

## PROLOGUE

The disheveled young prostitute felt like she was staggering out of a dark, muzzy cave when she had a lucid moment. Her eyes fluttered as a wave of pain, followed by a twinge of nausea and dizziness, caused her to squeeze her eyes shut again. She shivered; the night was cold. Shaking off the effects of a drug-induced stupor left her disoriented and confused. Groggily, she realized that she was lying cheek down in the back seat of a car. The car was bouncing and bumping. She had no idea how she had gotten in the car or where it was going.

Her real name was Jennifer Greene, but, like most prostitutes, she used a pseudonym while working. 'Angel' seemed to work for the johns that flocked to the desert city for a roll of the dice and some Las Vegas pussy. In the world of sex for sale, a first name, real or not, was enough.

Angel winced as she became aware of the pervasive pain. She felt her face; it was sore and swollen. Even the slightest movement was painful as if her body was bruised all over.

Groaning, she tried to sit up in the seat but couldn't muster any coordination. Lying cheek down was the best she could manage.

The car came to a sudden stop, pitching Angel forward into the back of the front seats and bouncing her onto the floorboard. She lost consciousness again.

Awareness returned. Someone was pulling her out of the back of the car, tugging her roughly to her feet. She was vaguely aware of the dark image of a man holding her up and wondered briefly if it was a friend, but her legs wobbled and gave out. The man jerked her upright.

"Hey, watch it, creep." Angel slurred.

The man marched her to the front of the car, where the headlights illuminated a desertscape of sand, rocks, and brush. He let Angel go with a shove. The young prostitute fell, crying out as she hit the ground, sprawling in pain.

Angel protested vehemently, "You fucking asshole!"

Angel sat up, turning to look for the man, but the headlights of the car blinded her. Then, suddenly, a shadow separated the glaring car lights, revealing the dark backlit image of the man.

"Help me up, god damn it!" The young prostitute tried to reach for help from the man standing over her. The man stuck out his arm but didn't reach for her hand, and Angel didn't hear the gunfire as the bullet crashed into her brain.

Angry and grumbling, the man dragged the dead woman a few yards across the desert to a hole in the rugged desert scabble. He laid her at the edge of the shallow grave and returned to the car, where he inspected the back seat, collecting the woman's clutch purse and one of her gauche hooker-style shoes that had come unstrapped. He inspected the car and the surrounding ground, making certain that nothing was overlooked. He threw the purse and the shoe in the

grave, then checked the woman's feet. The other shoe was still on. Using his foot, the man lifted the woman's body and, with a half kick, it rolled into the grave.

Disgusted with the whole episode, the man cursed for the next twenty minutes as he filled the grave with sand and rock. Satisfied that he had returned the desert to its natural state, the man drove back on the jeep-trail that meandered three miles through the desert to the Highway, Interstate 15 north of Las Vegas.

## CHAPTER 1

### LAS VEGAS, SUMMER 2008

The call from Mr. Flynn couldn't have come at a worse time. If it had been anyone else, I would have ignored the damn thing. But missing a call from the Ivory Tower could march my flourishing career in the gaming industry straight to the unemployment line.

Stephanie McMackin is one of the most attractive women I know, which is why I took a rare night off. Stephanie is 28 and a recent law school graduate. She passed the State bar a few months earlier and found her first employment at Muran, Mowbray and List, Mr. Flynn's corporate counsel. In addition to a blue-chip education and a razor wit, Stephanie is a ten, and I don't mean a ten by corn-fed mid-west standards. She is a certifiable Las Vegas ten!

We were at the Golden Steer on Sahara, one of the world's great steak houses. If you've ever been there, you'll remember that the strip-center exterior looks like a front for the mob, and the interior is like stepping back to the sixties, when organized crime ran Las Vegas.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know all about all the 'cholesterol,' 'animal fat,' 'red meat' crap the health gurus spew, and health-conscious women like to repeat ad nauseam; but, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. On my occasional night out, it's like Sam Elliott says in the TV commercial, "Beef, it's what's for dinner." You want a good steak? The Golden Steer.

Stephanie and I had met a couple of times before at business functions, and there seemed to be a mutual attraction. She is one of those women who never met a stranger and can strike up a conversation with anyone about anything. Tonight, her grooming was perfection —dare I say, exquisite? I felt like I was ogling her from the moment I picked her up, taking in her essence all the way to the restaurant.

At the Golden Steer, our attraction began to blossom into some real chemistry. Stephanie was wearing a sleeveless little black dress that complemented her shimmering blonde hair nicely. When we were shown to our booth, she scooted her ample tush all the way around until her slender thigh was touching mine.

"It's about time you asked me out on a real date." Stephanie said, flashing her cat eyes over me like I was some sort of 'Fancy Feast.'

"I wanted to sooner, but things have been hectic at work." That just slipped out. I didn't want her to think I was too anxious to get with her.

"I hear that you are very dedicated to your job." I shrugged my shoulders, slightly embarrassed. "And, that you're the most eligible bachelor in town...?"

“Hey, hey, slow down. I didn’t get a chance to do a background check on you. Who’s been giving you the intel?”

Stephanie smiled, winked, and shrugged her shoulders at the same time in such a cute way that I felt my chest constrict momentarily.

During cocktails, it seemed natural to give her a little kiss. The little kiss became very steamy, very fast. I touched her silky inner thigh and felt a jolt of arousal. The Neanderthal had suddenly come awake. My hand was starting to move north when the summons from the mount came.

Mr. Flynn cut our blissful evening short by kindly requesting that I get back to Xanadu, chop-chop, and meet with the head of security. There was a problem in one of the penthouse suites, and his instructions were to “take care of the situation as discreetly as possible.” Although my real job had to do with the collection of gambling debts, in recent years, Mr. Flynn had taken to using me as a corporate problem solver. I have a knack for dealing with people in a very straightforward manner, but my daytime job also gives me the edge that’s needed for dealing calmly with dicey situations.

Stephanie probably thought I was an asshole when I gave her a ‘honey bee’ and had the Mater de call a cab. Hey, I was more than ready for a thick, delicious Delmonico with Béarnaise or maybe a peppercorn sauce on the side, spiced with an evening of good company, but what would you do if God called and said, “Get your ass over here, now?”

## CHAPTER 2

The sidewalks along the Strip were packed. Tourists hoofing it from one attraction to another, staring agog at volcanoes and water shows while casino hopping. Las Vegas is the world's largest circus, and tourists are part of the show.

I parked my black Escalade in the reserved space near the employee entrance. It was summer in Vegas, and I was wearing jeans and sporting the latest Tommy Bahama shirt, attire unbefitting a Xanadu executive. Xanadu is the only Triple A, 5 Star resort in Vegas. I keep an extra Armani suit in my office, located in the executive cluster behind the cage. I changed quickly and hustled to the elevator bank.

Joe Grieves, our head of security, was waiting for me on the fourth floor of the North tower, where we have four world-class penthouse suites complete with every imaginable

convenience. Although the suites face and overlook the pool gardens, each penthouse also features its own pool and spa. Joe is actually the head of security for all of Mr. Flynn's casinos. He is former military, buttoned-down, and tough as nails. A military haircut and a couple of scars on his face that look like they might be from shrapnel give him an imposing bearing. Our jobs sometimes coincided, like now, and we work well together.

"That was quick," Joe gave me a poke in the ribs as I stepped out of the elevator. "I thought it was your night off?"

I rolled my eyes, "You know the drill when the emperor calls."

"That I do. But, rumor has it you were out with the best-looking lady lawyer in three states."

Joe was like that; he kept track of everybody. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

"I get paid to mind others."

"What have we got?"

Like a Hawaii Five-0 pro, Joe briefed me, "The penthouse was in use for the last three days by Fraser and his entourage." Fraser is none other than Johnny Fraser, the quirky Hollywood box-office king. "They cleared out earlier today, but the maid found a woman in the master suite lying in a pool of blood. The maid thought she was dead. Luckily, she called her supervisor, who called security. "I got here just before Gil."

Gil is Xanadu's house doctor. If you can catch him sober, he really knows his shit. Gil's real name is Jacob Schwartz. We call him Gil because he drinks like a fish.

Joe continued, “He examined her and cleaned her up some. She came to for a bit and got hysterical, but Gil gave her a syringe full of ‘sweet dreams.’ Now she’s sleeping like a baby. Gil can give you the gory details.”

Gil was fidgeting by the big sliding glass door in the living room when I came in. He seemed relieved to see me. Gil is a nondescript sixty-something man with graying hair and a mustache, shorter than average. Mr. Flynn’s Casinos are his only client.

“Break it to me gently, Gil. If you tell me our girl’s been raped, I’ll never believe it.” With all the partying going on in Las Vegas, next-morning rape complaints are as common as traffic tickets.

“Did anyone ever tell you you’re an asshole?”

“Sounds vaguely familiar.”

Gil sucked in a chest full of air and gave it to me straight. “She was still unconscious when I got here; mostly alcohol or drug induced, probably roofies.”

Roofies. Gil was talking about the date rape drug, Rohypnol. In recent years, its use in the party atmosphere of Las Vegas had skyrocketed. Gil and I had run into several cases in the hotel where an unsuspecting woman in a party mood had been slipped a roofie, usually in a drink, then became helpless to resist all manner of abuse, sexual and otherwise. The drug itself is a very potent tranquilizer, similar in nature to valium, but many times stronger. It produces a sedative effect, amnesia, muscle relaxation, and a slowing of psychomotor responses. Most of the time, sedation lasts for several hours. Once ingested, a woman is virtually helpless. A drug like Rohypnol makes a good case for why women should never party with anyone they don’t know, really well.

“She’s been sexually penetrated, vaginal and anal, with minor bleeding,

abrasions, probably rape, possibly multiple assailants.” Gil continued. “Beat up pretty badly to boot, but no broken bones. She may have a slight concussion, but she can still scream bloody murder, and she curses like a longshoreman. Some nasty bruises, a couple of cuts, nothing that won’t heal in a week or two. Mental trauma, that’s a different story. From what I saw, she may already be unhinged. That’s your problem.” Gil started packing his little black bag. “I’ll be on call if you need me.”

“What about the pool of blood?”

“Cut on her head, left temple just behind the hairline. More blood than damage.”

“How long will she be out?”

Gil checked his Chronograph, “A few hours. Maybe four.”

I told Joe to keep an eye on things while I went back to my office to pick up some reports and call the front desk and housekeeping to tag the room ‘do not disturb.’

When I got back, Joe was more than ready to get out of there. It was his night off, too. I settled in to wait for Sleeping Beauty.

Actually, I knew this girl. Her name was Mary Blaine. She’s one of the marquee dancers in Xanadu’s award-winning production show, “Q.” Mary has only been in the company for a little over a year, but she’s a real looker and can dance the toes off most of the other girls. It’s not hard to imagine that Johnny Fraser would single her out, who wouldn’t? I felt bad for her; we had had problems with Johnny Fraser before.

Mary was just like fifty thousand other girls who come to Sin City every year as some masochistic warm-up to ‘being discovered.’ Their plans for success were rarely well thought out, and most of them ended up in strip joints, as lap dancers in gentlemen’s clubs, or as hookers. A few make it into one of the big production shows, but the life of a showgirl is no piece of cake.

I've dated a few over the years, and I have a measure of empathy and respect for the cross they have to bear. Generally, they suffer sore feet, tired legs, and mediocre pay for twenty years, then they are laid off for being too fat or too slow, invariably to make way for some new hot young babe. Call it like it is. In the Vegas showroom, it's not who you know, it's how you look.

Mary Blain had reached for the brass ring and got the hot lead enema instead. I took a seat by the bed and settled in with my reports.

It wasn't long before I found what I was looking for. It was all there: game, time gambled, average bet, markers taken (\$497,000), markers repaid (0). The fucking bastard had lost nearly half a million dollars at the high-rollers' baccarat table last night, then came home and 'kicked the cat!' Johnny Fraser is a real piece of work. This dude was getting under my skin.

### CHAPTER 3

I was born at Sunrise Hospital on Maryland Parkway. My parents anointed me Martin Jefferson Davis. Probably some whacky redneck confederate streak that persisted in my father's genes. I couldn't stand being called Marty, and Jefferson was a non-starter. So, when I was old enough to have a say in the matter, I insisted everyone call me Davis. "What's your name?"

"Davis."

"Is that your first name, or your last name?"

"Both."

I am evil. This fucking town can make you that way. What do you expect from a city that consumes more electricity in a day than the entire country of France uses in a month? Sure, my mom and dad did the best they could raising me, taught me the difference between right and wrong, not to steal, and definitely, don't hit girls. But Las Vegas acts like an inexorable magnet on the psyche, bending you with its weird energy and pitting you against its strange characters.

They say, "Greed has dug more graves than shovels." You can take that literally in Las Vegas. When developers started clearing the desert for the Southern Highlands Master Plan, they found seven bodies. Four-foot unmarked graves were the funeral du jour. You would think that this was some anomaly. Not in Vegas. During construction, they found bodies at Summerlin, Peccole Ranch, Spanish Trails, and Green Valley. The desert surrounding the gambling Mecca is a virtual cemetery, and it's not just the Rosenthals, Rosenblums, and Ruggierios lying out there in sandy graves. You'll also find the inveterate gambler that didn't pay his bookie, or the careless call girl that chose the wrong john, or the bitchy wife that wouldn't keep her mouth shut, and even the businessman that wouldn't buy into the culture of greed. If you don't bend, you may break.