

CHAPTER ONE - VEGAS

To say, I hate Vegas is an understatement.

Even before any of this happened, it always felt like people there were trying too hard. Of course, Johnny love's Vegas, because no one judges you as long as your wallet is full. He loves the fact that his money makes him a god there.

It is this fact and my increasingly guilty conscience that are giving me second thoughts about the trip we are about to take. What started out as doing the right thing in my mind has mutated into something else entirely.

The week before our trip, I finally called Johnny and told him I didn't want to be involved with the details anymore. He had asked me to do him a favor and handle booking his girlfriend's plane ticket, and I had reluctantly agreed to help him. Even though he wired me the money and it wasn't my money paying for the ticket, this act had really bothered me. It was as if I had switched from watching his back to participating and it was a line I wasn't willing to cross again.

"No problem," Johnny says on our call, "I will handle everything after this trip."

Encouraged by his response, I lay down the ground rules for this trip. One, whatever he does is his business; I don't want to be involved with it anymore or have any knowledge of it.

Two, I get a room of my own, so I don't have to be involved with whatever he has planned for this weekend. Finally, I will cover for him as long as he obeys my simple requests, but I am only *covering* for him, not participating.

This is *his* thing.

Los Angeles, CA: May 12th 2011

The thought of this “vacation” has haunted me since I booked it. I wake up Friday morning exhausted by the idea of what lies ahead and I try and psyche myself up.

It is just a long weekend, I keep thinking on my way to the airport. Quit feeling sorry for yourself and man up!

As I order my second Bloody Mary on the plane, I start to question whether I am overreacting to being sucked into the whole thing. Unfortunately, no matter how hard I try to rationalize my actions deep down I know this is just wrong. As we start our descent into Vegas, I switch from the “dreading-it” phase to the “just get through it” portion of the “Johnny Russell Experience.”

Johnny doesn't know I call it that and would be furious if he found out I came up with a term to describe what he does. It's just my way of trying to detach myself from the whole thing. While I am the opposite of a prude, there are certain lines I never crossed until I met Johnny. Unfortunately, he seems dead set on sharing this experience with me and this thought turns my stomach a little.

I am a beard and nothing more, I keep reminding myself as my plane taxis to the gate.

Las Vegas, Nevada: May 12th, 2011

As soon as I get off the plane, I see Johnny and his new girlfriend, Cindy waiting for me. She looks like she is in her late twenties with long brunette hair and her outfit screams Jersey Shore.

"Nice to meet ya," she says enthusiastically. "Are you psyched for this weekend or what?"

"Can't wait." I lie and give her a weak smile.

"Let's get your luggage," Johnny barks and he gives me a critical look for my less than enthusiastic response. "We need to find a cab to take us to the hotel."

I look over at Cindy as we walk to baggage claim. I am not the only person to go through the "Johnny Russell Experience," and while I know what is coming, this girl has no clue. I feel a slight twinge of guilt as we pick up my bags and walk through the baggage claim exit.

She seems really nice, I think to myself as we walk outside.

Of course, as with anything that involves Johnny, things don't go as planned. Cindy informs us she couldn't find a friend for me to bring along for the trip as we walk to the cabstand.

So that is why he agreed to my conditions so quickly, I think to myself as the cab pulls up, *he was just going to surprise me with her friend.*

As I am thanking God for my good fortune in dodging that bullet, Cindy volunteers to sit in the front seat with the cab driver, giving Johnny and me a chance to talk.

“Do you want to split her with me?” Johnny asks me as soon as the cab leaves the airport curb.

Split her with him? I think to myself, as I try my best to hide my shock and disgust at the idea.

“No thanks, she’s all yours.” I say quickly and then turn to look out the window as the cab heads toward downtown Vegas.

Why me? Keeps on looping over and over in my mind, as the cab navigates through traffic. *What did I do to deserve this?*

Before this trip, I spent a lot of time thinking about how I was going to separate myself from Johnny’s idea of a “good time.” That’s why I insisted on separate rooms. I love women, but not when they are paid for, and I won’t cross that line again. In seeing how Johnny operated on the first couple of trips, I wanted to minimize my exposure to the whole thing.

I try and erase the question Johnny just asked me from my brain, but there are certain things you just can’t un-hear.

Still, I try to look at the bright side. Now that his plan to surprise me with someone has backfired, I realize I am completely off the hook for this trip. I allow myself to relax for a little and just take in the sights.

Maybe this won't be so bad after all, I think to myself as a miniature version of New York passes by my side of the cab. *I just have to keep my head down and mouth shut.*

This is when we run into problem number two. Johnny's new girlfriend is a smoker. And Johnny hates smokers. I try not to laugh. This is a man who asks the waiter to change seats if a diner who just smelled of smoke sat next to him. Now he has a weekend "girlfriend" who doubles as a human chimney stack!

Of course, this momentary setback doesn't deter Johnny from starting to turn on the charm in the cab as he starts the process of "winning" Cindy over. Each attempt Johnny makes at being charming is cringe worthy, and I absently wonder what the cab driver is thinking.

His lines and plays are so predictable and lame that you almost feel sorry for him. Of course, the cab driver doesn't know this is Johnny's strategy. He wants the girls to feel as if this is his first time and that he is really trying. Everyone gets to play a different part in the "experience" and I feel sorry for Cindy because she doesn't even know she is playing her part yet.

We pull up to one of the nicer hotels in Vegas and take the elevator to get to the hotel lobby. This is when Cindy informs Johnny of problem number three. It's that time of the month for her. As the elevator door opens, I am having a hard time keeping a straight face.

Maybe Karma does exists? I think to myself as we walk into the hotel lobby.

That's when Johnny asks me if he could speak to me in private for a moment. We excuse ourselves and leave Cindy with our bags by a couch next to the check in counter.

My momentary happiness immediately disappears, as soon as I see the cold rage in Johnny's eyes. He has now realized that his carefully arranged plans have turned to shit, and it looks like he is about to explode.

“What’s up?” I ask him playing dumb, not wanting to add fuel to the fire.

“Soon should have known better than to send me a smoker who is on her period.”

Johnny hisses in a quietly furious tone, “I’ll make sure she pays for this!”

I have heard this tone before and I am instantly on guard.

Johnny's mode swings can turn dark very quickly, and I don't want him causing a scene in the hotel lobby. This has the potential to go bad in an instant, and I can't risk that happening. The rooms are in my name, so I try to calm him down by breaking one of my own ground rules.

“Relax. Cindy can sleep in my room if the smoker thing bothers you that much.” I tell him in a relaxed tone that I hope masks the anxiety I am feeling. “Why don’t you go to your room and unpack.”

He continues to glare over at Cindy and I see he is about to explode.

“She can stay in my room while you get comfortable,” I say quickly trying to head off the detonation. “I will also talk to her about the cigarettes. Let’s just try and make the best of it.”

"Fine," he spits out as he turns to me with his anger. "Just handle it."

With that, he marches off leaving me to inform Cindy of the new sleeping arrangements.

Once Cindy and I get to my room, I make it crystal clear that she is off the clock. I already feel pretty bad for her. I think she realizes I am only trying to make the best out of an already awkward situation, and Cindy relaxes a little. After about thirty minutes of watching TV together, she excuses herself to start getting ready for our first night out on the town.

As the sun starts to set, Johnny knocks on my door and he's in good spirits. I desperately hope that whatever prescription cocktail he's on will last the entire evening and the Johnny I can't stand doesn't make a return appearance.

The guy I have come to know as the "nice" Johnny quickly turns his focus back to charming Cindy. He grandly announces we are going to one of the more exclusive restaurants in Vegas and a car is already waiting downstairs to take us there.

He is getting worse, I think to myself as we pass the neon signs that line the strip, *he almost blew up on the first day this time.*

Luckily, there are no explosions tonight and everything goes off like clockwork. We have a nice dinner followed by catching The Elvis Show. After the show, we immediately head back to the hotel and I am looking forward to a little time alone to decompress.

During the cab ride back, Johnny and Cindy start making out in the backseat. In anticipation of this happening, I volunteered to sit up front with the cab driver. My conversation with our driver gives me a chance to distract myself from what is going on in the back and I am thankful it is only a five-minute ride back to the hotel.

Once we arrive at the hotel, Cindy and Johnny race to his room and I run straight to the mini-bar in mine. I pour myself a glass of vodka with a splash of cranberry juice and down it in two gulps.

As I prepare another drink, I look at the mirror in front of me and hate what I see.

"Relax," I say to myself softly as my anger and self-loathing start to well up. "You just cleared the first hurdle, only two more days to go!"

The warmth of the alcohol starts to melt through the tension I feel and I begin to relax for the first time since I got off the plane. I start to think about everything that has happened since I met Johnny Russell. At first, I just wanted to protect Johnny and try to figure out what was wrong with him. But now his threats, erratic behavior, mood swings and the sheer number of lies I have to keep up with are simply becoming too much for me.

It feels like I am walking on eggshells when I am around him and every trip we take I lose another piece of my self-respect.

After a couple of hours of quality time, Cindy comes back to my room. I am still lying on the bed dressed in a t-shirt and sweats. I immediately remind her again that she is in a safe environment. As I've said, I love women, but there are certain lines I will never cross. I'm already feeling sorry for Cindy, as I see that she is starting to buy Johnny's act.

She begins to tell me about her experience so far with Johnny.

It always starts out the same: he wants to get to know them and makes really embarrassing attempts to win them over. These cheesy attempts somehow come off as sincere. He has been doing this for a very long time and knows just how far to push without going too far, but the result is always the same. They slowly start to open themselves up to him as he starts to share about his life.

The life of Johnny Russell reads like the human version of "Old Yeller." He tells them that he has devoted his life to saving the unborn children in war-torn Afghanistan, even risking his life to do so. He paints himself as a selfless doctor-hero who is just looking for a girlfriend to love.

The women fall for it every time. I wouldn't mind so much, but I know how this tale ends.

The next morning, Cindy is in a great mood and looking forward to the day. She sings in the bathroom and her voice isn't half bad. I am happy she is happy, but my mood is tempered by the knowledge of what is to come.

We all want to believe that there is someone special out there for us.

I can tell Cindy is starting to believe that Johnny is the one: he's kind, well off and into her. Most prostitutes know better, but Johnny has a knack for finding the ones that are looking for a better life, looking for a way out. This is fresh in my mind when the phone rings and Cindy snatches it out of its cradle.

"Your brother wants me to come to his room for a second," she says with a wide smile that just adds to my guilty conscious. "I will be right back!"

I watch her as she does a quick makeup check and then happily skips out the room. I immediately turn on the TV and find a pay per view movie; I know this is going to take a while. Three hours later, Cindy is back with the glow of someone who is falling in love.

"Can you give me the bathroom for a minute?" Cindy asks me, as we get ready in the bathroom for the pool, "I need to douche out my ass."

"Sure, no problem." I say trying to hide my shock and I walk out of the bathroom to head butt the wall in the other room.

Maybe if I hit my head hard enough, I can knock what I just heard out of it. I think to myself as I continue to head butt the wall and then hear a knock on the door.

It's Johnny grinning from ear to ear. He is the postcard picture of "nice" Johnny, charming, your best friend, and a lot of fun to be around. He insists we all wear sunscreen since "the sun is the enemy!"

How is someone so morally bent worried about skin cancer? I wonder as I put sunscreen on my face and then I remember. *Wait, we are still in the "honeymoon" phase of the experience.*

He is so good at the deception I still find myself buying it at times. I have to remind myself his care and concern is part of his act. He works hard to come across as the "nice" Johnny, the one that really cares, but has never found the right person to build a life with. By now, I have realized that I am part of the act to him, a prop if you will.

As we walk to the rooftop pool, I start counting down the hours until I am back on the plane to LA. I keep telling myself this will be over soon and I wonder if Cindy is thinking the same thing when I look over at her.

Nope. I think to myself. *She has definitely bought it, she really wants him to be the "one"...*

Obviously, no one has ever treated Cindy tenderly in her life. Recognizing that makes me incredibly sad and my guilt increases ten fold. No one has ever treated her with kindness, or expressing concern with the small things like insisting on sunscreen. Clearly, she has lived a hard life and is starving for emotional affection, which makes her catnip for Johnny.

I look over at Johnny and see his self-satisfied smile, it is clear he has noticed the change in Cindy as well. However, Johnny never leaves anything to chance when it comes to emotional manipulation. He goes into doctor mode to make sure she knows how much he cares for her.

"I know you're an adult, and it is really none of my business," Johnny says with paternal concern that makes me nauseous, "but the only person you are hurting is yourself by smoking. The long-term effects it will have on your lungs are irreversible, and it would be a shame to see you get your life together, only to have cancer then."

"I know," Cindy says, and I can tell she is touched by his concern. "I have been planning on quitting for a while now. It is just a hard habit to break."

"With everything you have told me about your life, I know you are strong enough to do it," he says encouragingly, "you just have to take that first step and stop."

Cindy looks at him for a moment and smiles.

"Your right Johnny, I am going to stop smoking right now." She says with confidence he has clearly inspired. "Thanks for caring enough to say something to me."

"Good for you!" Johnny says as he smiles broadly, "I am proud of you for having the courage to better yourself."

Her smile lights up the whole room with that comment and I can barely contain my self-loathing. Now you may be thinking that this doesn't seem so bad. Everyone (but me) is having a good time, right? But the honeymoon is about to be over and now we are getting to the marriage part of the trip.

And I get no thrill watching decent people suffer.

What I call the “marriage” part of the experience is just what it sounds like, at least marriage to Johnny. The fun is over, the scales fall away and the mind games start. Once Johnny senses that he has the girl – the moment she really gives herself to him – he gets bored and starts to reject her. He is no longer as attentive, demonstrative, and complimentary. He pretends to be bored and acts as if she has done something wrong.

He makes sure she feels like it’s *her* fault that he is no longer interested.

The poor girl’s reaction is always the same. She can’t see the game, thanks to years of pain and abuse, all feeding her own insecurity. Desperate to win him back, she redoubles her efforts. Each girl has a slightly different way of doing this, but the intention is always the same. She’ll do whatever he wants to make him “happy” again, to make him “love” her again.

That night, after a couple of hours with Johnny, Cindy doesn’t talk much. She looks totally defeated as she enters my room. I feel guilty because all I am thinking is, *please don’t share, please don’t share, OH PLEASE DON’T SHARE!*

To my relief, she asks to go to bed early, and I feel a little ashamed of myself for being so self-centered, as I turn out the light.

A short while later, my relief and guilt turn to horror as Cindy experiences an epic nightmare that wakes me up instantly. I can only assume it was caused by whatever happened in Johnny’s room. She keeps saying, “No!” and “Stop!” over and over in her sleep. She kicks and punches in her sleep. I turn on the light. She calms down but doesn’t wake up.

Who the hell does this guy think he is? I ask myself furiously as I watch a single tear roll down her cheek.

My anger starts to boil over and I am afraid I am going to break something. I walk quickly to the bathroom to get control of my emotions. I try not to look in the mirror but this bathroom is covered with them. As I stare at my reflection, I think of the people in my life that I love and try to calm myself down.

You are doing what you have to do to protect them. I repeat to myself silently for the 100th time this trip. *Think about what finding out would do to them!*

While that's the truth, it's not the entire truth. What I am unwilling to see is that I too am being exploited and manipulated. It's not just my best intentions that are being used against me, but my need to be loved.

I had no idea back in Vegas.

Truth be told, I hadn't figured out most Johnny's game out until I really thought about it years later. At the time, when you are caught up in something like this and your still struggling to be a decent human being, your goal is to survive it – and then try and forget about it. You avoid thinking critically about anything because the more you do, the more you hate yourself for being a part of it.

After another day trying to make Johnny happy, Cindy starts to look tired, frustrated and depressed. I know she is beating herself up for failing to please him. We are coming to the end of the marriage. I think of it as the last Christmas dinner we will spend together before the divorce.

Everyone is desperately hoping it will somehow work itself out, even as the parents are planning to call their lawyers after dinner.

That afternoon things go from bad to worse when we bump into a friend of my sister in the hotel gift shop!

How do we explain this? Quickly runs through my mind as Johnny takes off in one direction and Cindy knows enough to keep her distance. I tell my sister's friend I am in Vegas visiting a client by myself and she seems to buy it. After a couple of minute of small talk with the girl, I head back up to my hotel room. In the elevator, I even congratulate myself for helping Johnny dodge a bullet.

My momentary happiness doesn't last long. Johnny storms into my room before I can even close the door.

"Who was that girl?" Johnny yells in a manic tone that makes me realize he is on something, "did she see us?"

"She is just one of my sisters friends from LA," I say quickly trying to calm him down. "I already texted Veronica to let her know I bumped into her"

"Are you trying to set me up?" Johnny explodes. "Did I make a mistake in trusting you?"

After Cindy's heartbreaking nightmares, his irrational mood swings and finding out more about his sexual habits than I want to know, I snap.

“Are you kidding me?” I yell. “I have never, ever played you! And considering the amount of shit I have had to endure to protect your ass, you are lucky I don’t throw you through that plate glass window!”

My outburst has the desired effect on him. Johnny backs down and tries another approach; he plays the “poor me” card, the very same one that sucked me into this mess in the beginning.

It’s the same old song, and I buy it every time.

The “poor me” routine goes like this. He can’t trust anyone. No one loves or understands him. He even exploits my protective impulses, reminding me what would happen to my grandmother and sisters if his secret ever got out. By helping him keep this secret, I am actually protecting the ones I love.

I should also remember how much he trusts me by sharing this secret with me.

The sad fact is, even though I know better, I desperately want to believe him. I want to be worthy of his trust and I don’t want to be the person being used. After a brief pep talk from Johnny, we resume our schedule of expensive meals, shows and prepare to wrap up the trip.

After three nights of not sleeping, thanks to Cindy’s nightmares and my increasingly guilty conscience, I am counting the hours until this one is over. I am actually whistling while I pack in the morning and fantasizing about the triple Bloody Mary I am going to have on the plane.

Life is good; I think as I finish the last of my packing. I made it out of another trip unscathed with no major incidents.

That's when Cindy storms into the room in a rage. And I mean pissed!

"Johnny isn't going to pay me!" she screams.

All the oxygen in the room is sucked out in an instant. Whatever happiness I felt instantly evaporates.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!"

"No," Cindy says tearfully. "He keeps saying over and over again, 'I just wanted a 'girlfriend.'"

Johnny knocks on my door and asks if he can speak with me for a moment. I ask Cindy to give us a minute.

She sees that I am trying to fix this and may be even more upset than she is, so she waits in the bathroom.

"Are you out of your mind?" I ask Johnny in a whisper so Cindy won't hear us. "I told you I didn't want to be involved with this! What are you doing?"

"She wants a thousand dollars a day and there is no way she is worth that," Johnny says indignantly, as if I should know better. "I told her she wasn't getting anything from me."

There are times in life you just want to hit someone and not stop. Luckily my lifetimes worth of experience in dealing with difficult situations starts to kick in, and I go into negotiation mode.

“Look, I told you I didn’t want to be involved with this.” I say patiently trying to remind him of our agreement. “It isn’t fair for you to suck me into it. Just live up to whatever arrangement you made with her!”

“We never discussed money!” Johnny says righteously, but I can tell he is lying. “And besides, once a woman crosses state lines, paying a certain amount violates something called The Mann Act. That’s a federal crime! I can’t pay her.”

“Why the hell would you ask someone to fly from Montreal to VEGAS if you didn’t take care of it ahead of time?” I ask my voice rising, as I realize this has been his plan all along.

“I just wanted a girlfriend,” He says with a smile and then raises his voice so Cindy can hear in the bathroom, “Besides, Soon should have known better than to send me a smoker.”

I can hear things starting to break in the bathroom. It is a clear response to what Johnny just said, and my blood pressure is going from bad to worse.

First, he tortures her emotionally and now this? I think to myself. How am I going to fix this?

“Listen, just give me the money and I will lend it to her.” I say in a last ditch effort to get Cindy paid. “I will get her to sign an agreement stating it’s a loan with interest and tell her not to worry about paying it back! I can sell that.”

“No,” Johnny says, his anger rising. “She gets nothing. That will teach Soon a lesson for sending me a smoker.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I explode. “She told me her rent is due the end of this month! This is the money she needs to pay it!”

I can tell from Johnny’s expression he is enjoying the fact she is miserable, hurt and angry. He’s getting off on her suffering. I have never wanted to hit someone so badly in my life. I hear something else shatter in the bathroom. I quickly change tactics, as I know remorse and pity are not in his emotional vocabulary.

“Are you trying to screw me over?” I ask. “The room is in my name!”

“I guess you shouldn’t have trusted me.” He says as he starts to leave the room but turns back to me when he reaches the door. "Do whatever you want but she better not bother me again. I am going to my room, and I want to be left alone."

He slams the door shut and leaves me standing in the middle of the room completely speechless. Cindy emerges from the bathroom. Before I can start my apology, she says she heard the whole thing. I can tell she sees how helpless I feel and she tries to comfort me. Right now this poor woman, who now can’t afford to pay her rent, has more pity for me than herself.

“Thanks for trying.” She says sadly as she continues to try and calm me down, “I know this isn’t your fault. Hell, if I just wanted to sleep with some guy for free, I would have chosen you over some old man.”

“Thank you.” I mumble in a feeble attempt to acknowledge her compliment, and then I confess that I don’t know what else to do. I ask her if she wants to take the cab with me to the airport.

She accepts.

When we get into the cab, I keep repeating how sorry I am that this happened, how embarrassed that I even know Johnny, as his actions are despicable. As we talk, I get the feeling she knows a lot more about my relationship with him than I thought. She tries to make me feel better and tells me confidentially that the Soon will make it right when she gets back to Montreal.

As we wait in the airport security line, she even refuses my offer to give her what I have in my wallet.

From the start, I knew Cindy was a good human being trying to make the best out of a bad situation...just as I was. This last gesture shines a light on who she really is, which puts an even greater spotlight on Johnny's character. We part after we get through security, and I can't get to the airport bar fast enough.

I have ten minutes before my plane takes off, but I order a triple shot, Bloody Mary. The bartender doesn't even raise an eyebrow as I down half the drink as soon as I get it. I tell him to make me another one, as my flight takes off in five minutes and he goes to work.

My burner phone rings and I know who it is before I answer. Johnny. I give him a quick rundown of what happened and hang up. Once again, I have cleaned up Johnny's mess and he has gotten exactly what he wanted with no cost or consequence to himself.

As the second Bloody Mary hits my lips, I think about what my grandmother and sisters would think of Johnny if they knew the truth. It was the main reasons I put myself through the "Johnny Russell Experience" each time, to make sure they never found out.

Still this latest fiasco was a new low, even for Johnny and I start worrying about what might happen on the next trip. As I walk down the jet way I start to question how much more of this I can take. Of course, anyone reading this might think I should cut Johnny loose, that he is a sociopath, a sleazebag, or human cancer.

But I can't...

At least not at that moment, because he is my father and I want to protect my family from the truth.