s note explained everything, but Bill pretended not to know, in keeping with his secret package from Vivian.

John began to relax a little bit more and asked a waitress to bring him a vodka tonic, “Do what a drink?”

“Beer, thanks.”

“Robert hired a guy, then reneged on his salary; the guy confronted him and shot him in the head.”

“Wow, too bad for Robert.”

“Yeah, after that, mama thought everyone was out to get her and became paranoid.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear about your mama,” he didn’t refer to her as his wife.

It was time for Vivian to leave them alone. She wanted to make sure they’d be able to get along before leaving. “Mr. Strahan, it was a pleasure meeting you, I’m sure you and John have a lot to talk about, if I can be of any assistance, give me a call, and she gave him her card with her phone number written on the back.

John and Bill went to the Spades Lounge to sit, drink, and get to know each other. John’s first question went to the root of his troubles. “What did you do to go to prison?”

“I don’t know what you remember son, but it was your uncle who put me away.”

It was John’s turn to play dumb, “No, why would he do that?”

“He wanted your mother, so he got me out of the picture. He robbed a bank, a security guard was shot and killed, and convinced me to take the fall.”

“How could you let him do that?”

“He was smart, he went to college, he had potential, I was a nobody. I dropped out, I had a shitty job and couldn’t take care

of your mother or you. He offered to take care of you and your mama and give me a lot of the money from the heist when I got out. I didn't know he planned for me to be away for the rest of my life and take my wife and family. I was a dumbass. A fool. But I'm out now.

“That son of a bitch. I always had a bad feeling, even though mama said it was for the better.”

“Your mama's no angel either, it takes two to tango. She never wrote to me once. I had divorce papers sent to the prison for me to sign.”

“Why did you sign them? You just gave up?”

Bill was a strong man, strong on the outside and inside, but he was also an honest man, true to himself and others. “I signed them for you, son. Robert had money, he could take care of you, even if your mama never saw me again, I could at least help you. Believe me, it was the most painful day in my life when they hauled me away. At least I don't have to worry about going back to prison for killing the son of a bitch.” He snickered.

Now John felt bad for a whole new host of reasons but vindicated in his involvement in taking Robert out. His mother's demise was another issue. His new feeling of shame wasn't his humiliation of having a convict for a father, it was the deeper sense that he was not the son or the man that he could have been. His own self-worth just dropped into the basement. Vivian was a student of life and she paid attention in class. She had never met Bill, he was already in prison when she met John, but from all she knew, he was the only man connected in her life, who was honorable; the only man that it would bother her conscious if she was to hurt him. She sat with Sadie in the Hearts Lounge thinking about the emotional rollercoaster John must be going through and felt satisfied in her decision to help Bill get out of prison.

John looked at his dad, “You are a sight for sore eyes. Uncle Robert may have been a dick, but now we have all his

money, we don't have to live poor anymore. Let me take you shopping tomorrow, get some new clothes, anything you need."

"I don't know son, I still need to find a place to stay and if I don't report to the parole officer by four o'clock tomorrow, they'll lock me back up."

"You can stay here, there's plenty of room."

"No, I can't. Alcohol, gambling, and who knows what else, they'll never let me stay here."

John said, "Ok, I'm sure Vee can make the arrangements and rent you an apartment. What about transportation?"

"My Louisiana driver's license expired the year after I got locked up."

"Ok, not a problem," John said, "we can get that taken care of too." He then called Vivian, "Vee, can you get my dad a room for the night and tomorrow work on finding him an apartment?"

"It'd be my pleasure," she said. It was playing out just as she hoped and expected.

Friday rolled around with a renewed sense of purpose for John. He was anxious to show his father that he succeeded at something, while trying to beat down the feelings of failure. His answer was to throw money around. He bought his father a car, assuming he would be able to get a license, and personally went with him to buy furniture for his new apartment. Bill could tell John had insecurity issues; he'd seen this behavior before. People tend to overdo things in an effort to hide something. John being engulfed in a poker game while his father, who he hadn't seen in ages, was coming to town, was a giveaway of what his problem was.

"John, I don't need all this. I just need something small, something simple, like me."

"Nonsense dad. You deserve it. Your sacrifice is what enabled me to have this to give, I'm sorry about Uncle Robert, but isn't it ironic that we can now spend his money?"

“Just don’t go overboard son, if I’ve learned anything being locked up, it’s that everything in life can be taken from you except your integrity, that you have to give up yourself.”

Those were wise words to a man that took part in killing his uncle, locking his mother away, gambling away his future and generally thinking about no one but himself, but nevertheless, John thought those words were wasted on him. He often felt he’d never had any integrity to begin with. He tried to be receptive and rhetorically acknowledged, “You are so right, a man without integrity doesn’t deserve what he gets out of life.”

Bill drove the Toyota Camry John bought him, without a license, to the parole officer’s office and checked in. After his meeting he secretly made his way back to Castle Rouge to find Vivian. He called her from a payphone outside his apartment complex, “You said if I needed anything, I could call you?”

“Absolutely,” she said.

“I need to find a job. The parole officer said it was a requirement and I don’t want to ask John.”

“I understand. What kind of work are you looking for?”

He said, “Something simple, nothing special, I’ve worked in a laundry and a kitchen, just something to keep the parole officer off my ass and give me something to do so I don’t go crazy.”

“We go through a lot of kitchen help, it doesn’t pay a lot and it’s only part time, but it’s easy work. Of course, you can count on us to get you anything you need.”

“That’s perfect, thank you Vee. By the way, how did John ever find a gem like you?”

She laughed, “I guess it was fate. Do you need a ride?”

“No,” Bill said, “John bought me a car.”

“Come to Castle Rouge, I’ll meet you in the restaurant. Drive safe, Highway 15 has become a speed trap because of all the rich pricks traveling up here every weekend.”

“Thanks, I will.”

Vivian followed up on other pressing issues in preparation for Friday night at the Harem. Fridays were always hectic. Young players vying for respect among their fellow players in a game of one up-man ship. “Candy, honey,” Vivian spoke, “asked the ushers in the grand ball room to move the table off the dance floor and spread them farther apart than normal around the perimeter. I’d like to discourage the younger crowd from congregating out there, if we can keep them in the lounges, we can make more money and our finer guests will be able to enjoy the evening better out there.”

Candy asked, “Why don’t we have theme nights. That way the different generations won’t clash.”

“That’s not a bad idea, I’ll give it some thought.”

People started filing in around eight o’clock. Every week saw the security force grow. It has doubled since the grand opening. The security force now had about twenty guards, half of them were moonlighting from the local police and sheriff’s departments, licensed to carry and familiar with the local criminal element. They were asked specifically not to use their authority to arrest or harass the members for minor infractions, like simple possession or laying DUI traps. A fleet of taxis were available to give customers free rides home and if anything, the guard could insist on their use for public safety.

One of the guards recognized a member who had recently been busted for trafficking. He informed Vivian, “I don’t know how he got out, but that fellow over by the slot machines with the Hawaiian shirt was recently busted for trafficking. Is he a member?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t look familiar so I’m sure he’s not a gold or platinum member. I’m going to go find out.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No, I’ll be fine, I don’t want you scaring him off or him causing a scene. Hang tight, I’ll be tight right back.”



She walked up to him, “Good evening, is this your first time here?”

He turned and smiled, not because he was a pleasant sort, because Vivian was stunning, and he was enjoying the view. “No, I come here all the time, what’s your name sweetheart?”

“My name’s Vee, and you are?”

“You can call me big Johnson, if you know what I mean.”

She understood all too well his reference, “I can only assume you’re not a member of the Harem.”

He felt that she was looking down her nose at him. “Why would you assume that?”

“Come now, all the big Johnsons are next door in the Harem where the real action is.”

He now saw her being sexy again and figured she wasn’t disrespecting him. “So, you want to get a drink, or you want to get out of here?” He wasted no time hitting on her.

“No, I’m working right now. How long are you going to hang around?”

“I’ll be here all-night baby, what time do you get off?”

“I get off when the sun comes up.”

The way she said that made him wonder what she meant about getting off. “I’d like to be there for that.”

“As do all the big Johnsons Mr. Johnson.”

He was melting. “I’ll bet.”

“I have to get back to work, don’t gamble all your money away, it takes more than a big Johnson to make these girls happy.” She walked back into the Castle Rouge’s lobby leaving the guy with his tongue hanging out.

“He’s not a member and he’s back at his profession.”

“How can you tell?”

“He was wearing a fanny pack turned to the front, he barely had pupils, he must be speeding his ass off right now. I’ll bet his fanny pack is filled with drugs. He’s very jittery, I think

we should probably get him outside quietly and kick him off the property. I see nothing but trouble with him.”

He took another guard with him to confront the man, but when he saw them coming his way he bolted. Vivian figured him to be part of Gonzo’s crew and feared that his element was too close for comfort at this stage of her plan. She instructed the guards to alter their assignments to watch the casino more.

Sadie met Vivian at a table off the dance floor, “Why are you sitting by yourself?” Sadie asked.

“I’m waiting for Donna.”

“Donna who?”

“Donna Fey. I’m told she accepted the offer to party, I’m hoping she’ll grace us with a song. Berry Moran told me personally, he’d sing me a song, and that he talked to Donna about coming. So, here I am, waiting. Sweetie, can you get me a drink?”

“I thought you liked Jazz.”

“I do, but I listen to other stuff too. Besides, Donna’s a fighter, I like fighters.”

Sadie thought, ‘Donna Fey? Who knew?’

Vivian got tired of waiting, disappointed that she never showed up. She went about the rest of the evening trying to keep busy and checked in on her girls. The night drug on and as she thought about it, the closer the time came to meet Gonzo, the more she had to remind herself that patience was a virtue. She counted on making a deal with him and that deal would be the trigger to set her plan in motion.

## Chapter Ten

After leaving Tanya and Candy in the Spades Lounge, Vivian and Sadie entered the Diamonds Lounge where Gabrielle and Tiffany were working a small group of gold members. They came with no dates, so they were all about lusting over the chaperones and waitresses. Vivian looked all around the room looking for her girls but couldn't see them. She looked over toward the bar and saw Kat leaving the bar. He was walking toward a table in the back, so she followed him, "Where's Tiffany and Gabrielle?"

"I just coded their cards for room 16."

"Both of them? Together?"

"Yeah, they had some college guys hanging all over them."

As a general rule, Vivian didn't like more than one client with any of the girls at a time, "Can you tap into the cameras?"

"Sure, is something wrong?"

"No, I just worry, you know."

Kat opened his laptop and signed into the server, the cameras feeds were a little slow that night but finally loaded in time for Vivian to see three men and her two girls. At first nothing looked out of the ordinary then Vivian notices a gym bag on the floor at the end of the bed. "What is that?" she pointed to the bag.

He said, "It looks like a bag."

"Why would they bring a bag? Who goes out for the evening to drink and party and brings a bag?"

Before long she saw the answer. The third man opened the bag and took out a rope and a roll of duct tape. "I knew it, is Rex up in room 14?"

"I think so," he said.

"Get up there and find Rex. Watch these jokers like a hawk. A little S&M may seem exciting and worth the money in their view, but not mine. Whenever duct tape becomes a sex tool,

you know something ain't right. If they hurt my girls, I swear I'll cut off their nuts."

Kat entered room fourteen, Vinnie and Rex were sitting together watching the cameras. "Keep your eyes on room sixteen. Tiffany and Gabrielle are in with a trio we suspect are up to no good."

"Ok, you got a guy with Tiffany," he pointed out, "this guy has a camera, the other guy must be in the bathroom because I only see two of them." He continued, "Gabrielle is on the bed doing her thing."

"I don't need a play by play. Just watch them close, Vee should be up here soon, she thinks these guys are up to no good."

No sooner than he said that they heard a muffled sound in the distance and the cameraman put his camera down and grabbed the duct tape off the floor right about the time the third man came out of the bathroom naked, wearing a black Lone Ranger black mask. The camera man tossed the tape to him and grabbed Gabrielle. She started to fight and scream but the cameraman put his hand over her mouth. Everything was happening quickly as Tiffany witnessed the assault and began to yell and the man holding her slapped her hard across the face and pinned her down with his hand over her face. He turned to his friend, "Hurry up, she's stronger than she looks," and when he turned, they could see he was also wearing a mask.

Big Rex jumped up, knocking over the laptop running to the door, "They're in danger, we got to get in there." He swung the door open just as Vivian was entering the hallway. She saw Rex run out of the room followed by Vinnie and Kat. She knew something was wrong. She's never seen a three hundred plus man run so fast. When they opened the door to Gabrielle room, the man had already taped Gabrielle's mouth and was standing over her with a knife. The cameraman was busy taping her hands behind her back and the other man with a mask was leaning heavy

into Tiffany with his knees on her arms, mouth covered with one hand and choking her with the other, telling his friends to hurry.

Rex rushed toward them and the man with the knife turned and pointed it at Rex. Rex stopped his advance and put his hands out as a symbol to stop, "Put the knife down."

"Back away big man," and he turned and grabbed Gabrielle by the arm and pulled her in front of him, put the knife to her throat and repeated, "Back away man."

Rex turned his attention away from him and lunged toward the man strangling Tiffany. He hit the man upside his head so hard it knocked him out. Kat went to check on Tiffany while Rex resumed his position in front of the man with a knife. The cameraman stood up behind his friend and Gabrielle, at the far side of the bed, "We didn't want to hurt anyone, we're just making a video for the internet."

Vivian entered the room, "Hey mister, what do you think you're doing?"

"We're just having a little fun. Who the hell are you?" he nervously shouted.

She handed her room card to Kat, "Go get my gun from my nightstand and hurry."

Kat ran out of the room, she shut the door behind him. "Listen to me close, you creep. There's only one way you leave this room alive, drop the knife and let her go."

"What are you talking about, bitch, I'm the one with a knife, I make the rules."

Vivian was extremely calm on the outside and afraid like hell for Gabrielle on the inside. She sighed, "When my man gets back with my Smith and Weston, I'm going to put a bullet in each of your heads and arrange your naked homosexual bodies in a murder suicide pose. Hang in there Gabrielle, it'll be over soon."

"I'll cut her head off, bitch, you all better get back," then told his cameraman, "Check on Seth."

"Get back big man," the man with the knife said."

Gabrielle made a muffled noise as his knife pressed hard enough to break flesh.

“Hold on fella, you have the knife, you don’t need her.”

He looked at Rex, “Yeah right, back off.” He told his cameraman, “Carl, hold this knife to her throat while I get dressed.”

The cameraman was shaking and hesitated.

“Carl,” he repeated himself, “hold this girl while I get dressed god damn it.”

Gabrielle looked at Rex then looked down to her right. As soon as she noticed that he may have understood her clue, she grabbed the cameraman’s crotch and squeezed it tight as she could and twisted her body away from his to the right. As soon as she did, Rex had an open shot straight to his face with a fist as big as a toaster. The man was out cold before he hit the ground.

Kat reentered the room with gun in hand ready to shoot.

“Thanks honey,” Vivian said, “but we didn’t need it.” Gabrielle and Rex took his head off, both of them,” referring to his junk.

Vinnie said, “I see why you needed the cameras now. Wow, that was intense.”

Rex had his massive arm around the cameraman’s throat while Vivian had her 40-caliber pointed right at knifeman’s face, “Ok, mister, I want some answers.” She bent over to pick the camera up off the floor. She handed it to Vinnie, “See what they’ve been up to.”

Vinnie rewound the camcorder and took random views from previous recordings, “Oh my god, Vee, oh my god. You got to see this; we literally just saved their lives.” Vinnie thought about it for a second and tears filled his eyes. Vivian looked over the recordings of these three creating snuff films, and she was sickened with disgust. A fiery hatred overcame her, and she gave the gun to Vinnie. “Here, take this, if I hold it for another minute,

I swear I'll shoot them in the face four times each," and handed Vinnie the gun.

The knifeman tried to say they weren't real, that they were a production, actresses and it was all for show. "Rex, honey," Vivian begged, "Please knock this man out."

Rex reared back and hit him. The first one didn't do it, so he hit him again.

At this point all three of them have been knocked out and are lying on the floor or bed. Kat said, "What are we going to do with them?"

Vivian asked, "Does anyone here have a problem with us tying them up?"

"No," was the only answer she heard.

"Use their own tools, duct tape their mouths and tie them up. Let's see who these jokers are," she went through their pockets. Only one of them had a gold card. "Run this," she gave the card to Kat.

"Michael Beasley, 54, owner of Western Living Furniture Store."

"These boys are in their twenties. They obviously stole this card," Kat said.

"Ok, boys, wake them up. Rex and Vinnie started slapping them and telling them to wake up. It took a little while for them to come around, but they eventually gave Vivian their undivided attention. "I assume one of you boys stole Mr. Beasley's membership card, who was it?" They all stared at Vivian without making a noise. She looked them up and down, "Was it you," she pointed to the tall one. He didn't respond. She looked at the cameraman next, "Was it you?" his eyes momentarily looked away. She pulled the tape from his mouth. "Who is Michael Beasley, and why do you have his card?"

"I don't know," he said, "I stole it out of the lockers at my gym," he said with a quivering voice. "What are you going to do with us?"

“I haven’t decided whether to turn you over to the police or put you in the trunk of your car and drive you into the river.”

They really got nervous and ranting their muffled objections through the duct tape. Whether they were facing murder charges or drowning in the river, there was no good outcome for the boys.

The third boy grunted as if he were trying to say something through his duct tape muzzle. Vivian pulled the tape away, “What if we paid you?” He said.

“Do you honestly think you can buy your way out of murder?”

“My dad’s rich, really rich. I can get him to pay you a lot of money to let us go.”

“Junior, if your father is willing to pay the amount of money it would take to let you go after doing to those girls what you’ve done, neither of you deserve to live.” She turned back to Vinnie, “Can you make a copy of that tape?”

“It’s digital, there is no tape, but yes, I can download it.” He pulled the cable from the camcorder’s bag and plugged it into his laptop and copied everything.

Vivian then called Detective Hightower, “How fast can you get to Castle Rouge? We have a serious issue here and I could use your expertise.”

“I can be there in a half hour.”

“Thank you,” she said and hung up. “Well boys, I’ve decided to turn you over to someone familiar with these situations. I’ve also made a copy of your tape and if you are not dead or in prison by the end of the year, everyone, you have ever known, will know what you’ve done.”

The cameraman began to cry, whimpering like a child that had been scolded, Rex slapped him in the face and told him to shut up.

Detective Hightower arrived and met with Vivian downstairs and was briefed on the situation. He watched some of



the video from the camcorder and told Vivian, "I'll take care of this."

"I hate to tell you what I thought about doing to them. Are you going turn them over to the county or the city?"

He replied, "All this evidence could be contaminated with you and your staff's fingerprints on everything. The bruises on their faces and being tied and gagged will be a blessing to their defense attorney. I'm sure the victims' families would like some closure, but I'm afraid if it went to trial, there's a fifty-fifty chance they can get it thrown out. The district attorney's a straight shooter but I wouldn't trust the judge."

"Who would the judge be?" Vivian asked.

"Either Judge Withers or Judge Anderson."

Vivian looked out over the floor of the lobby and focused on a young cocktail waitress. She didn't have anything on either of the judges, so she had no leverage. She imagined the difficulties that young waitress had to deal with daily and the asshole that get away with murder. She whispered to Detective Hightower, "Is there another way to solve this problem that doesn't involve the possibility that they could get away with it?"

He knew what she was asking, and it wasn't beneath him to do something about it. "I can make this go away, but I'll need a little help on your part."

"I would take great satisfaction in knowing that these three have seen their last victim, anything I can do, I will."

"First off, it's a big risk that I'll be taking. With big risk, fair compensation is only justified, wouldn't you say?"

She looked around and whispered again, "Twenty K?"

"There's three of them," he said.

"Thirty?"

He nodded, "I'll take care of it," he said.

"What are you going to do? She asked.

"The less you know the better. Did you call nine-one-one, or the station?"

“No, you’re the only one I called.”

“Can we sit down somewhere and go over all the information we know so far. I need to know everything. All the people that know what’s going on, how did these guys get here, who knows that they were here, everything.”

“They all must have rode together, they only had one set of keys among them.”

He asked, “Who all knows these guys were here?”

“Rex, Vinnie, Kat, Tiffany, Gabrielle and me.”

“Is that it, nobody else?”

She thought for a moment, “No that’s it.”

“Do they know I’m here?”

“No.”

“Good,” he said, “don’t tell them.”

“Ok, then what?”

“Here’s what I need. Find their vehicle and bring it around to the loading dock in the back, make sure to wear gloves, use a laundry cart to wheel them out so no one sees them. Put them in the trunk and back floorboard and leave the keys in the ignition. I’ll take it from there.”

“Only one of them had a set of keys on them. The one with keys had an insurance card in his wallet for a GMC Yukon.”

“Even better. Have your guys dog tie them and load them in the back face down. The least your people know, the better.”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of my guys, they won’t be a problem,” she said.

“You’ll have to follow me in my car.”

“I’ll get Rex to follow you,” she said.

“No, no one else can know I was here or what’s going to happen to these guys, it has to be you.”

“All right, where’s your car?”

“I’ll park it at the corner around back. When you get the guys loaded up, walk out to my car and I’ll come out of the

shadows to drive their vehicle. Don't let your guys hang around, just have them load them up and leave."

"Yeah, I got that part."

Vivian wasn't cruel or sadistic, but these low life's fate didn't bother her. She had long realized some people were just a cancer on humanity and had no place in a civilized world. Her concern was relinquishing control of a situation that she would be involved in. Detective Hightower calling the shots made her feel uncomfortably vulnerable.

The boys were loaded into the SUV and Detective Hightower snuck out from behind a dumpster, put on a pair of leather gloves and climbed in the driving seat. As he drove off, he called back to the boys, "You boys enjoy the ride, we'll be there shortly." He received a mumbled response in unison and told them, "shut up." Vivian followed behind in his beat up seventy-eight Continental that smelled like a dirty sock and cheap cigar. A couple miles down highway 15 he pulled off the road and drove a few hundred yards down a dirt path into the Desoto National Forest. He pulled over to the side and stepped out. Vivian pulled up behind him.

"Why are we stopping?" She asked.

He said, "Let me see my keys for a minute." She turned off the car and handed him the keys. He opened the trunk and took out a handful of large zip ties he had in a box and an evidence bag containing some confiscated cocaine.

She watched intently thinking he must have done something like this before, he hadn't had a lot of time to plan, "What's that for?"

"When people show up dead, there's always an investigation and an autopsy. The locals in Gulfport will be looking for clues, we're going to give one. First this tape has people's fingerprints on it, so it's got to go. I'll replace it with these zip ties." He gave her back the keys and opened the back of the Yukon. He grabbed one of them and repositioned him on his

side and strapped a zip tie around his neck and told him, “If you yell or scream or kick or fight, I’ll tighten this tie and you’ll choke to death for sure.” Next, he put a zip tie around one forearm, another around his other, then one more to tie them together. After he had the zip tie cuffs on him, he cut the duct tape from his wrist.”

The man grunted and shook his head. As quick as he put the zip tie cuffs on his wrists, he then put them around his ankles. Vivian watched in awe at how efficient he was with this sort of thing, confident that he’d done this before. Then he asked the second and third man if they heard the instructions as his put a zip tie around their necks. One at a time, he replaced the duct tape with zip ties. “Now for the fun part,” he said while turning one over on his back face up. Vivian looked on with curiosity and with morbid wonder like she was watching a horror movie. The boys still had duct tape on the mouths, he pinched the nose of one of them, he struggled to breathe, he let up off the nose and let the man breath through his nose, then the detective pitched it again and again, the man struggled. This time, he had a baggie of coke at the ready and when the man sucked in a deep breath, he poured a little coke on his nostrils and the man involuntarily snorted between an eight and a quarter of a gram. He repeated the procedure on the other two and was ready to get back on the road. Afterward, all three were buzzing pretty good from the coke, but more importantly, “When the coroner does his autopsy, they find the coke in their system, and the investigators will lean toward a drug deal gone bad,” he said. He then shut the back of the Yukon, “There, now the local police in Gulfport and the medical examiner will have something to go on.” The three were frighten to death now, they had just learned of their fate, even though they were stoned, they knew it was bad.

They drove to the boat launch at Gulfport Lake. He took his time nearing the launch, scanning the area for people to make sure they were alone. He turned off his headlights, Vivian turned

off hers, he then signaled to Vivian to stop, and he crept up to the launch and parked at the top of the downslope. He cracked all the windows including the back window, looked around and went to the back of the Yukon and opened the back. He removed the tape from their face and one at a time and yanked the zip ties around their necks real hard to strangle them. While they struggled and floundered about, he shut the hatch and went back to the driver's door. He put the car in gear, with one foot on the break and the other outside the vehicle, he jumped back and slammed the door while it rolled down into the water. The boys were in the back yelling and screaming as the vehicle sunk deeper in the water. Detective Hightower watched as the vehicle slowly floated off with the current, tilted nose down and sank fairly fast. With the back window barely cracked, all the air trapped in the vehicle blew out of the vehicle like a whale when it finally submerged, and the screaming stopped.

Vivian had already moved to the passenger seat. While he was doing his business, she took the opportunity to take a few pictures with her mini camera hoping that the moonlight would be enough light to make out the images. Dealing with a detective was risky enough, dealing with a crooked one required extra precaution. He hurried back to his car, got in and told Vivian, "Let's get out of here, I'll take you home. Do you have something for me?"

She reached in her little handbag and pulled out three stacks of hundred-dollar bills, gave them to him and said, "Thank you." That was the last thing either of them said until they got back to Castle Rouge. Vivian wouldn't let him see, but his nonchalant performance scared her. He was methodical and calm like it was just another day at the office.

They returned to Castle Rouge, Detective Hightower pulled up to the dock in the back and let Vivian out, "Remember, this is the last we talk about this, agreed?"

She stepped out and replied, “agreed,” nodded the head and shut the door. She walked through the kitchen to the restaurant and waiting for her were all the other participants. They had formed an alliance amongst themselves that nothing ever happened. The restaurant had been closed for an hour, so no one else was around. “How did it go?” Sadie asked.

Vivian, with no expression said, “Justice has been served. On that note, stay away from Detective Hightower, he’s potentially dangerous. We should all pretend that this night was just a dream. Rex, Vinnie, thanks for being there for us, I’m putting a little something special in your check this week, go home, relax, take a couple of days off.”

After they left, “Girls, I’m sorry you had to endure those dangers, thank goodness we had Rex and Vinnie.”

Kat blinked a nervous twitch, “you left me out.”

“Of course, we’re thankful you’re one of us. I was referring to them because they’re outsiders and will still be here when we’re long gone. They’re potential witnesses. We would be wise to accelerate our exodus. But first, I’d like as many volunteers as possible to do something for me.”

“I will,” Gabrielle said.

“You haven’t heard what it was,” Vivian acknowledged.

“Vee, I had a knife to my throat and was moments away from staring in snuff film. Because of you, I’m alive.”

“Ok then. Let’s gather all the girls in my room.”

With just her girls and Kat in her room, she opened, “Tonight I want to say goodbye to John. Tonight, I want to bring John into an orgy. After this, his life will soon go downhill rather quickly. This is voluntary, but I’d like to give him something to remember us by, we’re going to get him drunk and screw his brains out.”

Gabrielle, Tiffany, and Kat were curiously amazed that Vivian could go from angel of death to sex goddess so quickly. Vivian saw the confusion in their face, “Relax, we’ll drink and let

them have all the fun with John, referring to the girls that didn't have to go through the episode they just went through. Besides, a festive mood helps heal the soul."

Vivian went down to the casino and found John playing blackjack, losing of course. "I've got a surprise for you if you need to take a break."

He looked up at her, back at his stack of chips and said, "That would be wise. What do you have?" his mood changed to a more pleasant persuasion.

"I'll have to show you."

He followed her upstairs and when they reached the landing, she led him to the right, down the red carpeted hallway to room 20. She carded the door, it opened, and the lights and music suddenly came on. Vivian and John stepped inside, and the girls livened up and started dancing. John was shocked, "My birthdays not for three months, what this?"

"It's a party for you," Vivian said.

"Why?" he asked, "because business is booming, and they want to thank you. I mean they really want to thank you" and put her hand on his butt.

He flinched, "Well, I don't know what to say." His smile subconsciously grew as the girls worked their way around the room to rub their bodies on him and flirt. John had never had a favorite drink like Vivian. Whiskey made him melancholy, vodka made his brain misfire, and tequila unleashed a demon within him. Tonight, was a tequila night.

Vivian backed away from the other girls and John and sat with Kat, Gabrielle, and Tiffany, at the breakfast bar. "Look at him. I can't remember what I saw in him when I was twelve, but whatever it was, he doesn't have it anymore."

Sasha approached Vivian, "Something seems different, are you alright?"

Vivian replied, "It's time we pull the trigger. Sadie used your contact in New Orleans and got all of us fake IDs, social

security cards, birth certificates, passports, the whole nine yards. We can pick up and go anytime we wish. Tonight, was an extremely difficult night. We had to take care of three serial rapists and murderers. We arranged for them to meet Jesus. Now it's time for us to close up shop and let the fireworks begin."

"I knew something was up, I saw the stress in your face, baby," Sasha said, "you're too young for wrinkles. So, what's this about rapists and murderers?"

"I'll tell you all about it later, but the short version is, Gabriel and Tiffany had a few boys upstairs, who wanted to film a snuff film, starring our babies."

"Oh my god."

"It's all ok, we put them on ice, but the girls are a little shaken up."

Sasha said, with a tear forming in her eye, "Why does evil always find us? Haven't we seen enough?"

By six thirty in the morning, everyone was tired and wore out. Vivian left with Sadie, went back to their room, and crashed until they woke at eleven thirty. She showered and dressed, then called Mr. Peters to come to the mansion and meet with her.

"I have an assignment for you," Vivian said.

"I'm listening," he replied.

"John needs Mrs. Strahan to relinquish custody of the mansion to him."

He replied, "Unfortunately, there's nothing that can be done, while Mrs. Strahan is deemed mentally unfit, her assets are in probate."

"I know."

"So, what do you want me to do?"

She said, "Peanut butter cookies."

"I don't understand," he said.

"She's highly allergic to peanuts."

"Are you asking me to kill someone? Forget it."



Vivian walked to a little table and poured herself a small drink. “I know it’s early,” referring to drinking at that time of day, “I need to collect on a debt for John.”

“I don’t owe John anything, I owed Robert, but that debt is settled.”

“I beg to differ. You may have gotten yourself out from underneath Robert, but John has a tape of you agreeing to institutionalize his mother. I wonder what that will do for your career.”

“You’re bluffing,” he said.

She waved Kat over with his laptop and showed the video. Kat then went back to the other side of the conference room. He sat in disbelief, he thought he was free. “I’m sorry, I won’t do it. I’ve done a lot of bad things in my life but I’m not going kill someone.”

“John is at risk of losing everything and that would include him turning all his evidence over to either the police, or a drug cartel, either way, your life just got terribly worse. You are probably the only one to have access to her and the only one with a report with the Facility Administrator. Give the cookies to your man, don’t tell him she’s allergic, he’ll give them to her, she’ll go into anaphylaxis and die, your man will cover it up, I guarantee.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He knows he’s keeping her there illegally; he’s not going to turn himself in for giving her the cookies. He’ll claim she took them out of the lunchroom while being unsupervised. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

He said, “I’ll still know it was me that killed her.”

“Right now, she’s the only one that can prove she wasn’t supposed to be there in the first place, her not being able to testify against you is the only way you can be free.”

He thought about it and realized that he had to take the chance with Vivian, he was guaranteed to lose if he didn’t, but there was still a chance to come out unscathed if he complied. He

even contributed by having his daughter make the cookies, unwittingly of course. He didn't put a great deal of thought into it and delivered the cookies himself. He hid them in his brief case and during the visit to verify her legal incompetency, he left them behind. In his mind, if she were so messed up, she couldn't comprehend her allergy, it wouldn't be his fault if she ate them. She found them within an hour of him leaving and ate them both, within minutes she went into anaphylaxis and died alone in her room sprawled out on the floor.

The hospital was unaware of the nature of her death. She ate the evidence, the Facility Administrator's concerns were explaining the death of a person that shouldn't have been there and to keep from being sued for neglect, they covered it up by claiming she faked taking her pills and stored them up till she had enough to commit suicide. Once again, another person, another circumstance, where the system cheats and the innocent pay the price. John legally took control of the mansion in time for Gonzo to make it back to the coast to meet with Vee.

## Chapter Eleven

As usual, Gonzo came with a couple associates, armed, she was sure. They met in the Clubs Lounge. This time, she was alone, she had Sadie help the girls get ready in the ballroom to entertain rich customers, who could afford to attend a private concert by some of the biggest names in music. Gonzo stood at his table when Vivian arrived, “Good evening, Vee, you look ravishing,” he said.

“Thank you,” and took her seat. “Have you decided?”

“Thank you for the offer, but no, I’m not interested in your blackmail scheme, but highly interested in what you have on the DEA.”

“I can give him to you for a million,” she bluntly spoke.

He agreed, “If what you have is good, I’ll give you the million.”

Vivian suggested, “Let’s go upstairs away from these people and I’ll show you some video.”

They went upstairs to the small conference room down the middle hall. Once inside Vivian pulled up a seat where her back was to the main camera and Gonzo was facing the camera. She had Kat set the laptop up in front of him and begin the video of him telling Kat his story. “I must admit,” he said, “I thought you were bluffing; you know you are one crazy woman. If you were going to scam me, I would have had my guys gun you down, you got balls, I’ll give you that. A deal’s a deal. He then looked at Kat, that’s you and him?”

Kat shook his head.

“Ok, I’ll have Raul bring your money,” he pulled out his phone, placed a call, and told his guy to bring the money.

“I have an even greater deal to offer,” she said.

“What’s that?”

Vivian looked around, “See all this, how would you like to own all this?”

His eyes got big. He hadn't thought about having a palace like this before, but now that the offer's been made, he interested, "What's this place worth?"

"Somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred million dollars, but I can sell it to you for ten million cash."

"I just got through telling you I was prepared to kill you if you screwed me, yet you still offer me this. You must be telling the truth. He looked around, "I have to make a call."

Gonzo got up from the table and made a call, speaking in Spanish he talked to his boss in Venezuela and returned to Vivian, "It's a deal. However, but if you try to screw us, we'll kill everyone you've ever known and feed you to my dogs."

She smiled and chuckled, "My god, I've never been threatened so many times in such a short amount of time. Senior Gonzalez, where I come from, a promise is a promise and a deal is a deal, I expect nothing less from a man of honor."

"I will get the money together; you get all the paperwork in order and give me a call in a couple days when you're ready and wrote a number on a piece of paper." Gonzo put everything on the line with the big boss for the bankroll to buy Castle Rouge. Raul knocked on the door with a million dollars in a case. Gonzo had brought two million dollars with him but didn't decide until the last minute not to accept the blackmail offer.

"Thank you," she smiled, "until we meet once more, "au revoir," she said.

"Adios," he replied. He watched her butt as she walked away, upset that his woman didn't look like that.

Vivian met Sadie alone in their chamber. The wear and tear shown on Vivian's face was an exhausted look that was often accompanied by physical distress. "Are you ok?" Sadie asked.

"It's been a hell of a day."

"Sit on the sofa, I'll bring you a drink. She sat next to Vivian and asked, "do you need a massage, or do you want your feet rubbed?"

“No just talk, sweetie.”

“Ok,” Sadie attentively repositioned herself on the sofa.

“Have to ever loved something so much you wanted to kill it, or hated something so much that you embraced it? It’s a damned if you do and damned if you don’t situation. I just made a deal with a devil to sell something I don’t have.”

“What are you going to do, how can I help?”

“I have to get John to sign documents transferring ownership of Castle Rouge to Gonzo.”

“He’ll never do that,” Sadie said.

“He’s not going know what he’s signing, he signs stuff I give him without reading it all the time, I’ll just tell him it’s a subcontract for a new caterer, or better yet to have a gazebo built in the garden. He knows I love the garden; he’d sign anything.”

“So, this is it, we’re actually getting ready to leave.”

“Yes, we are,” and pinched Sadie on the cheek, “get everyone together.”

Sadie left sharply and returned within ten minutes with all the girls, Kat included. Once they were all together inside, Vivian started, “It’s time.” She then turned to Sadie, “Give everyone their knew IDs.” Vivian explained, “We’re going to Sweden for Kat’s operation, then we’re going to Amsterdam, then Paris. In the package Sadie gave you are your new identities and a debit card from your new bank account. It will have a hundred thousand dollars loaded on it the day we fly out of here.”

“When are we leaving?” Candy asked.

“Soon, very soon,” Vivian said. She gave everyone a moment to talk amongst themselves then continued, “When I give you the word, I want everyone to book the next flight out of town to anywhere under real your name, then book a flight to Stockholm in your new identity. We’ll meet up and stay at the Terrassen Grand Hotel.” She asked Sadie, “Do we have everything?”

“Yes, Vee, we are all covered.”

“Travel light,” Vivian said, “we’ll buy new stuff along the way and when we get there. By the time we land in Sweden, we’ll all be millionaires.”

The girls hooted and hollered, Tiffany turned on the stereo, they were all pumped and excited, except one, “Vee,” Tuesday said, “I don’t want to go. I just met a guy who could make Frankie a good father, I can’t run around the world with a baby, and I can’t leave him.”

“I understand, that’s the beauty of it, you can do anything you want; those are our rules. I’ll deposit your share in your account when we land. Save this ID in case you need it.” She gave her a hug and moved around the room to make sure she talked to everyone. Monday night was the quietest night around the casino and the mansion, the girls stayed together, crammed in Vivian’s suite celebrating. What made it so great for them was that they all had one thing in common, they were all an only child, abused or neglected or both and now they’re family.

The following day she met with Mr. Peters, “Mr. Peters, there is one matter of business yet to conduct, our final business matter.”

“Oh, and what is that?”

“John is selling Castle Rouge and the casino for ten million dollars. He needs the bill of sale, title transfer, whatever is needed to sell the property.”

“Pardon me, but ten million dollars is a ridiculous amount, it’s worth ten time that much.”

“Ah, you’re assuming he’s a fool, perhaps a little light shining on his gambling problems would help you understand. There is incredibly good news for you in this venture, first off, you’ll be paid a hundred thousand dollars, second, none of us will be in your life anymore.”

“Whatever you need.”

“There is one caveat, John’s going to sign the paperwork, but he’s been drinking so much he can’t be trusted with his own

decision. If he claims he didn't sign the paper, you have to verify that he did. It's for his own good, if he doesn't sell, they'll kill him."

"Oh my god, who's going to kill him?"

"The less you know the better."

Mr. Peters was familiar with blackmail and assumed John was in over his head with something. "Ok, I'll get the paperwork ready."

"Thank you, give me a call."

By five the following evening the paperwork was ready. Mr. Peters called Vivian and Vivian called Gonzo. A meeting was arranged for Wednesday at one in the afternoon in the large conference room. This sale was blowing Mr. Peters mind.

Mr. Peters handed the documents to Vivian, "Mr. Strahan's signature is all that's needed."

She looked at the documents then to Gonzo, "Excuse me, I'll be right back."

Vivian took the papers to John and told him she hired a contractor to build on the back of the property, a gazebo for an outdoor orchestra. If he saw anything at a glance that referenced the castle it would have made sense. He took it, signed it, gave it back without thinking about it at all. She walked the papers back to the conference room, "Signed sealed and delivered."

Gonzo opened his laptop and logged into a bank account. He got the routing and account information from Vivian and transferred ten-million-dollars. Kat was at the table across from Mr. Peters and logged into Vivian's offshore account. It took a couple of minutes, but he confirmed the money had been deposited and their business was concluded.

"Please allow us one week to move out if you will."

Gonzo replied, "One week is fine, I hope you can find treatment for your cancer."

She slightly laughed, “The best I can hope for is a peaceful ending. I hope you love it here as much as we did,” Vivian said goodbye at the door.

Vivian thought to herself, ‘Isn’t John going to be surprised.’

After Gonzo left, Vivian had Kat transfer a hundred thousand dollars to Mr. Peters account. “Remember, you’ve got a hundred thousand reasons to confirm this sale.”

He was well aware of his participation, even if she did have a good story.

All the girls were waiting for Vee in her room. Vivian said the meeting wouldn’t take long and she was right. She returned to her room, pack your bags girls let’s boogaloo. It’s done, Kat, go online and transfer a hundred thousand to everyone’s account, by the time we get to Stockholm another nine hundred thousand will be waiting. Remember, take the first flight out anywhere in your own name, next get a flight to Stockholm in your new name. I’ll see you there in a couple days, I have to wrap up a couple things here.”

Vivian had one day to get the Harem club to look ready for another party while John would unwittingly spend that time gambling with money he no longer had. Gonzo would be showing up as the new owners in the morning and John hadn’t a clue. The chaperones served no facility support or purpose, so the operation of the casino or mansion wasn’t affected, John never noticed the girls were gone. Vivian cleaned out the Castle Rouge account and John’s secret account and had it all transferred to her account in the Caymans. She then transferred all that to her Swiss bank account, totaling Twelve and a half million dollars. Because Tuesday decided to stay, Vivian only deposited five-hundred thousand into her account but gave the other girls their full share.

Sasha, Tanya, and Candy travelled together and flew to Atlanta. Tiffany, Gabrielle, and Kat flew to New Orleans. Sadie insisted on staying with Vivian, she had one last visit to pay to



John before she left. “John, I’m going to take a short vacation soon, but there’s plenty of people here to help with anything you need. You haven’t gambled the casino away, have you?” she said with a laugh.

“It feels like it, I just can’t win for shit lately.”

“Don’t worry, they say it’s always darkest before the storm.” That was her cryptic sense of humor notifying him that his days are going to get worse. Have you ever sat and watched the sun come up? It’s like it breathes life into you, the beginning of a new day, new hope, that things will get better?”

“That was eerily familiar to what a friend I had a long time ago might have said, in fact you kind of remind me of her.”

“Johnny my boy, you should have listened,” she put one of her business cards in his pocket unsuspectingly and said, “keep your chin up, chest out and always keep your promises.” That was her last clue. She turned and walked away, Sadie in tow. John stood there confused and watched them leave. He didn’t ask where she was going or when she’d be back. He figured she’d had everything arranged to be handled till she returned and went back to the casino unshaved and unkept.”

Vivian and Sadie drove themselves to the airport in her vet. She called Rex to meet them there at the short-term parking. As she said her goodbyes, she handed Rex the keys and said, “Enjoy her, she’s yours now. In shock, he said, “What, aren’t you coming back?”

“No, darling, I’m headed to the land of love, you take good care of yourself, start by getting away from Castle Rouge, as far as you can,” then stepped forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She turned to Sadie with a big smile on her face, “Let’s go.”

Big Rex waved as she walked away. Everyone loved to watch her walk away. With Sadie stepping in unison with Vivian’s Rex’s view pictured a sunset. Two fine women walking through life. He would miss them.

The next flight out was to Houston so that's the flight they chose. Vivian left Gulfport International airport as 'Vanessa Wakefield,' then left Houston for Stockholm as 'Veronica Cooley.' She buried Vivian Bouvier years ago, waiting for redemption. She was so close, yet she wouldn't see it with her own eyes, she'd read about it and watch the news.

Their plane hadn't even landed by the time John and Gonzo met for the first time. Pepe Alejandro Gonzalez showed up at Castle Rouge at eight o'clock, Thursday morning with a large entourage. His boss was Antonio Fuentes, the longest ruling drug lord in South America. Even Gonzo had never met him personally, but no one was out of Antonio's reach. He had people everywhere, all inside the legal system, penitentiary, and social services. Gonzo's arrival caught the staff at Castle Rouge off guard. In their confusion, they scrambled to get in touch with Vivian but alas, she was gone. They next found John drinking at an empty poker table in Little Dodge. John hurried to the front to meet them. "May I help you," he said.

Gonzo's lawyer answered, "My name is James Poole, attorney for mister Antonio Fuentes, who has recently purchased Castle Rouge and the casino from John Strahan. This is Mr. Gonzales, his general manager, we are here to take possession of the property."

"Yeah, excuse me," I am John Strahan, and you're not taking possession of shit," and told a guard, "Bernie, call the police."

Mr. Poole held the bill of sale in his hand and said, you sold my client Castle Rouge and the casino and we're here to take over."

"I did no such thing."

"Is this your signature?" he handed him the documents.

"It looks like it, but I would never sell this place, that must be a forgery."

Gonzo looked at his lawyer, “Get this fixed or the devil’s going to walk the earth.”

Mr. Poole asked, “Do you have a lawyer? I suggest you get him down here right away.”

John called Mr. Peters, “I need you at the Castle asap, I got people here claiming they bought Castle Rouge and the casino.”

Mr. Peters knew they would show up and was already headed to Castle Rouge by the time John called, compliments of Vee. He walked into the main entrance and met them at a table by the ballroom bar.

John asked Mr. Peters, “Can you please tell me what’s going on?”

“Yeah, John, you signed these. You sold Castle Rouge.”

“When the hell, did I do that?”

Mr. Peters was very convincing, “Yes sir, you signed these a few days ago, you were drunk and angry. I tried to talk you out of it, but you told me to mind my own business.” These were all common traits he had so no one would doubt the story, not even John.”

Mr. Poole had all the details, “I witnessed Mr. Gonzalez transfer the funds to your account myself.

John looked at Mr. Peters confused, “I didn’t, I wouldn’t.”

“Sir, you were drunk and angry about losing at cards, they made you an offer and you accepted, you signed the documents and gave them to Vee to delivery. I tried to stop you, but you told me I could be replaced and told me to do my job, don’t you remember?”

John started to whimper; he had blacked out many times in the past, but he’d never done anything like this before. “If I sold this place, why can’t I remember, where’s Vee? She would know all this.”

John rumbled through his wallet for the note Vivian gave him with his account number on it. He checked all his pockets

then found the card Vivian slipped in his shirt pocket. He turned it over, it read, "Morning sunshine, August 1983, Woldenberg Park."

A thousand thoughts went through his mind, his mind went back to New Orleans when he was twelve and realized Vee was Vivian. All of the sudden, the concept that Vee may have orchestrated a scam set in. "Has anyone seen Vee?" John asked. "Anyone? Oh, wait a minute, she said she was going on vacation."

Mr. Poole said, "Mr. Strahan, regardless of your situation, my client has legal possession of the premises and is ready to take control of its operation. As far as your legal issues are concerned, I suggest you take it up with the court."

Mr. Peter's then told the chief of security, the new owner of Castle Rouge, effective immediately is Mr. Fuentes and his general manger is Mr. Gonzalez, either choose to do as he instructs, or find a new job.

He chose to stay, "Yes sir, what can I do for you?"

"Escort Mr. Strahan to his quarters so he can gather his essentials, then show him the door. Mr. Strahan, you can make arrangement with security tomorrow to return to gather the remainder of your things."

John's head was in a whirl, he couldn't believe he sold the mansion and especially the casino. 'Was Vee's real name Vivian? Her employment application said her name was Vanessa. Where is she, why was this happening.' He was distraught to say the least, and now he's being evicted from his home. 'Ok, I have to check with my bank,' he told himself. He couldn't find his account number and called the bank while he packed a suitcase with a couple days' worth of clothes. The bank told him his balance was exactly five hundred dollars. "You must be mistaken, check my other account."

“Mr. Strahan, you transferred all the funds from the Castle Rouge account and all but five-hundred dollars from your account yesterday.”

“Oh my god. I’ve been scammed.”

He was escorted out the front, the security chief told him, “I am so sorry Mr. Strahan, I hope you can get this fixed, this is all messed up. I’ll have a valet bring your car around. Where are you going to go?”

“I’ll see you again soon Jeff, hey, if you see my dad ask him to give me a call.”

“Yes sir.”

John drove off and Gonzo wasted no time moving his people in place. None of whom knew anything about a casino, a restaurant or managing a mansion with thirty-six rooms, but his entourage would oversee the people in place until they were slowly replaced or accepted for rehire.

Mr. Peters had one final duty. Vivian gave him an envelope to give to John’s father. He got his address from HR and drove to his apartment.

He knocked and knocked until Bill finally woke up. “What the hell,” he said, “I work nights, what do you want?”

“I’m your son’s lawyer, can I come in?”

“I guess, this better be good, I had just got to sleep.”

“It appears John sold Castle Rouge and no longer resides there.”

“Good,” he said. “That place was going to kill him.”

“Vee gave me this envelope to give to you and said she’s sorry she couldn’t give it to you in person.” He handed him the envelope and left.

Bill opened it up. It contained twenty thousand dollars and a note. Bill held the money in his hand with unabashed feelings of gratitude, sat and read the note. ‘My dear William, my heart goes out to you. I know what you’ve been through and want you to try your best to put all of this behind you. You were the only

one in your family with a good heart, and it would sadden me to see it hurt anymore. Take this money and start a new life, leave the old one behind, it will only break your heart. I wish you well, Vee.'

Mr. Peter's visit and Vee's note was mysterious. He has yet to learn of the circumstances surrounding the hostile takeover of Castle Rouge. Charges haven't been filed against John yet, Vee will not be returning, and when he gets to work to find out his new boss is a drug lord, he's going to have major issues. He couldn't go back to sleep, so he got up and drove to the casino to try and find John. He was met at the back door of entrance to the restaurant by security and turned away until his shift was due to start. He called John a second time, this time he answered, John told him the story as he saw it and referred to Vee in a negative light, but Bill didn't see that in her. "How could she have done that?" Bill asked. "She was the sweetest girl; I don't get it."

"It's true, everything evolves around her and now she's gone. She said she was going to take a vacation, then all this happened. Not to mention, I think she's an old friend from the past. She referenced the park we used to walk to and watch the sun come up. It's like a bad dream or evil vendetta, I can't decide."

"Don't make any rash decisions son, there may be a lot more to the story than what you know. Maybe she's in trouble, maybe the cartel has already eliminated her, maybe it's a coincidence. Before you can be sure, you may need more information."

"I'm at a loss dad. Yesterday I had everything, today I have nothing."

"I've been there. I lost my life, wife, and son in a blink of an eye and I can't find out the truth now, Robert is dead, and your mama is locked up in a nut house. Just take care of yourself today and tomorrow we'll do it all over again. I suggest you go down to

the police station and fill out the complaints and reports and let the system start figuring it out for you.”

“I’ve already been, they said they’d be in touch.”

Bill replied, “There you have it. Where are you staying?”

“I got a hotel on the beach, but I won’t be able to afford it for more than a couple days.”

“Stay with me, I got a couch you can sleep on, we’ll get it figured out.”

Meanwhile, everyone was kicked out of the mansion. It was no longer a club; it was not open to the public. Guards with dogs were stationed about the property. The casino was temporarily closed for renovation and relicensing. In the basement of Castle Rouge, Gonzo and a few of his thugs had Daniel Flaherty duct taped to a chair.

Daniel was met leaving the harbor master’s office in Pensacola by two of Gonzo’s men. They walked up to him as he was getting into his car and forced him into the passenger seat. One drove, and the other was in the back seat with a gun pointed at him. Instinctively he knew what was up.

“Be very careful,” the driver said, “take any weapon you have out and carefully hand them to Jesus, if you forget one, when we get to the castle and search you, we’ll shoot your dick off and you can have your conversation with Gonzo, crying like a schoolgirl.”

He complied, knowing a bullet was faster and cheaper than talk, he would have one chance to convince him that he was loyal. He was terrified.

Vinnie had been securing the backup copies of all the recording and had gone unnoticed by Gonzo’s crew. He saw on camera the men in the basement beating Daniel and got scared. He quietly shut down all the equipment, turned out the light and locked the door on his way out. He tip-toed through the mansion careful not to be seen and slipped out of the back of the restaurant.

Gonzo wasn't yet aware of all the recording capabilities. Vinnie made it out and never looked back.

The only thing he could think about was Kat giving him up. "I don't know what you were told but whatever it was, he played you. I have always been loyal; I've arranged for you to make millions. You've been good to me; I'd never turn on you."

Gonzo looked at him. "I've brought you all the way here to see me, and you tell me you're loyal. Is that what you are telling me?"

"Yes, whatever that little son of a bitch told you, is a lie."

Gonzo thought Daniel boasting and spilling his guts to a transvestite prostitute was hilarious. "You are one stupid gringo. If you were a simple thief, I'd just shot you in the head and be done with you, but you decided you'd play a little game with me. Well, Mr. DEA, I don't like people playing games with me so, I'm going to play a game with you. How much pain can a man endure before they ultimately die. Me and my crew are going to take bets," and back handed him in the face.

His crew took turns beating him and hitting him with a wrench. Gonzo stopped them for a moment, "Get some plastic on the floor."

Daniel's eyes were already swollen shut and his face had wide cuts and tears, he was covered in blood and moaning with a gurgle. For hours they beat him and rested then beat him some more. He finally succumbed to his injuries and died. They cut his body up, put the pieces in five-gallon buckets and drove him down to the marina. The rainbow pennant was raised, and the boat left the harbor unrecorded at ten o'clock that morning. The boat returned at three in the afternoon without Daniel.



## Chapter Twelve

Vivian and Sadie landed in London for a layover. Sasha, Tanya, and Candy flew into Hamburg Germany, Gabrielle, Tiffany, and Kat where on a train in the mountains headed for Stockholm.

The world was opening up for the girls who had never been away from home. They graduated from the school of hard knocks, girl edition, and are now international scholars in seduction. There was an absolute feeling among the girls that they had won. They fought their way through the trenches and paid their dues and now they're traveling the world with plenty of money in style. How great can life be, but for Vivian it was so much more. The depth of her convictions to even the playing field consumed her. No one had more rare and passionate love in her heart than Vivian, but she was also vengefully passionate about justice.

When she was twelve, she had no one. Her only friend left her, and her grandmother died, leaving her alone and unloved. She compensated by learning to love enough for two, but she never found another. She didn't know what would happen to John, but she knew it was not going to be good. There were many options on the table and all of them bad. She was satisfied with that. Everyone that hurt her is now gone. John for leaving her, his uncle for taking him, his mother for allowing it to happen. They all left her to fend for herself and there was no excuse in her mind for that. She also saw her girls as victims and vowed to protect them. She took it upon herself to bring justice to those that harm.

"Well," Vivian said to Sadie, "We're international now, what do you want to do?"

Walking through Heathrow was exciting to Sadie, "This is grand, so big and elegant, I feel like Audrey Hepburn in My Fair Lady."

Vivian suggested, “Hey, let’s get a cab and go get some fish and chips.”

“And a pint of best bitters?” Sadie asked.

“Sure, maybe I should lighten up on the bourbon. I’d like to make it to thirty.”

It was getting close to Oktoberfest and Hamburg Germany was hopping. Polka and traditional German folk music filled the streets. For three New Orleans ladies, it reminded them of Marti Gras but much colder. They stayed the night and got thoroughly skunked and boarded the train the next day to Sweden.

Vivian took the alone time with Sadie and talked and talked and talked. Vivian knew she wanted to write a biography and told her she’d help. She must have subconsciously wanted it because she laid out her entire life. From beginning to end, she left nothing to the imagination, Sadie was crying inside to hear the emotional pain she must have endured, but all of it combined is what Sadie became obsessed with. She was consumed with a desire for Vivian that seemed more than chemical. She felt connected to Vivian and had never felt safer, more loved, and protected. This was a book she had to write.

They found the beauty of the snowcapped mountain inspiring and awesome. “We should learn to ski. Candy said, “Yeah, that’s what rich European tourist do?”

“That is most definitely what many with money do back home. If you’ve ever seen Aspen in the early spring, you wouldn’t want to leave. Do you want to take skiing lessons while we’re here? We’ll just have to take pictures for Kat, he ain’t going to want to go skiing.” She laughed.

Tanya said, “I told Kat he didn’t have to cut his dick off to be one of us, we loved him just the same. He told me, as long as we look different, I’ll never be one of you. Think about it, you still call me he not she.”

“It stunned me,” Candy said, “Kat was right, dick was always getting in the way.”

Tanya laughed. "I feel bad for him though, it's a tough decision."

"I'm proud of him," Candy said, "the conviction required to endure this transition is extreme and many don't make it."

"Ok, I vote skiing lessons," Gabrielle said.

"Me too," said Tiffany.

They all agreed.

Vivian was already making new plans. Her mission was complete, she accomplished the one goal she set for herself and now needed to find herself a new reason to continue. She saw the mountain resort and saw money. She looked at the faces of the people she encountered and saw their need for sexual and emotional relief which equaled money.

In the restaurant looking out over the mountain, the girls sat at table in their ski gear having one celebratory drink prior to stepping out for their first lesson. Vivian walked down the length of the bar putting her hand on every one's shoulder, one at a time, and said in her most prolific Georgia Peach accent to date, "I'm looking for a friend and a glass of bourbon. Have any of you seen either?" smiled big and gave them a wink.

Sadie never saw people move so fast, four guys and one girl all called for the bartender at the same time. Sadie laughed and pointed, "Over there, she's driven them crazy," and laughed, they all laughed.

Vivian came over with her drink. "You sure had them going." Sadie said.

"Sweetie, if you treat people nicely, they treat you nicely. Isn't it a wonderful life?"

Everyone wanted to be Vivian at that moment.

"I think I'm going to get laid tonight," Vivian said as she looked around a room of European vacationers. She licked her lips, "Pair up girls, never go alone."

While the girls are partying and enjoying life, John is back in Biloxi hating life. The very next day, Police woke them up at

five in the morning. They brought a crew of six heavily armed officers who pounded on Bill's apartment door. Open up, it's the police, we have a warrant. Bill knew not to be near the door and backed up toward the bathroom. John got up, opened the door without as much as looking out the window. Bill argued from behind when they arrested John quick forcefully. John had been through a living hell already and was feeling like a rat against the wall, when the police gripped his arm, he jerked and they threw him hard to the floor, "Hey, there's no need for that, his is cooperating," Bill shouted, wanting all his neighbor to hear what was going on. One of the police walked over to Bill and used his club to beat him down. They left him bloody and bruised and took John away. As everything played out in his mind, Bill couldn't be sure it was the cops, or someone dressed like it.

Now Bill had no one to count on, no one to help, he was fresh on parole and inches away from multiple felony situations. He couldn't just pick up and go like Vivian begged him to, he had to stay and fight for his son. He wasn't around while he grew up, he can at least be around when he really needs him.

The district attorney could spend months on all the other cases and had time at his discretion, but John murder trial was his opus. Mr. King had been chasing the Strahan's for twelve years when Robert first bought Castle Rouge. Later he would pursue the insurance fraud, money laundering, other murders, missing persons, and all the blackmail. The list was growing by the day. All the players would slowly be brought to light as he unraveled Vivian's web.

While the district attorney was laying his cases together, Gonzo had taken control of the casino and the mansion. He was abruptly met at the restaurant by the Chief of Police with a warrant to cease the sale of alcohol, in addition to shutting down the casino. "Your attorneys should have told you that you can't do business before reapplying for a gambling license and

renewing your liquor license under new ownership. I'm sorry Mr. Gonzalez, that's the law."

"Yes, I know that we've already closed the casino."

Gonzo's main objective for getting the mansion was for a headquarters to conduct worldwide distribution of Antonio Fuentes' number one product. With CIA seed money to create enough chaos within the states, urban centers were flooded with product which justified billions of dollars in operating funds. Antonio was happy to be doing business with the government. The casino would only be a money laundering cover anyway, he still had his routes and transportation system to set up.

While John was locked up on five-million-dollar bail, Bill stayed away but had contact with his kitchen boss who relayed the rumors back to him. He went down to county lock up to visit him once, but John insisted he'd done enough damage and didn't want to put his dad through this. The sobering reality began to sink in. His jitters, from the lack of alcohol, were unnerving but the clarity of his actions against his uncle and mother who really only wanted the best for him sank in. It wasn't his fault his twelve-year-old friend decided to invest her whole life in making him miserable. What was he to do?

Bill felt terrible for John. He was just a boy, his uncle puts his dad away, takes his mother, and uproots him, it had to have been hard on him. He wanted to make some kind of positive mark on his life. He didn't want it being defined as an idiot agreeing to take the rap for an armed robbery turned bad. Robert and Bill looked a lot alike. Just before Robert graduated college, and accidentally killing a man during a bank robbery. The man tried to take the gun away from him, it went off and Robert got away with six million dollars. Bill had been kicked out of school so many times he never went back. He saw himself as a loser and was in common trouble with the law for little stuff all the time. Robert talked him into taking the rap in exchange for half the money when he got out. Bill knew Robert had, or was getting, a

degree and had a much better chance at success and happiness than he. Louann complained all the time, stayed drunk half the time, and seldom spent time with John. Trading twenty years or so out of his life for a chance to help her and John, and three million when he got out seemed worth it.

His surprise coming out of prison, like coming out of coma, was everything was different. The rules no longer applied, and he's wasted his whole life. Bill began some planning of his own.

Vivian knew what his outcome would be even if she didn't know the details and she was ok with it. He was no better than the criminals he worked for, just another person unworthy of the blessing of a happy life.

This wouldn't be the end of Daniel's saga though. The district attorney had access to the same tapes, so this story was going to come up again.

Days went by and still have no license for alcohol or gaming. Gonzo started to realize the value of the blackmail option he chose not to accept. His drugs kept coming and his clients kept coming and he was soon operating in a naïve bubble, unaware that all around him, people were being pulled into the grand conspiracy.

Back in Sweden, Kat had her operation, it was official. She could now use her third identity, Katherine Benoit, from Lake Charles Louisiana. Her recovery went well. After a week she was able to get about the room and potentially leave the following week. She would need to return for the stitches to come out and follow up visits. Vivian and Sadie stayed with Kat while the rest of the girls packed earlier and headed for Amsterdam. They would meet up with them in another week as the European tour became an extension of the ultimate party.

Vivian had her sights set on Paris. Coming to Stockholm and Amsterdam was the vacation she referred to when she told

John goodbye, but Paris would be her new home. The future was looking bright for the girls and pretty dark for John.

John was due in court for another hearing, during this hearing a gauntlet of accusations and evidence were laid out and it was abundantly clear to him that Vivian set him up. Convinced that Vee was Vivian regardless of her ID on file, he fell deep into a state of depression. All day long for the next week he thought and was tortured by the memories of him conspiring against his uncle, and his mother, all to get his hands on a piece of property he had no business having. He hated his uncle for what he did to his dad, he hated his mother for the same reason plus telling Robert not to let 'that filthy girl' come live with them, when they left. But most of all he hated himself for not making the right decisions, to which he still didn't know what was right.

He waited till the middle of the night of November 1<sup>st</sup> and tore his shirt into skinny strips and braided them into a lanyard. It was long enough for him to tie a slip knot around one end and tie the other end to the faucet of his sink. Just after the guard made his hourly rounds he quietly got out of bed and walked to the sink. He put the noose around his neck, bent over and tied it to the faucet, then sat down next to the sink. His butt was suspended six inches from the floor, and he hung himself in despair.

Bill learned about it the next day when he arrived at the correctional facility to see John. He was quietly devastated. He didn't know what happened, John was weak and insecure, but Bill didn't think he'd commit suicide. No one called him, he had to go all the way out there to find out. Bill knew not to trust the system. He'd been incarcerated for fourteen years; he's seen all kinds of guard coverups and gang related crimes within the halls of justice.

Later that day, he walked out and abandoned his apartment. He sold his car to a chop shop for just enough to buy him a beat-up clunker for cash and set out to make his statement. Everything in his life had been taken from him and he had nowhere to go and no one to do it with. With an internal anger

deep in his soul he decided he wasn't going to take it anymore. He'd start a new life in a new state, but he wasn't leaving without saying goodbye in his frustrated and vengeful way.

The Harem had been closed since Gonzo took over the place. All the girls were gone.

The restaurant was the only thing operating at this point, so Bill still had a job. He went to work at six in the evening and got off after the kitchen closed at about three in the morning. The first Saturday after John hung himself, Bill loaded eight one-gallon Crisco jugs, full of gasoline, into the trunk of his car and parked around the back of the mansion at the dock. While the restaurant was busy and the kitchen staff going in and out it, was customary to block the back door open for easy access to the freezers on the dock. He packed the door latch cavity with putty so when the door closed at the end of the shift, the latch wouldn't be able to seat. After a busy day and a lot of dishes, he left out the back and waited for his boss to walk out the back. The restaurant manager was always the last one out, always went out the back and always turned out the lights as he went.

Bill saw his moment. It was all quiet, no one in the back and no one in the back of the restaurant or kitchen. He aimed to burn the place down for ruining his son's life. The casino was Robert's obsession which ended up ruining all their lives. He carried the jugs of gas though the door that wasn't latched and punched in the access code to the alarm system. Gonzo's team wasn't bright enough to change the code. He placed the gallon jugs of gasoline strategically on the interior walls to maximize the spread of the fire. He poured some of the gas on the floor, put the jug in the middle of the puddle, and started from the farthest point and threw a lit match to the puddle. Within seconds, the fire heated and melted the jugs causing the kitchen to burst into flames.

Bill drove his clunker away, looking at the golden glow in the mirror and flames reflecting off the billowing smoke he felt



good, he felt vindicated. The illuminating view wasn't wasted on Bill. From the front of the Mansion people ran out into the drive in whatever there could grab and dress within a hurry and watched the mansion burn. Castle Rouge looked red for a different reason this evening and he could only imagine the chaos anyone inside might have gone through as the mansion filled with smoke. They were so far out in the woods the nearest fire truck would take fifteen minutes to get there, by then, the entire mansion could be considered lost. There would be no video evidence of an intruder, no record of who may have set the fire. All would be lost in the fire.

Bill got his revenge and made his way out of town, never to return. The money Vivian gave him would help him set up a new life in New Mexico.

The fire department showed up but the best they could do was to prevent the spread of the fire to the forest. All their resources were spent preventing the forest from catching fire. The fire raged on, and the castle became a pile of embers by the time the fourth fire truck made it to the scene. Gonzo was going to have to deal with Antonio for the loss of his investment and an insurance company that would claim the arson was just another stunt to defraud the Castle's insurance.

Internal affairs had Detective Hightower and Sergeant Stoddard under investigation from the first day the district attorney received his trove of information, and the evidence became even more compelling when they fished the three boys from the water.

Crimes from Castle Rouge stretched far. The mental health facility was yet another targeted case the district attorney would add to his resume. Mr. Adams financial misdeeds and secret records of transactions, he hoped would one day protect him from prosecution, were more than enough to lock him up for twenty years in a federal prison.

When the dust finally cleared, a total of nine people died, and an additional six more in prison. This didn't include Gonzo or his crew. The district attorney was ready to drop the hammer on his operation, along with the DEA, FBI, and the NSA when the fire ruined their opportunity to close in on them. Gonzo was forced back into the shadows and without an inside man, they were nearly back to square one.

In the fire, all the personnel records were destroyed, the girls were gone, the district attorney had no information on them or Vivian, other than tax information from the IRS and the department of employment security. While the district attorney was trying to locate Vivian and her girls, so was Antonio Fuentes.

Gonzo handed Antonio a ten-million-dollar loss, not to mention the loss of potential revenue. Gonzo might have preferred Daniel's fate over being fed to his own dogs. All of Gonzo bodyguards and crew were forced to watch as Gonzo's own dogs were starved for days then fed Gonzo to them. Antonio now had a vested interest in Vivian, his problem was he had no clues. No video, no audio, no photo, or fingerprints, just a fake name.

The court filings, hearings, depositions, and appeals had everyone's lives turned upside down. The courts were expected to be filled for months with all the cases Mr. King would bring to court.

Meanwhile, Vivian and the gang met in Amsterdam. They partied like there was no tomorrow, for three straight nights, and then rested all day on the fourth. Bound for Paris, the place of Vivian's dreams. The girls bunched up together on the train like one big happy family, singing and drinking and embracing each other. Tiffany remarked, "Back in the states, I had never ridden a train, the only trains I ever saw, looked like oil, coal and hobo cars."

Vivian got a call from Tuesday, "John hung himself in his cell last night," she calmly remarked.

Vivian felt relieved yet disappointed. She didn't want him to die, she wanted him to dig deep into his soul and feel the pain he caused her. "His weakness was foretold twelve years ago, maw-maw was always right. I forgive him."

When she told the other girls that John committed suicide, Tanya remarked, "That makes me sad, I felt sorry for him."

"Se la vie, mon amour," Vivian softly said with her head tilted down in reverence.

Tanya saw peace in Vivian's face, she watched very carefully as she ended her prayer.

"Group hug, everyone," Vivian suggested, "When the battle's over, go home," or in our case, start new. It was his choice to end it this way. I hope Bill can move on, he's now alone as well." Vivian then changed the topic and the mood, "Brighten up everyone, check your accounts, everything should be complete."

When they checked their bank accounts online and saw a million dollars, their minds were blown. From little girls growing up in difficult times, to having it all was Vivian's gift to them, and they loved her for it. She was their hero. A lot of people were harmed along the way, but the girls felt each of them deserved it. They weren't going to be victims ever again.

Sadie stood in the middle of the club car and tapped her glass. "I want to say a toast to the most wonderful person in my life. Thank you, Vee, for everything, riches, fame, pride, but mostly for giving us our honor back. We love you."

"I'm the one's that honored," Vivian said, "you have done more for me than you will ever know." She hollered out, "We're going to Paris!" she shouted excitedly and loudly.

They all hooted and hollered. "Crank up some music," Tiffany said, and they partied all the way to Paris. Vivian knew what she was looking for in Paris, an opportunity. A chance to start over, this time she'd have the advantage. This time, revenge wouldn't be the motive, success would be her goal.

She had an eye on a lovely castle outside Paris on the Seine, Chateau de la Fontaine. She saw it in a magazine at the hotel and had to investigate. They established three rooms in a swank hotel, Tanya, Candy, and Sasha together again, and Tiffany, Gabriel, and Kat. Of course, Sadie was by Vivian's side. They kept in tradition and met in Vivian's room. "Let's crash a party tonight."

Tiffany got excited, "Are we going to one of those rave clubs?"

"No honey," she said, "a vineyard is having an annual bash to celebrate a good harvest, lots, and lots of playboys. Do you want to go and have some fun?"

The girls were all excited, but Sadie saw a little more in Vivian's eyes when she saw her looking at the pictures. Whatever was on her mind, Sadie knew she was the only one who could understand. "I wonder about little things sometimes, and the expression on your face when you saw the picture of the castle in the magazine told volumes, but it's a language I don't understand. You looked like you were coming home after being gone forever, kind of mystical look. Is everything ok?"

"You think I'm up to something," she laughed, "maybe I am," she said and smiled at Sadie. "You know what else was in that magazine? A story about how one of the richest families in Paris lost it all in a drought. François de la Fontaine was a 52-year-old widower who was nearly on the verge of bankruptcy, the party was a ruse to cover their situation. I hope to be able to charm my way into his life and acquire Chateau de la Fontaine for my own. I always wanted to live in Paris."

All the girls got decked out in the latest French fashion and head out to an exclusive party without invitations. Vivian and Sadie arrived together first and walked into the foyer and was met by an usher in a fancy outfit. He asked about an invitation in French, she replied in French that she was his personal guest, his very personal guest, and winked at him.

He suspected she may be a mistress of Francois and didn't want to be the one that embarrassed him, so he let her through. She then waited for her girls to show and as they did Vivian told the ushers, 'they're with me.'

Sadie snickered quietly, "It's like watching a pro. You had him eating out of your hand."

With everyone together she said, "Go have fun, in pairs, if they ask who you're with, just tell them Vee."

Vivian saw Francois walking in her direction with two glasses of champagne. She waited for him to get close and tuned into his path. She caught his eye immediately and he stopped short of running into her. She was electrifyingly beautiful as she gracefully put her hands up to his chest. The collision was averted, and she had his full undivided attention. Speaking in French she pardoned herself, "Excuse me, was it fate that caused us to meet? My name is Vee."

Francois was taking a couple glasses of champagne to his sisters when they nearly collided. "Hello, I'm Francois, this is my home," he nervously said. "I mean welcome to my home." He stopped to gaze into her eyes, and she had him in her trance. It was a thing of beauty to watch a man melt in her presence. He handed her a glass of champagne, "We're celebrating, a toast to a chance meeting," and raised his glass.

"You're a quick thinker Francois, I like that in a tall French sexy man, and raised her glass.

They took a couple moments to briefly address each other then, Vivian mentioned, "The magazines have you in dire straits," Vivian said.

"You're not with the newspaper, are you?"

"No, I'm here to help."

"I don't understand, who are you?"

"Darling," she lowered her voice, "If you want to save this absolutely beautiful castle, I can help."

That got his attention. "How can you help?"

“I have a talent for making money,” she took his arm, “tell me, how many rooms do you have here.”