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## Vegas Heat



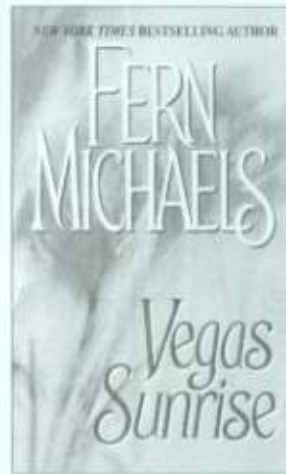


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# VEGAS HEAT

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FROM 1829 TO 1941  
BY  
FRANK M. CLARK  
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
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# VEGAS HEAT

**Fern Michaels**



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I'd like to dedicate this book to those nearest and dearest

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to my heart: Cynthia, Susy, Patty, Michael, David, Kelly and Billy. And for the four legged creatures who warm my heart, old and new; Fred, Gus, Harry, Maxie, Rosie, Lily and Lennie, Buck, Weenie, Spanky, Pete, Zack, Tinker, Einstein, Izzie and Bennie. I love each and every one of you.

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## Part One

Those in the know said Babylon was a one-of-a-kind gambling casino. Those same people said the Thornton family, owners of the casino, had overextended themselves. The big question on the Big White Way was how Ash Thornton, a man confined to a wheelchair, a man whose body was racked with pain twenty-four hours a day, could hope to operate Babylon.

The windowless counting room, an inner sanctuary where the money washed through daily, bore testament to how well the wheelchair-bound man managed. For Ash the ultimate thrill was being immersed in the sight, smell, and touch of money— tons of money, stacks and bundles of coins so heavy he had been forced to buy a hydraulic lift to move it all around the counting room.

It was amazing to Fanny that rather than counting the money, Ash had the cash bundled according to denomination and weighed. Her daughter Sunny had told her a million dollars in \$100 bills weighed 20 1/2 pounds; a million dollars in \$20 bills weighed 102 pounds. A million dollars in \$5 bills weighed 408 pounds.

There was even a name for the electronic coin-weighing

scale, the Toledo Scale. Sunny had laughed, a tinge of hysteria in her voice, when she said a million dollars in quarters from the slots weighed twenty-one tons. A fortune passed through Babylon every day of the year, so much money that it had to be weighed instead of counted.

What was she doing here? I'm trying to justify my mother-in-law 's faith in my ability to safeguard the Thornton family fortune, Fanny told herself. I'm trying to help her family and to keep my own family intact.

Fanny Thornton hated the opulent, decadent casino. Today, she should have called ahead to arrange a meeting someplace else, made a luncheon reservation as far away from this fool's paradise as possible. She knew that floor Security had announced her entrance the moment she walked through the door.



Ash was probably watching her from one of his top-secret peepholes. Birch and Sage were probably on their way to intercept her while Sunny sat with her feet propped up on an open desk drawer, awaiting her arrival. She, too, would have been notified that Fanny Thornton was in the casino. The big question to all of them would be, why?

Knowing what was ahead of her, Fanny quickened her step, refusing to look at the acres of slot machines and banks of poker tables. Directly in her line of vision, striding toward her, were her handsome twin sons, dressed in dark suits and pristine white shirts. They could have posed as Wall Street bankers. They were smiling, but only Sage's smile reached his eyes.

"Mom! What brings you down here? Try and work up a smile or the customers will think Babylon hasn't been kind to you." Birch leaned over and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Mom, it's good to see you." Sage hugged her as he gave her a smacking loud kiss. "Do you have time for lunch or at least a cup of coffee?"

"I have the time. How's your father?" Her voice was polite, nothing more.

"Is that one of those questions that doesn't require an answer or is it one of those questions whose answer doesn't matter?"

Birch asked as he cupped her elbow to lead her through the casino.

"Both."

Sage laughed, a sound of genuine merriment. Birch's features tightened.

Fanny looked from one of her sons to the other. The twins were like night and day. Sage was loving, open, warmhearted, and always the first one to ask "what can I do to help?" He was so much like her he scared her at times. Birch was cool, noncommittal except where his father was concerned, selfish, and arrogant, possessing all the same traits his father was known for.

Fanny shook off her son's hand, a motion that caused Birch's lips to tighten. She didn't care. She had every right to expect loyalty from her children. "If it's your intention to lead me to your father's office forget it. This may surprise you, but I don't require an escort."

"Mom, why are you always so difficult when you come here?" Birch asked.

Fanny stopped in mid-stride. "That's a very amusing statement, Birch. I've been to this casino exactly twice in eighteen months. The first time was at the grand opening. The second was when Sunny fainted and Sage called me. The first time I was here I spent so much time smiling I thought I would end up with TMJ. My second visit was spent putting cool cloths on Sunny's forehead. Perhaps you have me mixed up with someone else."

"Mom, Birch didn't mean ..."

"Yes, Birch means exactly what he says. I don't like this place. I have never liked it, even when it was on the drawing board. Those feelings have not changed. The only reason I'm here is because of business. Now, if you don't mind, I can find my way to Sunny's office by myself. Fetch your father,

please."

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"Mom ..." Birch watched his mother walk away, her shoulders stiff, her ears closed to whatever he wanted to say.

"When was the last time you called her just to say hello, how are you?" Sage asked. "She hasn't forgiven us for choosing up

sides two years ago. I can't say that I blame her. It was the worst kind of betrayal. You know it, and I know it. We're damn lucky she even talks to us."

"This is bullshit. We're running a business here. There's no room for 'he said, she said, I don't like this and I don't like that' crap. What's the point in calling, she's never home. She's always off somewhere with Simon."

"Uncle Simon, Birch. Show some respect. Mom can do whatever she pleases. She doesn't owe us explanations. She's fifty-four and she's independent. She makes more money than this casino does. Go ahead, defend that one."

"I don't have to defend anything. I don't kiss ass and take names later like you do, Sage."

"Where the hell did that come from? Mom walks in here and she has every right to do so and that invisible alarm goes off. Dad gets in a flap, Sunny goes white in the face, and you look so damn brittle it wouldn't surprise me to see your face split wide-open. Am I the only one who's normal around here? Scratch that, and add our sister Billie to the normal list. Don't forget for even one minute where the money came from for this fancy-dancy casino. Or is that what's eating you?"

"Let's not get into this now, Sage. I'll get Dad and meet you in Sunny's office. Where do you suppose Uncle Simon is? Dad calls him her shadow. He says they're joined at the hip. Actually, he didn't say hip."

"I know what he said. I was there. That crap is getting really old, Birch. Why can't you accept things for what they are? You're turning into Dad's clone. I just want you to know I hate what I see."

"Ah, the good son. Mom's good son. I'm the bad seed, is that it? Because I hate it that our uncle has taken over Mom's life? Dad hates it too. He still loves her."

"That's about the biggest crock I've ever heard. You're even more stupid if you believe it. You need to start lining up your ducks, Birch, before it's too late."

"Jesus, Sage, that almost sounds like a threat."

"It's whatever you want it to be," Sage said, turning on his

heel. "I wouldn't make light of this to Dad. Whatever it is that brought Mom here must be serious. Hey, isn't that our little sister making her way in our direction?"

"What the hell! Is this a family reunion?" Birch demanded.

Sage grinned. "I think it's one of those things that's going to require a family vote. Billie, you're lookin' good!" He hugged his sister. Birch did, too, but not with the same enthusiasm.

"You handsome devil! You still beating the women off with a stick?" Billie teased as she tweaked Sage's cheek. "If you'd wipe that scowl off your face, Birch, you'd be just as handsome. What's up? Mom just said to be here at noon."

"Your guess is as good as ours."

"How's our little mother to be? I can't believe Sunny is going to have a baby."

"Dad can't believe it either," Sage said. "He's taking it personally. He thinks Sunny is having this baby to embarrass him. He won't allow her out on the floor."

"What?"

"You heard me. You wouldn't believe the crap that goes on here."

"Sure I would. Sunny takes it?" Billie said, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"She doesn't want to make waves. She says she learned her lesson that time when we all turned on Mom. In addition, I don't think she's feeling all that good. Tyler asked me to keep a close eye on her. I worry about her. If she doesn't shoot off her mouth, something is very wrong. Birch ... Birch seems to take some kind of perverse pleasure in baiting her. It's taking a toll on her, Billie. So, enough about you, how are you doing? You still seeing that guy?"

"Yes, and don't ask me any more questions. My love life is my own. Tell me about yours."

"Her name is Iris. She said her mother named her after her favorite flower. She reminds me of Mom. Really down-to-earth, wants a family. She just got a professorship at the university. She's so smart she makes me look like a dummy." Billie

hooted with laughter. "Sunny says Rainbow Babies is making so much money you guys can't count it that fast enough."

"Kid clothing sells. We're doing well. Why does it have to be us guys versus you guys? I hate that, Sage."

"Because that's the way it is. This family has always been divided, and it will probably remain that way as long as Dad calls the shots around here. I don't see any changes on the horizon."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Sure, have dinner with me and Iris over the weekend. I'd really like you to meet her. Bring along what's his name." Sage dropped his voice to a whisper as they approached the door to Sunny's office. "Billie, I want out of here. I gave it my best shot, but it isn't good enough. This was supposed to be a four-way operation, but Dad and Birch call the shots. Sunny and I are just their flunkies. I hate getting up in the morning knowing I have to come here."

"Then do something about it. The Dutch have a saying, Sage. If you can't whistle on your way to work you don't belong in that job? Do you whistle?"

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"Hell no, I don't."

"There you go. Is there anything I can do?"

"If there is, I'll call you. I just know this is going to be one of those spill-your-guts things. Everyone is going to say things they'll regret later on. The wedge will become wider. One of these days we're going to be strangers to one another. Wanna bet?"

"No thanks."

The door to Sunny's office opened. Billie said, "Mom, you look wonderful. Sunny, you look terrible. Are you taking your vitamins?"

"Of course I'm taking my vitamins. I'm married to a doctor. I just called down to the conference room to get it ready. We're going to need to spread out. The kitchen is sending up coffee and sandwiches. How's what's his name?" Sunny asked, leading the way out of her office.

"What's his name is just fine, thank you. So, Mom, what's

this all about?" Billie asked as she linked her arm with her mother's.

"Family business. Serious business. I'm going to stop by the offices later. I haven't seen Bess in three weeks."

"Sunny's Togs and Rainbow Babies aren't the same without you. Bess misses you, Mom. She's just like you and Aunt Billie. You really are lucky to have such a good friend."

"I know that. We're like sisters. Actually, we're closer than sisters. I'm worried about Sunny, Billie. Has she said anything to you?"

"Only that she's taking her vitamins. Get her out of here, Mom. There aren't any windows, she's indoors all day, sometimes for twelve hours. It doesn't look to me like she gets any thanks for all her hard work either. Wouldn't it be something if she had twins?"

"Bite your tongue, Billie," Fanny said.

"Are you going to give us a clue as to what this meeting is all about, Mom?" Sunny asked. "Pop's smack in the middle of winding up all the details for the World Series Poker Championship. The emperor of Las Vegas as he's called these days, will view this meeting as a thorn in his side."

Fanny snorted. The World Series Championship was what Wimbledon was to tennis—the oldest and most prestigious of all the tournaments. Players came from all over the globe to compete. For three straight weeks, twenty-four hours a day, people would line up and play, right up to the main event, the \$10,000 buy-in no-limit tournament that would last four days until a new champion was crowned.

"Fanny, what a pleasant surprise."

Fanny stared at the man in the wheelchair, the man who had once been her husband. She felt her shoulders straighten. There were no regrets. Not now, not ever.

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He was impeccably dressed, manicured, and coifed. 'Whatever this is about, Fanny, can we make it quick?' he said, not looking at her. 'I'm up to my ears with the final details for the championship. There aren't enough hours in the day.' His

voice was syrupy, the way it always was when he thought he could charm her, wheedle her into doing what he wanted.

"Dad, I offered to help," Sunny said. "Sage ..."

"Forget it, Sunny. The customers don't want to see your big belly. It's a turnoff. Men don't want reminders of home and hearth when they come to paradise."

Fanny sucked in her breath when her daughter's eyes filled with tears. "That was unnecessarily cruel, Ash, and you need to apologize to your daughter."

"It's okay, Mom." Sunny said.

"No. It is not okay. It wasn't okay when your father said the same things to me years ago and it's not okay now. This is not your casino, Ash. It belongs to the Thornton family enterprise. Sunny has a role here, and if you forgot what it is, I can have my attorneys refresh your memory. I also don't give a damn about your championship gambling tournament. Now, I came here to discuss something very important."

"You're really trying to stick it to me, aren't you, Fanny? Where's Simon? Shouldn't he be here?"

"Why is that, Ash? He doesn't belong to this immediate family even though he is your brother. But, to answer your question, I don't know where he is. Before we get down to the reason I'm here, outline what Sunny can do to take part of the burden off your shoulders. Now, Ash."

"Mom, it's okay. Really it is."

"Ash? Birch? Sage?" Fanny said. The three men stared at Fanny, blank looks on their faces. "I see, no one knows what's going on. Well, we'll change that right now. Sunny, you are in charge of the championship. You will report to Billie and me at the end of each workday. If it's too much for you, hire some help. Now that we've settled that little matter, let's get on with it."

"Just a goddamn minute, Fanny. You can't waltz in here and tell me how to run this business."

"I just did. We've moved on, Ash. What part didn't you understand?"

"You're deliberately screwing this up, Fanny. The minute you get your fingers on something it goes to hell."

"I made a decision, Ash. When I do that, I don't look back, and I don't back down. If I did, I wouldn't be in business, and you wouldn't be sitting here in this . . . this obscene den of opulence. As I said, I came here for a reason. I'm giving you all the courtesy of asking your opinion. I'll weigh what you

have to say very carefully." Fanny drew a deep breath as she stared at the faces of her family.

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"What is it, Mom?" Billie asked gently.

"Billie Coleman needs our help. As you know, your grandmother Sallie bought into Coleman Aviation years ago. The stock has been holding its own until now. Ash, I know Moss talked to you about the plans for his new plane before he died. I also heard you say you would help in any way you could. Simon also agreed. The Colemans are tapped out. They have nowhere else to turn. They've come too far now to let it all settle in the dust. I think we should do all we can to help Aunt Billie bring Moss's dream to life the way we all worked to make this dream possible for you, Ash. I'd like to hear your thoughts."

"Charity begins at home, Mom. What have the Colemans ever done for us? Uncle Seth didn't give a damn about Grandma Sallie. His own sister. I don't plan on forgetting that," Birch said.

"What happens if they go belly up?" Ash asked. "Where does that leave us, Fanny? What exactly do you want from us? Our cash flow isn't that strong. Or are you saying you want to mortgage everything? That's it, isn't it? Jesus Christ, Fanny, we could lose everything on some cockamamie dream of Moss's."

Fanny's heart hammered in her chest. She waited.

"Aunt Billie is family. Families stick together. If this is a yes or no vote, then I vote yes," Sage said.

"Me too," Billie said without hesitation.

The score was two to two. If Sunny didn't vote, it would be up to Fanny to break the tie. The turmoil on her daughter's

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face tore at her heart. Once before Sunny had taken a stand and made a decision she couldn't live with.

"What are you waiting for, Sunny?" Ash demanded, his eyes boring into his daughter.

Fanny shivered at Ash's tone as she too waited for her daughter's response.

"I love Aunt Billie. I love all the Colemans. I say what's ours is theirs. I know in my heart Aunt Billie would do the same for us. I'm voting the way Grandma Sallie would want me to vote. I vote yes."

"That's just dandy. And when that plane doesn't get off the ground and we're hiding out from our creditors, where will you all be?" Ash snarled, his wheelchair burning rubber as he pressed the electrical control.

"You're a jerk, Sunny," Birch said. He followed his father out into the hall.

"No, you are not a jerk," Billie said as she wrapped her arms around her sister. "I know what it took for you to do that." This last was said in a hushed whisper.

"So, what's the game plan?" Sage asked.

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"I'm going to talk to Simon. He's our investment man. I don't think he's going to agree. This could go either way. Sage said it best. Families need to stick together. It's possible we could lose our shirts."

Billie's voice was flippant. "The sign on my door says I'm the head designer of Sunny's Togs and Rainbow Babies. If we lose our shirts, I'll design us new ones."

"Attagirl," Sage said, pounding her on the back. "C'mon, Sunny, sit down. You don't have any color. Are you sure you're okay?"

Fanny's head jerked upward at the concern in Sage's voice. "I'm taking all of us to lunch at Peridot. Billie, call Bess and ask her to meet us there. Sage, ask Birch if he wants to join us. There's no point asking your father, but do it anyway. I'll meet you at the front door. I want to call Billie and tell her the good news."

The moment the door closed behind her children, the phone

was in Fanny's hand. She would call Billie, but first she was calling Sunny's husband.

"Dr. Ford here."

"Tyler, it's Fanny."

"What's wrong?"

"That's what I want you to tell me. Sunny looks like death warmed over, and that's a kind statement. Aside from morning sickness, a pregnant woman usually has a wonderful sparkle in her eyes, color in her cheeks. She's a happy woman. This is not the case with Sunny. And another thing, she shouldn't be working twelve hours a day."

"You're right about everything, Fanny. Were you ever successful in changing Sunny's mind or getting her to do something she didn't want to do? I've spoken to her doctor, and he tells me she's fine. He says if she wants to work, she should work. She eats well, she exercises moderately, she takes her prenatal vitamins, and she sleeps through the night. She tells me she takes an hour nap in the middle of the afternoon. She makes sure she takes breaks and walks outside. She didn't have morning sickness. She's never been one to complain. My personal opinion is she's under a lot of stress at the casino with her father and brothers. Did something happen or did you just call to ask me questions? Whatever we say, Fanny, will go no farther."

"I know that, Tyler." Fanny told him about the brief meeting and Sunny's vote. "She looks so ... fragile, so washed-out. She appeared a little wobbly to me. If she's willing to come up to Sunrise for a week or so, would you have any objections?"

"None at all. I've suggested the same thing to her, but she's married to that casino. I hate that goddam place."

"Not as much as I do. Maybe I can work a little mother magic." She told him about the vote to help the Colemans. "How's everything going otherwise, Tyler?"

'Reconstructive surgery is not glamorous, but it is rewarding to make someone feel whole again. I love what I do as much as Sunny loves what she does. So, you see, I'm the last person who should ever make suggestions where her job is concerned. I'm being paged, Fanny. Call me if you think there's something

I can do. Not that my vote counts, but I think you're doing the right thing. Tell Billie I said hello when you talk to her."

"I'll do that, Tyler. She adores you, you know. She said you remind her of her son Riley."

"That's one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me. Look, you do what you feel is right and don't let anyone make you back down. Families need to stick together. We'll talk again."

Fanny's fingers drummed on Sunny's desk. She should be feeling better after Tyler's reassuring words but she didn't. Her motherly intuition was telling her something was wrong. She dialed Billie Coleman's number in Austin, Texas.

"Is everything okay?" Billie asked, breathless. She had picked up the phone on the first ring. "Every time I hear the phone the word disaster rings in my head. Before you can ask, we're facing a brick wall. Money just pours out of here. I don't know what to do. If I don't finish this project, then Riley's death and all those other boys who died in Coleman aircraft will have been in vain . . . how can I live with that? As sick as he was at the end, Moss worked tirelessly to perfect this plane. How can I do less?"

"You can't. The Thorntons are going to help, Billie. I'm at Babylon right now. We voted and the money will be on the way by the end of the week. If it isn't enough, we'll go back to the drawing board. Please, Billie, don't cry. Be thankful your granddaughter Sawyer is the aeronautical engineer on this project."

"We're all obsessed with this plane project, Sawyer more so. My own children . . . Fanny, how is it possible for a mother to be estranged from her two daughters? I never, ever thought such a thing would happen to me, how my daughters can fight me on this plane. All they want is the money they say we're wasting. They say a new plane won't bring Riley back, and they're right about that. He was their brother, and I know they loved him. On a more pleasant note, I just know Sawyer is going to explode when I tell her about your offer. That child has worked for months now, getting by on three hours' sleep

a night. She eats, sleeps, and dreams about her grandfather's dream plane. She's going to get it off the ground too, thanks to you. Fanny, I wish there were words ..."

"Words aren't necessary, Billie. We're family."

"We could lose our shirts."

"Well, guess what? Your namesake said if that happens, she would design us new ones. You can't beat an offer like that."

"No, you can't. How are things going on the Big White Way? How's Sunny? Is Birch still giving you



heartache?"

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"I'm in the conference room here at Babylon, Billie. I'll call you this evening. I'm taking the kids to lunch at Peridot."

"That place where you and Sallie got blitzed at your first meeting? When I told Thad how Devin took you two home in a hearse because no one had gas, he laughed until he cried."

"Drunk or not, that is one of my fondest memories of my mother-in-law. Oh, Billie, I miss her so much. She had such faith and trust in me. I hope I can live up to her expectations. I know in my heart she would approve of what we're doing. Family, Billie, is what life is all about. Sallie always said our families' destiny was in your hands and mine. Together, we'll work toward that end."

"We won't fail, Fanny. You can take that to the bank. Do I dare ask about Simon?"

"Tonight, Billie. Give everyone my love. Now, take a nap, okay?"

"At ten o'clock in the morning?"

"Why not? Aren't we independent women? If we are, then we can take a nap anytime we want. Actually, we can do anything we want. Both of us have earned that little perk. Talk to you tonight."

The Peridot restaurant was as old as Las Vegas itself. It was also Fanny's favorite restaurant for the very reason Billie Coleman had mentioned earlier.

"I love it when my brother finally acts like a grown-up and holds our chairs out for us," Billie said.

Sunny's voice was blunt yet sad when she said, "You're leaving, aren't you, Sage?"

"I want to. I'm willing to stay until you have the baby and get back into the swing of things. We're just flunkies, Sunny. You know it, and I know it. I glide around the floor trying to look important. I'm not sure what you do behind those closed doors. I don't know if you're aware of the latest developments. anyone interested?" The women nodded just as Bess Noble, Fanny's second-in-command, joined them.

"I heard that," Bess said as she kissed everyone before taking her seat. "Now, tell us what the latest development is."

"Dad and Birch want to buy riverboats in Biloxi, Mississippi, for gambling. He planned to apply for mortgage, but you beat him to it, Mom. At least I think you did. Dad and Birch can be secretive at times. Those riverboats are a great big can of worms. I spoke up and said it had to be put to a vote, but they ignored me. At the risk of repeating myself, what the hell kind of family is this? Tell me, Mom, what you want us to do to help Aunt Billie."

"I'm going to call Simon this evening and discuss everything. We'll sell off all our shares of Rainbow Babies and Sunny's Togs. Simon never sold them. He fibbed to us about that transaction. Thank God he did. We're going to move our offices out of Sallie's Bingo Palace. It will go on the market tomorrow. It's prime real estate so it should fetch several million. I'm going to mortgage Babylon. By tomorrow the news will be on the Strip and the sharks will start to gather, so be prepared. I'll empty out that monster safe in Sunrise. I'll mortgage Sunrise. I'll sell all the jewelry Sallie left me. That's

already in the works. I'll borrow what I can to make up the difference. The only monies we'll have coming in will go to make the mortgage payments. I did have a thought, though, and I'd like your opinions. Sallie never raised the rates for the other casinos to tie into her sewage and electrical systems. It's time for a hefty increase. Those fees, I believe, will keep our heads above water."

The sighs of relief could be heard around the table. "Good thinking, Mom," Sunny said.

"It's about time," Sage offered.

"This might be a good time to unveil my latest creation," Billie said as she dug into the voluminous bag she was never without and pulled out two soft dolls. "Meet Bernie and Blossom. I showed them to a few of our salespeople who took them on the road. Guess what! We already have orders for ten thousand. The big question is, how are we going to market them? The next question is, where do we get the money? Do we form a separate company or do we license them under Rainbow Babies or Sunny's Togs? I thought we could hire the Bernsteins to get our publicity started. We can have a million of these on the market by next Christmas."

Sage stared at his sister, his face full of awe. "Just like that! Where are you going to manufacture them?"

"Made in the good old U.S. of A. Forty bucks a pop or \$39.95. People like to walk away with change even if it's only a nickel. We learned that in marketing class."

Fanny held the soft fabric doll in her hands. As always, she marveled at her younger daughter's abilities. "The scraps from Rainbow Babies, right?"

"Yes, but each face is different. I know eight people that come to mind who will be willing to work on the faces. The doll itself and the garment can be made for under a dollar if mass produced. The faces are what will cost, and labor of course. Sign on, Sage, we can use your expertise. You said you want out of Babylon. So, what do you all think?"

"I think this is one of your best ideas," Bess said, a calculator in hand.

"Billie, these dolls are priceless. I wish I had your talent. Can I have the first one off the line for my new baby, Bernie if he's a boy? If I have a girl, I'll take Blossom. They are so adorable. Raggedy Ann and Andy will be passe."

Billie reached into the bag again and withdrew two tissue-wrapped bundles. "I already made them for you. I wanted something special for you. That's where I got the idea. Think

about it, Sunny, you have a clothing company named after you and now you're the inspiration behind these two dolls. I don't think we're headed to the poor house just yet."

"This calls for a celebration," Fanny said.

"Let's have some of that same wine you and Grandma Sallie had that famous day you first met. Tell us the story again, Mom," Sage said.

"It was wartime and I was meeting your grandmother for the first time ..."

The moment the door closed behind Ash Thornton, he went into a rage. "Now, do you see what your mother is capable of? She undermines every single thing I do. If she'd keep her nose out of the casino business, things would be just fine. Do I interfere in her business? No, I do not. Your mother has to dabble in everything. She's not content to own two of the biggest clothing companies in the country, she has to make her presence felt in everything that concerns me. I'm not going to let that happen. We're going to go ahead with those riverboats. I want you in Mississippi tomorrow. Get everything under way. She won't stop us. If she does ... I'll deal with it then and there. When Sunny comes back from lunch, send her in here. She's out of here until that kid arrives. I have enough problems without her jinxing me. Why are you looking at me that way, Birch? Business is business. We're on top, and I plan on staying there. So I already took a mortgage out, so what? I got a good interest rate and cut Granger's markers to half. That's how you do business in this town. I love bankers who gamble. Hell, the governor was in here two weeks ago, and he shot a load that made me blink. You suck up to these people and you can get anything you want. You have to know how to play the game. Your mother doesn't know the name of the game much less how to play it. I even know what her next move is going to be. She's going to raise the rates on the sewage and electric plants. That won't endear us to the rest of the owners. The dark stuff will start to fly. Anything can happen in this town

and take my word for it, something will happen as soon as those rate hikes go into effect. Your mother talks a good game about tightening our belts and all that crap. Don't kid yourself, son, it's what Fanny wants when Fanny wants it. Thanks for sticking up for me. They'll eat our dust yet."

"Dad, this is all wrong. The past is past. Can't we let it die and make things better? I know you can't go back, but you can go forward and make it better than it was. Sage is going to walk. I could see it in his face."

4 "Sage is not a team player. Neither is Sunny. You and me now, we have the same goals. We'll make those goals, too."

Birch watched as his father swallowed a handful of pills. He could feel his shoulders slump. Sage was his twin, his other half. He never felt quite whole unless Sage was close by. He adored Sunny, always had. It was all getting away from him, just like the last time when they sided with their father against their mother.

"You can't tell Sunny she isn't needed right now. If we do that, Mom will shut this place down so fast we won't have time to blink. She'll do it, Dad. I'd hate to see you make the mistake of pushing her to the edge. She won't jump over the edge, she'll plow you right under. She takes her commitment to Grandma Sallie and this family very seriously. You're wrong about Sage, too. Sage has the charisma to make this place work. He works the floor like a pro. Any casino on this Strip would hire him and pay him five times what we pay him. He'd be worth every dollar, too. Don't mess with Sage, Dad."

Ash eyed his son, his one remaining ally. His mind was scrambled with the pills he'd just taken. His chaotic thoughts reeled back in time to when he was Birch's age. He'd been just as tall, just as good-looking, just as virile, just as mobile. He stared at the replica of himself and wanted to cry. "Sage is weak," he mumbled.

"You're wrong. Sage has more guts than the two of us put together. I'll walk out of here before I let you put Sage down."

Ash stared at his son and knew he meant every word. He waved him out of the room. When the door closed behind

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Birch, great wrenching sobs tore at his wasted body. "I hate your goddamn fucking guts, Fanny," he sobbed.

In his office, Birch sat down behind his desk. His head dropped to his hands. He wished he could turn back the hands of the clock to the day he and Sage left for college with Simon behind the wheel.

He knew the story behind his father and his Uncle Simon. He'd heard his father's version, his grandmother's version, Simon's version, and then his mother's version. Somewhere in between was the real story. Late at night in the college dorm, he and Sage had put their own spin on the story and came up with one they could both live with. Now, eighteen years later, history seemed to be repeating itself. He was his father and Sage was Simon. He remembered how his Uncle Simon had come out the winner in all the different stories, even their own. That meant Sage was a winner and he was ... his father all over again.

It was three o'clock when Birch closed his briefcase. 'Biloxi, Mississippi, here I come,' he muttered. The knock on his door startled him. "Come in," he called.

"Nan. I don't think so," Sage said from the open doorway. "I stopped by Dad's office to drop this off, but he was asleep. He'd just tear it up anyway. You can do whatever you want with it. It's my resignation. You going somewhere? Let me guess. Biloxi, Mississippi, right? Big mistake, Birch."

"Come on, Sage, we go through this at least once a week. You always back down. This thing is going to blow over the way these things always blow over. This is our business. We need to pull together."

"That's really funny coming from you. I've had it. What we voted for was right for all the right reasons. I don't have any regrets. All I want is a life, and I'm damn well going to get one. Uncle Simon walked away and got his life. I've got the guts to do the same thing."

"Let's not forget that good old Uncle Simon walked off with the queen of this parade. Our mother."

"Mom's personal life is none of our business. Justify what

happened with Sunny, Birch. Don't tell me nothing happened either. I know how you and Dad do things."

"Sunny belongs at home taking care of herself. Mom stayed home and took care of us. Why isn't that good enough for her?"

"The why of it doesn't matter. It's her choice. We made a pact early on. You can't blow Sunny off. You're gonna do it, aren't you? I refuse to be a party to anything that hurts one of us. What the hell happened to you, Birch? For months now we've been at opposite ends of the spectrum. I miss the old Birch, my buddy and my pal. Where'd he go?"

"Get your ass in here and stop telling the world our business. What about Dad?"

"Ah, the emperor's son has spoken. The queen's son is speaking now, the son who is his own man, and

he says, fuck you, Birch." In a dramatic gesture, Sage threw his hands high in the air. "Jesus, do you have any idea of how good I feel right now? Because I'm in such a good mood, I'm going to give you some advice for free. Forget those riverboats, they're going to sink to the bottom of the Mississippi River. Give some thought to buying a gondola. Isn't that what emperors ride around in or sail in ... ? Whatever. See you around."

"Sage, wait. We need to talk. Sage, get in here. What the hell is bugging you? Come on, we can talk this through and make it work."

"Sorry, Birch, not this time."

The sound of the door closing behind his brother sounded ominous, final. Birch cried then for what he'd allowed himself to become: the emperor's son.

Fanny waved good-bye to her children, then frowned as she watched Sage and Billie link arms with Sunny. She turned to Bess. "I'm worried."

"I know. Why don't we take a walk, just you and me, Fanny? Remember the old days when we traipsed around this town? Two young girls who never in their wildest dreams thought they would be where they are right now."

"I had such dreams back then. I thought I had a marriage made in heaven. Hell would be more like it. I tell myself there must have been some good years. If there were, why can't I remember them?"

"It's over. You can't look back. You told me that a thousand times or more."

"That's because Sallie always said it to me. I miss her so much, Bess. A day doesn't go by that I don't think about her. She was my best friend. The mother I never had. I try to do things the way I think she would want me to do them, but I'm never sure I'm succeeding."

"Maybe you need to stop doing that and do what you think is best. Sallie isn't here anymore. She trusted you. That means she trusted your judgment. Lay her to rest and live your own life. It's time for you to crawl out from under her shadow."

"Oh, Bess, it sounds so simple. I can't turn it off. I envy you and your nice normal family. You and John were meant for each other. Doctor and Mrs. Bess Noble. I love the way that sounds. You and John got the brass ring, my friend."

"We've had our ups and downs, Fanny. Every married couple does at one time or another."

"You came out stronger, though. We're to the half century mark, Bess. Actually, we're past the mark. I'm divorced. My

family is divided. No one is happy. Sunny's ill, I feel it in my bones. My eyes see things I don't want to recognize. Yes, my businesses are successful. Yes, I provide jobs for a lot of people, including my children. When is it my time in the sun, Bess?"

"Whenever you decide to make a commitment to Simon. You could get married tomorrow at a Las Vegas wedding chapel if you wanted to. You could do it the minute you pick up Simon. It's a choice,

Fanny. You have to get rid of all that guilt you're carrying around. So what if Simon is Ash's brother. So what, Fanny! You're divorced for God's sake. Ash no longer has a hold on you. His accident wasn't your fault. Let it die already." There was such exasperation in Bess's voice that Fanny laughed aloud.

"I think you care more than I do."

"That's a bald-faced lie if I ever heard one. You love Simon. He loves you. Carrying on an affair is what Sallie did. That's not who you are, Fanny. You're a home and hearth person. If you deliberately choose to pattern your life after Sallie's that's one thing. If you let circumstances dictate to you, that's something else. Sallie has a hold on you from the grave. You need to shake it loose."

Fanny stopped walking to stare at her friend. "Is that what I'm doing, Bess?"

"Yes." The single word was an explosion of sound from Bess's mouth. "I want to see some backbone. Starting right

now

Fanny hugged her friend as people walked around them, smiles on their faces. "What would I do without you, Bess?"

Bess shrugged. "We need to start scrounging for money for the dolls. You can put John and me down for \$75,000. I know the kids will kick in with their savings. Your kids, that is. Mine don't have any savings."

"Don't you have to ask John?"

"Nope. That's why we work so well together. He knows I wouldn't do anything to put our lives in jeopardy. We have other savings. If he knew the situation, he'd offer before I could get the words out of my mouth."

Fanny recognized the truth of the statement. 'Isn't it strange, Bess, how Billie managed to save the day? She did it once before with Rainbow Babies. The truth, Bess, am I doing the right thing where Billie Coleman is concerned?"

"Absolutely. When it comes down to the wire, Fanny, when everything else is shot to hell, family is the only thing you can count on. In the end family always comes through for you. Trust me on this."

"My own family ... Birch ..."

"Birch is torn, Fanny. All you can do is be there for him when he finally comes to terms with his role in his father's life. Birch isn't a kid anymore. You always said because he was minutes older, he was the leader and Sage was the follower. That changed somewhere along the way. Sage is his own person and has been for a very long time. I think Birch knows that and doesn't know how to get back on even footing. He'll figure it out, and when he does, he'll come back to the fold and you'll be there because that's what mothers do."

'But, will I feel the same way about him? Right now I love him, but I don't like him. Does that make sense? He hates it that I'm considering marrying Simon."

"No, Ash is making him hate the idea. Birch always adored his uncle. He has to deal with that, too. He has a lot on his plate right now. The minute Sage is gone, he's going to start soul searching. We'll just have to wait and hope he sees the light. By the way, how is your ex 0 ""

"His debonair self as far as I could see. If you're asking me if he's still taking all those drugs, my answer would be yes. His eyes appeared glassy to me, but he wears tinted glasses indoors. Sage told me once the fluorescent lighting bothers his eyes. I don't want to know, Bess. All I want is what Salli wanted, a simple life with a man I love and who loves me. I want my family."

"Then tell Simon you'll marry him and don't change your mind this time. No matter how much he loves you, he won't wait forever. Neither one of you is getting any younger."

"I have loose ends in my life, Bess. I hate loose ends. I

know life doesn't come in a tidy little box with a ribbon on top. I have the box and the ribbon, but I can't tie it into a bow. I still haven't found my mother. My instincts tell me she's out there somewhere. I'm ashamed that I didn't do more to find her. I could have half brothers and sisters, a whole other family I know nothing about. I need to do something about that. Then there's Jake and his money. I've borrowed on that money so many times I've lost count. I need to lay that to rest, too. It's been thirty years, Bess, since that bus holdup when Jake gave me his money to hold. I wanted to give the money back, but I could never find him. He must have a family somewhere. I never did tell Ash about that money. Simon invested it time and again. It's a small fortune."

"Fanny, with all the new technology out there today you can hire the best of the best. It might take a while, but I think you'll be able to lay those two matters to rest once and for all. Now, didn't we have nice chat? Time for you to be getting ready for the drive to the airport. Isn't Simon due in soon?"

"How do you know he's coming in and that I'm picking him up?"

"Because you're wearing your yellow dress. You always wear yellow when you pick Simon up. Sometimes you are very transparent, Fanny."

"Obviously," Fanny sniffed. "I didn't lie back there at the meeting when I said I didn't know where Simon was. I didn't know precisely what city or town his plane was flying over at that moment." Fanny grinned and hugged her friend.

She would have known him anywhere, even in a dark room, this love of hers. She wanted to jump over the barrier and run to him. Instead she held out her arms and smiled. 'T missed you. I thought about you every minute of every day. The moment I open my eyes in the morning my first thought is, is Simon awake yet?"

He kissed her while the world on the tarmac watched. Neither

one cared. "It doesn't have to be this way," he said against her lips.

"I know," she whispered. "For now it is what it is. I do love you, more than I loved you yesterday and not as much as I will tomorrow. So there!"

"How's everything?"

~~"Some things are good, some things are bad, some things are indifferent. Nothing much changes around here. We'll talk later. Let's just enjoy each other. It's been two whole weeks, Simon!"~~

' 'Three hundred and thirty-six hours or twenty thousand one hundred and sixty minutes. Damn, I can calculate the seconds in my head."

"Who cares? You're here and that's all that counts."

"Fanny, let's get married. Right now. I'm willing to keep it a secret if you don't want the family to know. I see something in your eyes I've never seen before and it scares me. Now, Fanny."

Fanny slid into the passenger side of her car. Simon always drove when they were together. Her heart started to flutter in her chest. Simon's words sounded like an ultimatum. The hard set of his jaw frightened her. Bess's words rang in her ears. "Simon won't wait forever."

Fanny's voice was squeaky, jittery-sounding when she said, "By now, do you mean on the way home soon?" Simon's demand coupled with what had transpired earlier left her feeling drained. She needed to say something positive, something light and funny to take away the harsh look on her beloved's face. She couldn't find the words. Was it possible they weren't in her vocabulary? Was it possible she wasn't meant to marry Simon? The thought was so devastating she could feel her eyes start to burn.

"Fanny, did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, Simon, I did. I'm thinking."

The disbelief in Simon's voice was total. "You're thinking? That doesn't say very much for us, Fanny. What in the name of God do you have to think about?"

"Everything, Simon. Everything."

"That word sounds ominous. I don't think I care for that explanation. Would you mind explaining?"

"Can we have this discussion when we get to Sunrise?"

"It doesn't look like I have a choice. What's happening to us, Fanny?"

Fanny's voice was a tortured whisper. "I don't know."

' 'I thought what we felt for one another was rock solid. You and me against the world, that kind of thing. Am I wrong, Fanny?"

"No. I never thought I could love someone as much as I love you. I didn't know I could feel like this. I don't want to lose you like I did the last time, Simon. If you recall, I asked you to marry me and you turned me down flat. Those were the longest, the most miserable days of my life. We'll talk over cocoa, and a nice warm fire. It's still chilly on the mountain in the evenings."

"Okay, Fanny. So, how are the kids? They're always going to be kids to me no matter how old they are."



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