

Heart of Dixie

(Wiseguy crossover)

by L. C Wells

Summary:

Elliot Burch survived the attempted assassination, and after clearing his name -- and becoming bankrupt, headed south to start again. He ran across someone going to New Orleans - Roger Lococco, a former CIA operative and assassin. What he didn't know was that their paths were going to cross again at the Heart of Dixie, whose proprietor was someone that Burch used to know.

Chapter 1

The man who entered the diner was in his mid-thirties and bearded. Sun-streaked auburn hair, caught in a pony-tail, hung well below his collar and was held off his forehead with a sodden sweatband. His white sleeves were rolled up, showing muscular arms burned to a deep brown from the sun, with a lighter streak around his watch band. His jeans were frayed at spots. An acute eye would have noticed his watch was an expensive, if heavily-battered, Rolex, and that the pants had been designer in a previous life. His small truck in the lot outside, was covered with dust and sported an "I love NY" bumper sticker. He asked for a glass of water and a slice of the strawberry pie and sat down at the long, stained, Formica counter.

Three men seated further down the counter glanced at him and one man, a stocky man with a flushed face and clothing that said 'redneck', sneered. He took another sip of the beer in front of him, then turned to the others.

"Look'ee here, Charley. One of them Yankees down here workin'."

The man glanced their way, then turned back to the waitress who was putting down his food. She rolled her eyes and smiled.

"\$5.50."

He smiled as he handed her the money. "Thank you."

The flushed-faced man burped. "And isn't he polite too? Who do you think you are, mister?"

"Leave him alone, Harry!" one of the men beside him said. "Have another beer."

The man chewed and swallowed some of the pie before smiling at the girl again. "This is very good."

Harry slid off his stool, holding himself upright with exaggerated caution. "I asked you who you are, mister!"

A stocky, curly-haired blond man stepped from the men's rest room. He surveyed the situation, then stepped forward, putting a calloused hand on Harry's flannel shirt. "Leave him alone, Harry. You've had too much."

The drunk turned his head, saw the man and glared belligerently. "Whaddya want - oh. You." Harry

wiped the back of his mouth with his hand. "Thought you were leaving town, Roger. Thought Sheriff Brown told you to move on."

The man's eyes narrowed ominously. "He didn't put a time limit on it," he said softly with a slight Southern accent burring the words. "Now sit down and let me get you a —"

Harry swung at Roger, who ducked easily. He grabbed the drunk and slammed him chest-down on the counter, unfortunately landing in the remains of the stranger's strawberry pie.

One of Harry's companions aimed a brawny fist at Roger, who ducked and swerved, dragging Harry with him. The crockery on the Formica counter shattered on the linoleum.

The object of all this trouble picked up his glass of water and threw it in the face of the second man who stumbled back, hands on his face.

Roger gave Harry a shove that tumbled him into the other man, sending them both to the floor. "Time to take off. You gents have a good evening and give my best to Sheriff Brown."

He was out the door before Harry and his friend detangled himself.

A fraction of second later the auburn-haired man exited, his keys in hand.

"Where you going?" he called, heading for his truck. The blond hefted an old army kit bag that had been left on the porch. "Anywhere. Away from here."

"I'm headed for New Orleans. Want a ride?"

The diner door opened and Harry and companions boiled out, followed by the waitress who caught Harry's arm and held the drunk back.

Roger tossed the kit bag in the back of the truck and opened the door on the passenger's side. "Don't mind if I do. My name's Roger Lococco."

"My name's Elliot Burch. Let's get the hell out of here."

They had traveled several miles before Burch was certain that they weren't being followed. He shot a quick glance at the man, assessing him.

"Thanks for trying to stop that fight."

Lococco's tightly-curved blond hair touched the worn leather jacket, with a patch that said "13" on the upper breast. Underneath, he wore a grubby tee shirt with an alligator decal on it, and blue jeans worn and well-patched at the seat and knees. The boots had seen a decade or two of wear.

"Couldn't let you beat on Harry," Lococco answered. "He's got a new baby, third kid, and a glass jaw to boot."

"You knew them?"

"I've been around here for a couple of weeks," the other man commented. "Taking the slow road down from Vicksburg."

"Why'd they ask you to leave?"

"Brown's kid got 'napped and I found her and brought her back. The sheriff didn't like my methods. You're not from around here, are you?"

"What tipped you off? My accent?"

"Your bumper sticker."

Burch grinned, showing white teeth against the bronze of his skin. "A remnant of the past. It has started some interesting 'discussions', I admit."

"What do you do?" Lococco looked at the darkening countryside. The highway ran straight down along the river to where New Orleans sat. In the heat of late summer, the ground was parched and the grasses long and tall, waving in the slight breeze. Occasionally, a cypress tree waved long tails of Spanish moss at them and a wild turkey darted across the broad highway.

The New Yorker wryly chuckled. "Depends who you ask. Professionally I'm an architect."

"Thought so. If I remember correctly there're a couple of buildings in New York with the name Burch attached," Lococco observed.

Burch grimaced. "There were. I hear they've been renamed."

"What happened?"

The man flicked him a glance. "Bad business decisions mostly. You've been to New York?"

Lococco smiled, a knife-thin smile that didn't part his lips and was gone almost before it was there. "I been around the world, Buckwheat."

"The war?"

The blond man stretched out his legs. "Vietnam and other dirty little wars. Long time ago."

"Ever been to Paris?"

Lococco nodded.

"Rome?"

"Yup. Mostly Southeast Asia and the Caribbean. A few trips to Europe. So why are you headed down south, Burch?"

Burch accepted the other man's reticence. "I was asked to do some work in Memphis, but it fizzled out. A friend asked me to meet him in New Orleans, so I thought I'd take the scenic route. Spent a couple of days at the battlefields, then followed the river." Burch shrugged. "How about you?"

Lococco stared out the window. "I'm a wanderer."

"Got somewhere to stay in New Orleans?"

"I know a woman."

Burch nodded. "Where do you want to be dropped?"

They broke the trip in Natchez, splitting the cost of a motel with two double beds and a six-pack of beer. Burch had found out little to nothing about Lococco, except a travelogue of exotic cities he seemed to know intimately, but felt as if he had told the other man far too much. Then again there wasn't much that wasn't in the public domain. His problems in New York, the murder charge which had been dropped, his disappearance and subsequent reappearance, and the Grand Jury testimony, had been a boon to the tabloid press. Burch hadn't disguised himself when he came South, but found that used clothing and a tan worked wonders. And not everyone read the National Enquirer.

It was mid-afternoon before they reached New Orleans. Burch dropped Lococco off at the start of the French Quarter and drove a couple streets further in, reaching the hotel where he had made a reservation. The St. Francis was a small elegant hotel and the man felt slightly out of place in his dusty jeans and flannel shirt. Still, he parked the truck and went inside, the uniformed bellman holding

the door open as grandly as if he was wearing white tie and tails.

Walking up to the front desk, Elliot reveled in the air-conditioning. It was like an ice-bath after the humidity outside. The temperature had soared as they drove south, the air becoming tropical.

The clerk's smile was a little faded as she took in the casual clothes, but when he held out his driver's license and she saw a gold credit card on the other side, it brightened. He smiled inwardly. Better than the motel which had, it turned out, only taken cash, which Elliot didn't carry. Lococco had paid for the night, and Elliot had promised to repay him with the best dinner in the French Quarter, once he cashed some of the traveller's checks. They were going to meet tomorrow night.

"Room 342, Mr. Burch," she said briskly, handing him a key, and signaling a bellman. Burch waved him away, lifting his one suitcase and slinging his knapsack over his shoulder.

"Do I have any messages?" he asked.

She checked and pulled out a sealed envelope. She saw his hands were full, and tucked it, with a blush, into his shirt pocket.

He grinned. "See you."

The room was small and narrow, the only window looking over roof tops, with a fire escape right outside.

Not the palatial suite that Burch had been used to, in past years when he was a multimillionaire developer in New York, who could have bought and sold the hotel he was in now for petty cash. Still, it was clean and neat, and the cable offerings were comparable with big Eastern cities and besides, he thought amusedly, it suited the man who was Elliot Burch - from the son of a sanitation worker, to a rich architect in the skyscrapers of New York, to a restorer of historical mansions and builder of small vacation homes in the Southern US. Who said someone couldn't reinvent themselves every five years?

After a long, cold shower, he sat down on the bed, slid on a clean flannel shirt and opened the note.

*Elliot -- glad you made it, buddy boy. I've got a dinner set up at the Starling's Roost if you can make it. If you don't show, I'll drop by the St. Francis around 9. Come have some authentic Cajun food!
Galvin.*

Burch smiled grimly as he refolded the note. "Johnny Galvin, I wouldn't break bread with you if you were the last man in N'Awlins!" he muttered. He pulled on underwear and pants and put a jacket over the shirt.

Brushing back his hair, he saw streaks of grey in the beard and around his temples. He was starting to show the strains of the year.

Thinking back, he was amazed that he had survived. In January, he'd been nearly murdered by a bullet on the orders of a megalomaniac named Julian Gabriel. Several months later, after an eventful recovery, he gotten in touch with Joe Maxwell, the District Attorney for Manhattan, and gone in front of a Grand Jury in New York, explaining to them about Gabriel, the man who had basically ruined him, his business, and his life. He had also murdered the woman who Elliot loved deeply - Catherine Chandler. After a month of testimony, Burch had been released to continue his life, scanty though it was, since Burch Industries was in bankruptcy, and had headed South, taking what little was left of his personal fortune, his talent for architecture and a determination that he was going to enjoy life a lot more than he had before. The bullet had made life seem much more desirable. He found the Southern rhythms very different from the hectic Northeast, and many of the people here had no idea of what happened in the Big Apple. Elliot was enjoying his rebirth.

His long forefinger tapped the note, then he put it into his jacket pocket. "Maybe I'll just walk around the Quarter and take in the sights."

Roger Lococco hadn't been in New Orleans for several years. The last time, he had been part of the Mel and Susan Profitt organization, a corporation devoted to international contraband - arms smuggling and drug running. Roger had been Mel Profitt's 'head of security' and unofficial enforcer, the man who cleared out rocks in the path of making another million for Mel, and he had stayed at the richest hotel in New Orleans in the penthouse.

Now he was a drifter. Life took strange twists. He walked up the path to a southern mansion; through a iron lacework gate, past a flowing fountain and lush gardens full of magnolia trees and flowering hydrangeas, up to the dark-stained wooden porch and the polished door. The shutters were oyster white, while the windows glistened, showing no signs of dirt or dust. Knocking, he heard the sound reverberate through the building.

A dark-haired teenage girl opened it a crack. "We're not open, sir."

Roger frowned. "I'm looking for Lavinia Comeaux. Isn't this her house?"

"Lavinia? Oh, Lavvy... I'm sorry, sir, she's —"

"Hold on there!" a contralto voice said behind her, then the teenager stepped aside, and another woman took her place. "Who are you and why are you looking for Lavinia?"

Lococco stared at the statuesque blond. She came up to about his shoulder, and was built like the Statue of Liberty. Her clothing, a white cotton blouse tucked into a free-swinging patterned skirt and leather boots, showed off her figure. He thought she had to be around thirty-five. Her face was marred only by a slight frown line between plucked brows, but her makeup was almost flawless, a marvel in the humid weather.

She smiled lazily, recognizing his silence for admiration not rudeness. She had assessed him as well, he realized, as she stepped out, letting the door mostly close.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her accent Southern soft.

His trained ear caught almost eradicated accents in the voice. He shook himself slightly, and smiled back, as smooth and charming as her own.

"I'm lookin' for Lavinia Comeaux. She's a friend of mine."

Her smile faded a little bit. "And when was she a friend of yours, sir?"

Roger cocked his head. "Has somethin' happened to Lavinia?"

The woman spread her hands. "I'm afraid Lavinia's not... here. She's been gone for about six months now."

His eyes narrowed. "Gone?"

"AIDS."

The word rocked him. Roger felt a frisson of fear, then common sense asserted itself. "I haven't seen Lavinia in. ..."

"She traced it back to a man she'd been with a couple of years ago," the blond said with an amused smile.

Roger sighed relieved. He had visited Lavinia a year or two, ago but not slept with her. "It's a pity, Ms..."

"Miller."

"Ms. Miller. Lavinia was a beautiful and warm-hearted woman. In fact I was hoping to stay with her for a couple of days... in return for doing something for her, of course." He shifted the kit bag on his shoulder.

"Well, if you feel that way, and would do some chores for me," she eyed him boldly, "you can stay a while. I sometimes need a... man around the place."

His gaze met hers. "And what kind of a place would this be?"

"It's my place." She waved to a small discreet brass plate set next to the door knob. The writing said, "Heart of Dixie School for Young Ladies."

"Dixie?"

"My name. Dixie Miller. But you can call me, Dixie. What's your name?"

He smiled widely. "My name's Roger."

"Well, Roger. Come on in and meet the rest of the girls."

As darkness fell on the French Quarter, Burch found his path leading to the *Starling's Roost*. He hadn't planned on meeting Johnny Galvin - a little of the man went a long way. But after wandering for several hours, he found that the city wasn't much fun alone. The details of the architecture were lost in the darkness, the streets crowded with tourists, the bars smoky and loud, and the offers he received not to his liking. He almost wished that he made the dinner appointment with Lococco for this evening.

Climbing to the quieter second level of the *Roost*, he spotted Galvin at a table at the far end of the room.

John Galvin was a big-boned man, running to fat around the waist finally, after years of abusing his body. He had a few strands of black and grey hair carefully arranged across a bald egg of a head, and an open, faded pink sport shirt. His lightweight jacket was white, as were his pants, where they weren't covered by the restaurant napkin. The black eyes that watched Burch as the young man sat down were almost embedded in the slacking flesh. He smelled of cologne and the raw oysters that he was slurping down. A plate of crawfish and Cajun rice sat to one side waiting for his attention.

The waitress handed him a menu which Burch instantly returned. "I want the Cajun chicken and black-eyed peas, please. And a large glass of water."

"Still off booze, Burch?" Galvin said in his grating bass. Even the Southern accent, more pronounced than Burch remembered, didn't keep it from harshness.

"Never off the wagon, Galvin. I like keeping a clear head and the night's young."

The big man's lips curled in a smile. "That's what I like about you. Always lookin' ahead. You should try the crawfish, the wild ones are in season now. How long it's been, buddy-boy?"

" 'Bout three or four years. You left New York rather abruptly," Burch said in a polite, if challenging, way.

Galvin burped, then patted his lips with his napkins. "Ran into Avery on one of his rampages. Glad you got him, Burch."

"Me too. What's up, Johnny?"

"Got a job for you."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

The man reached down and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "Look at that."

Burch flipped back the top sheets, and studied the drawing underneath. "Greek Revival... What is it?"

"Place out at the edge of the Quarter. Belonged to a woman I knew, who died a couple of months ago. It's one of these historical places."

"So what do you want from me?"

The New Orleaner studied him for a second, then reached across and flipped the main sheets back. "I need someone to look over the spot, make suggestions on what I can do to make it a better spot. Plan to use it out as a bed and breakfast in time for next Mardi Gras."

"Is there anyone in there now?" Burch put the papers aside and made room for the waitress to put down the chicken.

Galvin made a rude sound as the waitress took the remains of the oysters. He waited till she was out of earshot, and then spoke in a low voice.

"There's someone there who you gotta meet, Burch. She's one of the most stunning women in town. The broad's running' it as a 'finishing school'."

"A what?"

"A 'finishing school'. Teaches a lot there that you don't find in the Preppy Handbook though. It's an old-style New Orleans bordello."

Chapter 2

Roger Lococco had seen plenty of beautiful women. His time with Profitt had been filled with beauties who would give anything to get close to Mel - even by getting close to his chief enforcer. He had to admit that Dixie Miller had filled the house with beautiful women of every color and shape - black, white, Asian, brunette, blond and redhead. The girls were as fine a stable as a madam could want. If it wasn't clear that this was a whorehouse, he could have sworn he was in a French finishing school. And despite their beauty, none of them came close to the most beautiful woman he had ever met; Susan Profitt, Mel's incestuous sister. The tall willowy brunette had never shown any sexual interest in him, for which he was thankful. Susan had been as touchy as nuclear detonator and as deadly beautiful as a coral snake. She and her brother had been a matching set of genius insanity.

Lococco knew most men would feel like they had fallen into heaven. He felt more like he had fallen into a chocolate box - smothering and overwhelming. The girls had checked him out as he eyed them, and apparently approved, from the number of young ladies that offered to show him his room. He let the teenage brunette who answered the door lead him into the back of the house.

It was a small room with a thin single bed and painted walls. To one side was a dresser, a mirror with a pitcher and basin, and a small runner that hung down both sides. The bed had two folded sheets and thin comforter.

He smiled at the girl as he dropped the kit bag. "Who're you, honey?"

"I'm Anise," she said. "Dixie's assistant. Do you think you need anything more?"

"How long have you been here, Anise?"

"A while.. almost a year. Dixie is training me."

"Training you?" Roger's curiosity was sparked. "As she was trained?"

"She's from Paris!" Anise said proudly. "Trained by an agency there and brought back here by a

millionaire!"

"And now she's running a brothel in the French Quarter," Roger mused. "And how does she get her clients, Anise?"

"By referrals. You gotta know someon' to get in here, Mr. Lacco—Laccoc—"

"Lococco. Call me Roger." And what does she want with me? "Anise, where's Ms. Miller now?"

"She's setting up for tonight's customers. Then she'll go upstairs to check if everything's okay." Anise hesitated, foot raised on the threshold. "Ms. Dixie's much nicer than anyone else. It's so much better than the street!" She took off before he could think of an answer.

Roger realized with a pang that Anise could have been his daughter, age-wise. She had to be in her mid-teens and had a spooky resemblance to someone... Lavvy? No, Lavvy was a smoky-haired blond, whose curves had even shown through the military nursing uniforms they'd had in Vietnam. He flipped mentally through his file of women. It would come to him.

After unpacking he went in search of Dixie. Anise was arranging flowers with the help of a black woman, whose gaze stripped him as he walked into the main hallway. This was a *Gone With The Wind* house, he mused, eyeing the winding staircase that led up to the second level. He could almost see Scarlett O'Hara coming down.

His gaze met the woman who stepped out of a room upstairs. Dixie was a perfect complement to the building. She paused at the top for a second, making a perfect picture of a Southern Belle, then descended gracefully down the staircase.

All she needs is an armful of magnolia blossoms, Roger thought, and wearing only a corset...

"Roger. Please come with me."

Dixie led him to her office in the rear of the house. Roger remembered it as one of the small dusty parlors that Lavvy had shown him one time. Supposedly, the furniture hadn't been moved since they put the gas light in. It had been modernized and a light bulb flickered in the old gas lamp high on the wall. The outer wall had three, tall floor-to-ceiling windows, which opened onto the veranda. Each window was covered with tall shutters except one, which stood ajar. Through it orange light flowed into the room, the dying embers of the afternoon sun, and the hot humid air of New Orleans. Along the opposite wall were file cabinets. An antique wooden desk with a leather chair sat facing the door. In front was an old-fashioned wooden swing-chair on rollers. A porcelain mask hung on the wall behind, with a water bug crawling out beside it. Below was a bookcase filled with legal and medical books, with a tall vase holding red roses and leafy ferns sitting on top. The air smelled sweetly of their scent.

Roger relaxed in the swinging chair. "What can I do for you, Ms. Dixie?"

She smiled, "That's what Anise calls me. Sounds better from you, Roger."

"How can I help you?"

"I am sending a couple of girls out to meet with a client. I'd like to make sure that they meet up with the man they're supposed to."

"Am I supposed to bring them home, too?" He couldn't help the edge of sarcasm.

She frowned. "You don't need to approve, just do it or leave." After a second of silence, she went on. "They can get back on their own tomorrow, but be around here in case they call me for help."

Roger shrugged. "Seems pretty simple considering what I get for it."

"You don't sample the merchandise!" she said sharply.

"I meant the food," he said angelically. "When do I go out?"

"Right now."

Galvin had gone from the crawfish to a giant slab of Key Lime pie. No wonder the man had put on weight. He was a candidate for heart failure, thought Burch.

He found irritating that the man's gaze continually went to the staircase as if he was waiting for someone. Elliot found himself going over the plans, to avoid looking at him.

It was an intriguing building that Galvin was interested in. Built before the Civil War, it had survived the occupation of New Orleans, had been rebuilt in the 1880's and had been family-owned until this Miller woman took over. He'd have to research the building through the historical societies, before he could really give Galvin an idea of what could be done. He had a problem believing the man's pious announcement that he was going to turn it into a bed and breakfast. Galvin had operated on the thin edge of legality in New York. Burch had a suspicion that Galvin was simply after making the brothel run with 'new management'.

He admitted he was curious about the woman as well. Galvin's description was a description of total infatuation, and the hunger of a man who wants a woman badly. She sounded like she had all the attributes of Aphrodite, with the physical qualities of a Gay Nineties beauty.

"Ah!" Galvin boomed. "Here they are!" He pushed back his chair and stood, holding out a hand the size of a brick.

Burch turned. Two young women were climbing the stairs. One was dark-haired with features from Playboy and the bust to match. The other was honey-blond and modernly thin. For a second he thought of Catherine Chandler. Then he saw the woman was considerably taller and the hair was a well-done blond hair job.

Galvin leered at them. "I invited these young women, but they're a little late."

"Um, I don't think so, Johnny," Burch started to push his chair out.

The blond pouted. She stood as high as him and Burch found himself looking at a pair of smoky green eyes with long lashes.

"Won't you stay with us?"

He swallowed and mentally cursed the big man across the table. Dang, it had been a long time too!

"Well, maybe for a drink."

Galvin grinned evilly. "It's on my tab."

Lococco stretched, his arms touching the head of the bed, his toes dangling over. Outside, the crisp morning air smelled of the river, and he could hear birds twittering in the garden outside his room. The two women he had escorted to the restaurant had returned just before he turned in at three A.M., giggling and whispering to each other. He wondered how they'd fared with their 'dates'. He had been ordered by the blond to leave as soon as they reached the restaurant. He spent an hour whiling his way through the lively French Quarter, reacquainting himself with its multiple pleasures, and then spent most of the night watching Dixie and the 'girls'. He'd finally gone to bed, alone, when it was clear that they were taking no more customers.

Now he took out three small metal balls from his kit bag and began rolling them between his palms. He used the ball bearings as a meditation device, a modern equivalent of Chinese worry beads. He

thought about the situation. Working in a high-class whorehouse was still working in an illegal and morally-degrading profession, even though he didn't have to 'perform'. It was clear that most of the women felt that this was luxury beyond their dreams and not degrading. From his years with Profitt, he knew that many women would sell themselves for many things - only in this case it was cash or a donation to the Heart of Dixie School. He decided to put his moral qualms on hold - they ill-became a man who had been an assassin. It was small comfort that prostitution didn't kill the people involved, unless the sex was careless. Dixie had made very clear that if it did, the woman was on the street and the other partner uninvited to visit again.

The house... He remembered the last time he'd seen Lavvy. The house hadn't been so rich then. The gutters had been sagging and ivy, now eradicated, had covered most of the windows. Inside, the wood floors had been worn and the shutters had peeling paint. Lavvy's warm personality, though, had made up for any deficiencies. He'd know her in Vietnam when she was a nurse, when he was part of the C.I.A. shadow forces.

Later, he'd dropped by every time he was in Orleans, to talk and spent the night.

She had never asked for anything from Roger, one of the very, very few who didn't. He had 'loved' her as much as his paranoid, repressed nature could at the time. Susan Profitt only teased him about it once - his reaction had made her afraid to bring it up again. If he had known Lavvy was dying, he would have sent money. He would have done what he could for her!

He threw one of the ball bearings viciously and it went through the cheap wood of the door like a bullet.

He heard someone gasp, and rolled like a panther to his feet. Despite being dressed only in shorts, he was ready for an attack.

The door opened without knocking and Dixie walked in, dressed in a blue teal dressing gown tied loosely at the waist. Underneath it, her lacy floor-length nightgown billowed around her magnificent body.

Roger eyed her for a second then deliberately reached out and picked up his pants. "Can I do somethin' for you?"

Dixie eyed him up and down, then smiled. "I have a job for you."

He zipped his pants. "Sorry, I don't whore for a bed."

"That wasn't what I had in mind. Have a good night, Roger?"

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "The mattress' a tad thin, but the girls are prime."

She smiled icily. "Quite a complement from the man who used to be with Mel Profitt."

Roger froze for a second then looked up gutlessly. "Mel Profitt?"

"Mel Profitt. The arms dealer who you were spying on for the CIA," she said urbanely. "You see, I recognized you from your Congressional testimony, Roger Lococco."

He eyed her suspiciously. "I don't know what you mean."

She pulled out photocopies of a newspaper articles. Roger's face was on the front page. "I wasn't... working at the time, and I watched C-Span a lot. I sent Anise out yesterday and found this."

Roger took the articles and glanced at it for a second, cursing the newspapers. They covered his background as a war hero, Congressional Medal of Honor winner, and his later connection with Mel Profitt which actually been an assignment from the C.I.A.

Herb Ketcher had planned to use Mel and Mel's millions to take over an island, Isle Pavot - an

Agency plan which turned out to be 'unauthorized'. Lococco had been his point man, the man who set Mel up. The plot had failed, Lococco was betrayed, and the blond man testified in front of a Congressional committee against his former master. Ketcher had committed suicide. Roger, realizing that too many people wanted him, faked his own death, and vanished. It was unfortunate that Dixie had recognized him. Others had thought he looked familiar, but no one had tracked it down.

"So?"

"So, I know about everything that happened. I think we can work together, Roger."

His face must have showed skepticism. "Or I could just call the F.B.I.—"

The F.B.I thought Roger Lococco was dead. He wanted to keep it that way. "Would you prefer to have a wringed neck?" He moved so fast she barely had time to shrink when he had her pinned to the wall, one hand around her throat.

She laid one long-fingered hand on his, and looked up, stretching her long neck, daring him

"I don't think you really want to do that."

He tightened his hand slightly. "Try me."

"Let go!"

He hesitated, then kissed her as softly as a butterfly alighting on a calla lily. He stepped back.

"Sure that's not what you really wanted?"

She massaged her neck and licked her lips. "Pricilla has fallen into bad habits." At his look of incomprehension, she started again. "The blond woman you escorted last night was Pricilla. She's good at what she does, but has a streak of klepto. I need you to take back a watch she stole."

"A watch?"

"A Rolex. Can't understand why she bothered this time. It's battered beyond belief." Dixie fished it out of the dressing gown's pocket and handed it to him.

She was right - the Rolex had been through the wars. It was scratched and worn-faced.

"She took it off a young man last night after she slipped him a sleeping pill. Anyway take it back to the St. Francis Hotel and give it to the bartender."

Roger flipped over the watch showing the back. The name was barely readable but he thought the watch looked familiar. He'd seen it worn on the tanned wrist of Elliot Burch for the entire trip south.

"I'll see it gets back to the owner." He slanted a glance at her. "Did she slip him the Mickey Finn before or after she went to bed with him?"

She glared at him arrogantly. "Just get it back, Roger. And come back when you're done. I may have something else for you."

Burch's room was on the second floor and Lococco reached it without meeting any of the hotel's patrons. His worn boots sank into the thick, plushy carpet leaving ruffle marks. He knocked on the wooden door. After 30 seconds of silence, he looked both ways, then took out a credit card. A couple of jimmies and the door came open.

Inside it was dark. The curtains were still drawn. He could hear the sound of heavy, drugged sleep and knew that the man had at least made it back to the room.

He padded to the dresser and flicked on the light.

They must have carried Burch back because he lay, face-down, on the double-bed, still fully dressed, including his dusty boots.

After studying him for a second, Roger walked over and grabbed his shoulder, shaking him. All he got was a grunt.

"Come on, Burch, wake up," the blond man muttered.

Nothing happened. Lococco went into the bathroom, soaked a towel in ice-water, and coming out, slapped it on the prone body.

That had an effect. Burch jerked convulsively, then hid his head for a second showing all the signs of a major class hangover meeting with the light of day.

"Get up," Roger said amused.

Elliot groaned and rolled over, then pulled himself slowly upright. His boots left dirty streaks on the bedspread.

"Got any aspirin'?" he muttered. "No, in my top drawer. Please..."

Roger plundered the drawer, found the drug and got him a glass of water without commenting. Then he leaned back on the dresser and studied the man.

Burch swallowed the pills, setting the glass on the beside table, then ran his hand through his disheveled hair, and blinked a couple of times. Finally he looked up.

"What are YOU doing here?"

Lococco grinned. "I was wondering when you'd get around to asking that."

"How did you find my room?" Elliot said bemused. "Why do I feel like hell?"

"I checked your wallet that night in the hotel and found the reservation," Roger confessed. Elliot looked up in disbelief. "Wanted to see what kind of man I was dealing with. Why you feel like hell is because of high livin' in old New Orleans. I thought you were here for the architecture, but it seems to be the ladies."

"Not me." Burch realized that sounded wrong. "Not that I don't mind the ladies, but... God, my head hurts. No, I was with Johnny Galvin who ordered up a couple of women and we had a drink or two and..."

"And then you came back here with a blond," Roger prompted.

"No, I passed out in the restaurant," the younger man admitted. "I can't believe I did that on one drink."

"You didn't do it on one drink," Roger commented. "She slipped you a sleeping pill."

Burch blinked at him. "A pill? How the hell would you know?"

Lococco smirked. "Because I was asked to return your watch by the madam who sent them. Apparently, it's bad for her business if the girls start stealing." He pulled the Rolex from his pocket and tossed it on the bed. A ball bearing fell on the bed unnoticed.

Elliot picked the watch up, and smiled wryly. "Another souvenir of a misspent life. She must've been desperate to pick this up. Do you know who she was?"

Roger explained where he was staying and why.

By the end, Burch was laughing as much as his pounding head would let him. "Many men would kill to be where you are, Lococco."

The blond man grinned. "It doesn't match up to the past. I'm curious to find out what the lady wants me for."

"Maybe your body," Elliot said stretching, cracking joints.

Roger shook his head. "No, though I did expect some company last night. There's something else. What do you have planned for today, Burch?"

"After I get rid of the hair of the dog, I'm gonna head out to this house that Galvin wants me to take a look at," Burch said with a yawn. "The plans should still be in my jacket."

"Then you slept on them," Lococco commented.

Burch fished around and found the papers which he tossed to Roger. "I guess I'm lucky someone brought me home."

"Still got your wallet?"

Elliot frantically went through his jacket, then pants, then spotted the billfold on the dresser. "Guess she doesn't want a credit card," he said opening it. "That's here."

"Probably only lifts platinum," Roger suggested. He flipped the sheets of paper, scanning Galvin's material.

"I should probably cancel it anyway," Elliot muttered. "Just to be safe."

Roger reached the drawing of the house and looked up at the man, then back down. He recognized the house. *The Heart of Dixie*, no less.

"What exactly does this Galvin fellow want with the house, Burch?" he said with an undercurrent of seriousness.

"He says he's going to turn it into a bed and breakfast. Knowing Johnny Galvin, that's unbelievably benign. He plays the margin."

"Got a clue what he has in mind?"

Burch shrugged. "Nope. He says the house is a historic mansion and he wants to buy it. He wants me to check it out for him."

Roger put down the sheaf. "Gotta go. We're still on for dinner?"

"At the *K-Paul* if you want."

"Sounds good." Lococco eyed the man. "Want me to hang the 'do not disturb' out, Buckwheat?"

Elliot glared at him. "Get out."

Chapter 3

By mid-morning, Burch felt half-way human. The bright sunshine still hurt, but he put on his battered sunglasses and donned the blue denim jacket that he had gotten from the car. The air was steamy after a mid-afternoon rain storm, and the pavements were slick. He took Galvin's papers, put them in one pocket, and walked through the Quarter on the way to the house.

New Orleans' French Quarter in daylight was an elegant dessert with hidden secrets. In the heat of late summer the air shimmered. The hanging plants draped extravagantly over their pots, long strands of flowering blossoms dangling from the balconies. He passed the pre-Civil War buildings with iron-scrrolled balconies, past the open bars and restaurants where jazz boomed into the street, passed the omnipresent gift stores on each block selling basically the same goods: porcelain masks, costumes, candy and tee shirts. Civil War memorabilia shops sold history - guns, ship models,

bullets, daguerreotypes and boots. He avoided crowds of tourists decked out in tight pink polyester or neon green outfits, noticed a trio of transvestites who walked past him on spike heels, and saw the police parked on nearly every corner. He contrasted it with the last time he was in New Orleans. He'd just made his second million and decided to go to Mardi Gras. Despite being hemmed in by his bodyguards, and being unable to roam freely through the crowds, he had had fun. But that was seven years ago in another lifetime...

Up towards the French Market, it was quieter and less crowded, the tight buildings giving way to residences set behind walled gardens, visible only through locked gates, and warehouses that probably reached back into the 18th century. The cobbled streets were uneven under his docksiders and he avoided a man retching in a gutter, probably from too much beer judging from the smell.

Galvin's house was just outside the French Quarter, set back from the street. He walked in past the open lacy iron gates, which had recently been painted, and paused when he saw the fountain. It was authentic 1880's construction, he decided, studying it. The water in the marble basin was clear and he saw the bottom showed signs of being recently caulked.

Looking around he saw signs that the Gothic Revival house had been being restored. The porch had five tall white pillars holding up a balcony. On both sides of the front door were tall windows, stretching up fifteen feet or more, curtained inside and flanked by shutters outside. The stairs leading to the veranda were painted white. The ceiling fan over the front door was motionless but would no doubt provide a welcome breeze to visitors. The only thing amiss to his architect's eyes, was that the front gutters hadn't been emptied and leaves had jammed into one end, causing water to cascade down the farthest corner of the building. It left a tannic stain mostly hidden by the massive magnolia tree in front of it.

He pursed his lips then let out a small sigh. It seemed unlikely that this was the house that Galvin wanted him to work on, but he might as well check.

He mounted the stairs and walked over to the heavy polished walnut door. Searching for the bell he found the small sign, freshly polished. *The Heart of Dixie*, eh? Johnny, what've you got me into this time?

Pressing the bell, he heard it ring twice then the sound of running steps. The door opened showing a flushed teenager dressed in jeans and an apron with a dust rag in one hand. "What - we're not open!" she stammered out.

"I'm here to see the owner," Burch replied confidently, though he didn't feel it. "I believe an appointment was made for me?"

The girl's jaw dropped for a second. "An appointment?"

"May I come in?"

She shifted then looked behind her, then stepped back. "Come in."

Out of the sun, it was instantly cooler and he gave a sigh of relief. "Stay here. I'll get Ms. Miller," the girl said retreating backward keeping an eye on him.

Elliot put his hands in his pockets and looked around. If Galvin wanted THIS house, he'd have to pay top dollar for it, he mused. The place looked like an interior decorator's showcase with authentic French antiques, including Napoleonic love seats and Empire-style chairs. The floors were buffed walnut and showed signs of being recently mopped. The walls were, he discovered running a hand over one, off-white flocked wallpaper and the rugs, Oriental. The staircase was classic antebellum, wide enough for several women in hoopskirts to stand beside each other. Rich brocade curtains, and abundance of flowers, made it look like it should be in Southern Living magazine. He walked over to

one of the spindly white-gold chairs and sat down, then winced. He stood and fished through the cushions. He came up with a small bamboo stick, and a condom wrapped in cellophane.

He stared at it for a second, then distastefully put both items on the table next to the chair. He wiped his hand on his handkerchief, glad that the condom was unused.

The unmistakable sound of high heels made him turn around.

"May I help you?" said a soft Southern voice. Elliot stared at her totally at loss.

"DIXIE?"

Dixie stared back at him equally horrified. "Elliot? Elliot Burch?"

After a couple of seconds the woman came back to life. "What are ... come back here with me." She stepped forward and took his arm in a firm grip. He let himself be led through the house, his training automatically noting building details, while the rest of his mind reeled. Dixie? What the hell was she doing here? He said it aloud.

She pushed him towards the wooden chair and slammed the door to the office. "What are YOU doing here, Burch?"

He shook his head in disbelief. "Last time I saw you, Dixie Miller, you were being arrested by the F.B.I., for assisting in the battery of a federal agent."

"That was the last time I saw YOU too, Burch," she spat. "You didn't lift a finger to help me, though you knew I was innocent."

"Un-nuh, Dixie. I saw what your friend did to McPike, and Serla admitted that you were the one who tipped them off."

"The Feds couldn't make it stick because it was obvious I didn't know the information was gonna be used to injure that man!" she slashed. "But I spent a couple of months in custody till they came to that conclusion and you just went off into the sunset."

"We weren't exactly close by that time," Burch observed, finally regaining his composure. "As I recall you were sleeping with someone new--"

"Because you were ignoring me!" she said hotly. "And you were after that other woman!"

He shrugged. "It's all a long time ago now, Dix. What are you doing in Orleans?"

She licked her lips. "I... run this place."

"Sounds like something you could do well," he mused. "You were trained at the finest escort service in Paris."

"And this'll be the top bordello in New Orleans by the time I'm finished," she said coldly. "What the hell are YOU doing here, Burch? Trying to find somewhere else to set up shop?"

He shook his head. "Dixie, I was asked to check out this house for a man who says he wants to buy it for a bed and breakfast."

She stared at him and gave a crack of laughter, like a pistol shot. "A bed and breakfast? Here?"

Burch spread his hands. "That's the story." "And who is this guy?"

"John Galvin."

She stood abruptly and walked around the desk, and adjusted the shutter. Her teeth worried her bottom lip in a way Elliot found very familiar - and not at all attractive at the moment.

"You're workin' for Johnny Galvin?"

"I told him I'd check the house."

Her eyes gleamed through her bleached lashes as she stared at him "A mighty come-down for the great Elliot Burch."

He shrugged. "I've had some setbacks."

"I know. I've kept track of them, every last one," she spat venomously. "And now you're working for Galvin. I remember when you could have bought and sold him, Elliot."

"I remember when I bought you," he said, stung. "I brought you over from France, set you up in my Casino in Atlantic City—"

"And then you fell in love with a blond in New York City," she taunted, walking over till she was looming over him.

He leaned back, the chair sagging putting him off-balance. She used the movement to sit in his lap and put her arms around his neck. His arms went around her automatically.

"Remember when we used to do this, Elliot?" she purred.

He nodded suspiciously.

She leaned forward, lips fractions from his. "And this?" She kissed him, soft and lingering.

He nodded again, a fraction less suspicious.

"Now I'm going to give you something I could never have given you six years ago," she breathed at him. Her breath smelled of oranges and cream.

Crack! His head snapped to one side as she hit him as hard as she could. When his vision cleared she was on the phone.

"Anise, get Roger," she ordered into the phone while his head still rang from the blow. "And now you can tell Mr. Galvin that I'm not selling out to him or his other buyers. You personally, Elliot Burch, can go straight to hell."

"Too late," he mumbled. "Already been there."

Before he could stand, the door opened and a familiar figure filled it. Roger looked down without an outward acknowledgement of knowing him, then up at Dixie.

"You called?"

She waved to Burch who was still feeling his jaw. "Get rid of the garbage."

The two men stopped by the fountain where Elliot soaked his handkerchief and put it up against his jaw. He looked at Roger who was studying him.

"Why didn't you tell me about Dixie?"

"I wanted to see what would happen," Roger said. "I didn't know you were interested in the *Heart of Dixie* till I saw those plans."

"Any idea of what's going on yet?"

"Well, it appears your Galvin wants to buy her out, and she's not selling - the house at least."

Burch looked thoughtfully at the blond man. "More than that. Galvin was hot last night, hot for Dixie, so hot he ordered up two of her girls. I think he wants her as well as the house."

"And she's not giving up either," Roger mused.

"She always was a tight-fisted woman," Burch said, soaking the cloth and putting it on his bearded jaw. "Had a tendency to hold on to anything she could get her hands on."

"You knew her?"

Burch grinned till the pain from it hit him "She was my woman until 1985. She got involved in a F.B.I. sting at my casino and ended up being arrested for stupidity. I didn't try to find her when they let her go, since she made it clear she didn't want to see ME."

"So you didn't know she was here?" Roger asked.

"Hell, no! And I wouldn't have gotten involved if I had." The architect hesitated for a second then continued. "I can't afford Dixie any more."

"Can Galvin?"

"Johnny Galvin never had a feather to fly with. But he's got connections." He stepped outside the gates and turned. Roger stayed inside. "If you're involved with Dixie, I suggest you get out, Roger."

"And leave the Georgia peach to the wolves?"

Burch snorted. "She's from Syracuse, New York! Don't let the hair mislead you. She is one of the most beautiful women I ever met, but a piranha at heart."

Roger closed the gates and slid the lock in place, as Burch walked away. He wandered slowly back to the house thinking about what he had said. A sudden breeze made him look at the sky. Grey-black clouds threatened a summer storm, and he heard a distant rumble of thunder. The rising wind rustled the magnolia trees, and blew some leaves at him.

He headed for the back door, closer to his room. Rounding a corner, he saw a small building hidden back among the broad-leafed trees. It was of grey marble.

He walked over. The name "Comeaux" carved over the doorway of the crypt. Roger had once visited the above-ground cemeteries that were such a notable attraction in New Orleans, and knew that private cemeteries were still used by some of the older families. It had recently been swept out and was in good repair. He looked at the names etched in stone and saw one freshly carved.

"Lavinia Comeaux," he muttered touching it. "Damn shame, woman. Wish you were here."

Above it, the elements had taken revenge on the stone and the other carvings were blurred. His finger raced the names.

Archer. Emilea. Margarite. Phillipe. Anise. Anise?

Roger stared at it for a second, his mind working, then turned and gave the house a speculative look. The wind blew hard in his face with the smell of rain.

Somewhere he heard a lawn mower start up, then die.

Pieces of the puzzle were still missing. He rounded the corner of the house and saw Anise pulling the cord on the lawn mower. It sputtered and died.

"You shouldn't mow with a storm coming on," Roger said reprovingly. "Don't you have someone else to do the mowing?"

She pushed back her hair and blushed, then looked down at the mower. "I wanted to get a start on it before the rain. Besides, we get storms every afternoon."

He pushed her away. "You have to get a good grip and pull!" The motor stuttered into a roar.

She yelled over it, "I just started doing it a month ago. Let me—"

He held up his hand to fend her off. A rumble of thunder made both of them look up, then Roger cut the motor and pulled the mower towards the small garden shed. "Better try this later," he called loudly, over the increasing thunder and the beginning of a hard rain.

Anise helped lift the mower over the threshold, then took refuge from the rain.

Roger eyed her, then knelt down by the mower, purposely non-threatening. That faint resemblance to someone tickled his mind again. Anise's round teenage face had high cheekbones, and thick brown eyebrows which overshadowed her brown eyes. The hair wasn't styled, and at the moment hung limply. She brushed it back behind her ears, except for one lock which she nibbled on. She was tall, when she wasn't slouching, and still had puppy fat on her. Anise had the potential to be a real beauty if taken in hand, and he had no doubt that Dixie would teach her how to use it.

He found this mildly depressing.

"What's this?" She picked up a silver ball bearing that had fallen out of his leather jacket.

He smiled. "Part of what makes the world run, sweet thing."

"It's a ball," she said curiously.

"A ball bearing."

"Didn't come off the mower, did it?"

He chuckled. "Nope. I use them to pot aggressive squirrels."

She giggled.

"Keep it if you'd like. Anise?"

"Yeah?"

"Were you here when Lavvy died?" he asked conversationally.

She turned to him, her face instantly suspicious. "I was here, yeah. Dixie brought me here."

"Where did Dixie come from, Anise?" he coaxed.

She licked her lips. "Dixie was a friend of Lavvy's from Atlanta. She came down about a year ago, and she and Lavvy began to set up the *Heart*."

"*The Heart of Dixie*?"

"Lavvy thought it was a cute name. She only lasted a couple of months after that. Dixie took care of her."

"Lavvy died of AIDS, didn't she?" Roger straightened up. He was getting too old to crouch for long periods.

"Yeah. Dixie knew some guys in Atlanta that gave her some drugs that helped Lavvy, but we knew it was gonna be soon," the teenager whispered. "At least she died at home."

"At home. That's good. Lavvy loved New Orleans," Roger said softly. "Where YOU from, Anise?"

Anise looked out the door, seeing the rain pouring down harder and harder. The temperature was falling rapidly. "From up near Baton Rouge. I ran away from my parents, came down here. Dixie found me at the train station and talked me into coming with her."

He felt a burn of anger and frowned. So Dixie cruised the bus station for chickens out of the

heartland?

Anise caught the look and shook her head. "No, she wasn't out recruitin', she was meeting the guy with the drugs! She offered me a bed, a bed alone, and hasn't asked me to do anything that I don't want to."

"But the women are still whores," Roger said harshly.

"They need the money," the girl said defiantly. "Cilia says it's not much different from gutting fish, and a lot cleaner. Dixie got a doctor in and everyone's healthy for once."

"Still...," the man said inquiringly.

"I don't have to do anything I don't want to," Anise said out loud looking at the rain. "That's what I left home for."

Burch sat down on a damp street bench and moved his jaw tentatively. It still hurt a little. The torrential thundershower had stopped, but the air was heavy with moisture and humidity. The sun came out and Jackson Square steamed. Named after Andrew Jackson, not Stonewall, as most of the tourists around him believed from their comments. It bordered a park that overlooked the river, a magnificent view that, at the moment, included a paddle-wheeler steaming its way upstream. He could see the clouds of a thunderstorm recede as it rumbled its way towards the Gulf of Mexico.

He hoped it wouldn't take Galvin long to get there. He was starved. He had skipped breakfast because of his long slumber, and now his stomach growled every time someone passed with a hot dog.

A shadow fell over him. Looking up, Burch saw that Galvin looked unexpectedly dapper, decked out in a white Panama suit with matching hat and a cane.

"What about the house?" Galvin asked without preamble.

Burch shifted, putting one knee over the other. "You didn't tell me who was running it."

"Dixie Miller? Didn't know you'd recognize the name, Burch."

"I recognized the woman."

Galvin's eyes narrowed and he cut the air with his cane. "Bitch. What about the house?" he repeated.

"The house is in good shape, freshly painted, and looks like the finishing school it's supposed to be," Burch replied. "I didn't know Dix had it in her to decorate her house that way."

"You sure it's HER that did the decorating?" Galvin said softly. "That house had been in the Comeaux family since 1815. Lavinia Comeaux was a belle in these parts, before she ran off to be a nurse in Vietnam. Came back a different woman."

Burch cocked his head and squinted up. The man was silhouetted against the sun.

"You knew the previous owner?"

"I want you to check on what I have to do to get the building registered as Historic, Burch."

"Nope. I did what you wanted last night and ended up with a Mickey Finn, and a cracked jaw! Get your own errand boy, Galvin!"

The fat man shrugged. "I made sure you got home intact, Burch. Besides, aren't you curious about the house, now that you've met up with the Miller woman?"

"Well..." Elliot's bump of curiosity was intrigued. He was even more curious as to how Galvin knew so

much about the house. This was coming down to a personal fight for the Southerner. "Where do you want me to send what I find?"

"Leave it at the desk of the St. Francis. I'll pick it up tomorrow. Where do I send your money, Burch?"

"The check? I'll leave an address at the desk as well." Burch stood up. "And, Johnny, watch yourself, okay?"

"You care?" Galvin said mockingly.

"Not really, but Dixie's a hard lady and I'd hate to see anyone hurt."

Galvin's lips twisted momentarily. "You're six months late for that, Burch. Good day."

Burch watched him walk off, wondering what he meant. Six months too late? His stomach growled reminding him that lunch was a necessity before he went to check the Records. He set off for the French Quarter.

After lunch, Burch went to the Historical society and checked the property records. He absently flicked the pages of the current year's register in front of him, while the clerk disappeared into the stacks in search of the files for that area of New Orleans. He paused at a familiar name, "John Galvin, July 10th, 1990," and then closed the book when the young man came out with a file.

He took it over to a table and settled down. The papers were mostly photocopies of old Parish records on the house and surprisingly thin. Galvin had been right that the house had been in the Comeaux family for generations. Someone had even provided a genealogy that looked like it came out of a family Bible. Lavinia wasn't on it. She must have been born in the 1950s of Archer and Anise Emily, the only living couple of childbearing age at the time. He leaned back, thinking. Lavinia was the belle before she 'ran off to Vietnam. So where had Johnny Galvin met up with her? Over there? He photocopied some of the sheets on the house, then put them back in the folder, handing back to the young clerk.

He went up to the newspaper area, and found the index to the New Orleans Times-Picayune for the Vietnam years. There was nothing listed on a Lavinia Comeaux or a John Galvin.

"What are you trying to find?" the librarian asked his disappointed expression.

"I'm trying to track down a woman I knew. She apparently was a local belle in the late 60's," he answered.

The woman smiled. "Try the society papers. I've got the index here. Do you know when she was born?"

Burch spread his hands showing ignorance.

"Well, take a look through about five years. They listed birth and deaths, coming-outs and weddings for all the upper-crust." Her voice was dry and crusty under the southern accent. "And the six-months births as well. There's more scandal in that sheet than any supermarket!"

The young man flinched imperceptibly. He remembered when he was on the front of the tabloids, pictures that were always ugly, and generally unrecognizable. He knew the 'laws' of scandals, inside and out.

He settled down with the index and began searching.

Roger finished mowing the lawns and put away the mower, heading for a cold shower. He had taken over the job, despite Anise's protests. The teenager would have collapsed in the sultry weather. The hot sun made the air feel tropical, and he almost expected to see a monkey swing out of the trees or

a parrot break from the foliage. He was also sweating like a horse.

Heading for his room, he noticed that the building was empty and quiet. None of the girls he had seen the night before were around. He could smell cooking coming from the back, but even the rattle of pots was barely audible.

He paused when he heard Dixie's voice raised shrilly. He heard another voice, a low male voice, and walked soft-footed down the polished wood floor till he reached the mostly-closed door of her office.

The bass voice of the man seated opposite her was intense, the words bitten off and harsh despite the Southern accent. Roger could see Dixie leaning on the desk, gripping the edge, and the faint frown forming a line between her eyes.

"So I'm making you an offer," the man finished. "You can decide what way you want it."

"The house's not for sale," she said in a hard voice. "I don't need a partner, especially not you. Get out of here, Galvin, before I get Roger to throw you out!"

He shifted his cane. Roger tensed. "Now you wouldn't want to spread the gossip about what you did, Dixie."

"Did?"

"Did to Lavinia."

She stayed silent for a second, then crossed her arms. "Did to Lavinia? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Those drugs from Atlanta? Didn't help her much."

"Gave her four months," Dixie replied brusquely.

"They were untested drugs from a researcher at the C.D.C."

"She was in the last stages of AIDS, Galvin. She begged me for anything that would have kept her going!"

"She was demented," the man said his voice laced with bitterness. "And you took advantage of that to get the house away from her!"

"She left the house to us in appreciation of what we did."

"She left the house to you because you made her think Anise was her daughter!" the man thundered. "And that was a lie!"

Roger froze.

"Are you sure it was a lie, Galvin?" she said sweetly.

"Lavinia's child died in 1970. If she hadn't been so far gone, she would have seen through your charade!" Galvin's voice said biting.

Roger was rocked, though his face didn't show it. He had slept with Lavvy in Vietnam in late 1969. Had the kid been his?

Unconscious of the effect she was having on Roger, Dixie echoed his query. "You know that so precisely. How would you know?"

A familiar, if unexpected, voice cut in. "Because he was likely the kid's father."

"Burch?" Dixie gasped turning.

Lococco saw Burch step in one of the tall windows that had been left open for ventilation. The man

had been running and was damp with sweat, his shirt sticking to his chest.

"The local society rag devoted pages to the Comeaux family. When Lavinia ran off to Vietnam in '69, her boy friend, John Galvin, enlisted to see if he could find her. He came back ten months later, when the Army invalided him out for malaria. She didn't come with him."

Galvin slammed his cane like a pistol shot on the wooden floor. "She wanted a life out of New Orleans, where everyone knew her name! The war broke her like a bamboo reed! When she came back in 1972, all she wanted to do was forget everything that had had happened over there."

"It was nothing to sing about, Buckwheat," Roger said pushing open the door and stepping in.

Dixie looked up with an immensely relieved expression. "Thank God, you're here, Lococco. Throw him out! Throw them both out!"

He stared at her and she swallowed, her expression changing.

"I think I want to hear a little more about Anise and Lavinia, don't you, Elliot?"

"Yes."

"You know each other?" Dixie gasped.

"Anise said you found her at the bus station," Roger prompted. "Go on."

"Yes. Tell them all about it," Galvin said menacingly.

Dixie looked from face to face, then licked her lips. "She had been there a couple of days and was starving. She'd turned a couple of tricks, but it wasn't part of her... yet. You know what I mean. I was getting a shipment of Lavvy's drugs from Atlanta and saw Anise looking like a lost kitten. I offered her a job helping me with Lavvy."

Her gaze flicked to Galvin. "You remember what she was like then? The virus was turning her brain to mush. She took to Anise right away, said she looked like a Comeaux. Then one day, she said Anise was her daughter. I checked the Bible and saw a child had been born twenty years ago, and tried to tell Lavvy that Anise was way too young, but Lavvy insisted on it. On one of her good days, she went into the city to the family lawyer and made a will leaving the house and the land to Anise."

Roger looked from Burch to Galvin. The big man's lips were sucked in as if this was very bitter.

"They thought she was sane. It was legal. She didn't want New Orleans to know the last member of the family had AIDS. The stigma would've haunted her beyond the grave." Dixie shook her head sadly. "When she told Anise, Anise came to me, begging to know what to do. I talked with Lavvy--"

"You talked her into keeping that will!" Galvin thundered.

"I tried to convince her that Anise wasn't her daughter, but it wasn't any use. She died happy that another Comeaux was living in the house."

"Which was a lie," Lococco said.

Dixie looked at him defiantly. "It was a lie that she wanted desperately to believe in the few minutes when she was sane, Roger!"

"So you turned her home into the *Heart of Dixie School* for the fashionably impure," Burch said ironically.

She tossed her blond mane of hair back. "Anise was still under the age to inherit. Lavvy set up that I'd be her guardian until she was twenty-one."

"And what do you get out of it?" Galvin sneered.

"I get what I left behind in Paris," she snapped. "And no one stays here who doesn't want to. We don't need the money to run this place. Lavvy's trust -"

"It should have been mine!" Galvin surged to his feet. "She would have married me if the kid had lived, but the girl died, and Lavvy wouldn't see me again! Said my heritage and hers wouldn't mix."

Roger felt a surge of relief. It had been Galvin's kid then, not his own.

"Your families have been in this town for generations," Burch said compassionately. "Going through the magazines, I found that branches of the Galvin family intermarried with the Comeauxs."

"Don't PITY me, Burch!" Galvin snarled. "I should have had Lavvy and the house and the money."

"Ah, it always comes back to the money, doesn't it?" Dixie said mockingly. "The Comeau land upriver."

Galvin moved swiftly for a man that size, pulling a gun and aiming it at Dixie and Burch. They both froze.

"Get over there. Or I'm going to kill them both," he ordered. Roger reluctantly moved towards the other two. All his commando training couldn't make him faster than a speeding bullet.

"What are you going to do?" Dixie said with a squeak in her voice.

"I want you to sign that contract on your desk," Galvin replied. "I want this house and I want half its profits. I deserve it."

"Deserve?" Roger said softly. "You got Lavinia pregnant over in 'Nam and when she lost the baby and told you to go away, you waited till she came back and began harassing her. She told me that."

Galvin flicked his gaze between the three people. "You're lying. Sign it, Miller. Or die."

"It'll never hold," she said shakily. "I'll fight it—"

"And then I'll tell them about the drugs and this 'finishing school,'" he said mockingly. "Go on, fight me. I'll enjoy that. And you, too."

She bit her lip and picked up her pen, her hand shaking.

Roger kept his gaze on Galvin as the woman signed the papers, waiting for some break where he could attack.

Burch's gaze went to the open door, where he saw a person in the hallway. He gasped as someone threw something into the room.

A ball bearing came flying in, hitting Galvin's arm hard. The gun went off.

In the second between the gasp and the ball hitting the arm, Roger moved, knocking the gun hand up, desperately hoping that the bullet wouldn't hit anyone. The gun went flying to a corner of the room behind Dixie and Burch. He pinned the man against the wall using judo, and looked back.

"Burch!"

"I'm okay. But Dixie got hit," the other's voice said tersely.

"DIXIE!" the girl's voice made everyone jump. Anise flew through the open door to the blond who had sunk back in the chair.

"I'm all right." Dixie said shakily. "No really, I am. It went through my hair."

Burch tilted her head up, seeing the long scratch across the scalp and the flowing blood matting the blond hair. "Makes an interesting part, Dix."

"I thought you were gonna die!" Anise wailed abjectly. "I threw that thing Roger gave me and then the gun went off!"

Dixie stroked her head. "I'm still alive, Anise, honey. Will you get me a towel?" After she was gone, Dixie looked at Lococco. "What're you going to do with him?"

Roger raised an eyebrow. "What am I going to do with him? He's your problem, sweet thing. I'm just the muscle here."

"Let me go!" Galvin made an attempt to get free, which Roger stopped, twisting the arm painfully.

"He tried extortion," Burch commented, picking up the now-bloodstained contract.

"I can't have people looking into here, Elliot," she said bitterly. "He's right about that. We would be out of business before sunset."

"Don't see that he has any say in the matter anymore," Roger threw over his shoulder. "Maybe we should bury him with Lavvy."

Dixie cast him an unbelieving look. "You plan to kill him?"

Roger glanced at her. "Well, that's what I used to do, Dixie."

"Well, you don't do it anymore," she said sharply. "Put him in the chair."

Anise came through the door with towels. Dixie took one and dabbed at the blood.

Elliot took it out of her hand. "Let me."

Anise cringed behind the chair and bent over. He thought she was going to be sick.

Lococco dumped Galvin in the swinging chair, keeping a grip on his shoulder. "So what are you gonna do?"

Anise lifted the gun and fired, the bullet barely missing Burch as he stood next to Dixie.

Galvin slumped over onto the floor. The others froze.

Dixie was the first to move. "Anise? Anise, honey, give me the gun." She held out her hand to the girl.

Elliot looked down the muzzle of the gun and prayed that she wouldn't fire. He didn't want to spend another session in the hospital or end up as dead as Galvin.

The girl pursed her lips and shook her head. "Not till they're out of here, Dixie."

"But, Anise—"

"I've got it all worked out. We can blame it on Roger."

Lococco's gaze flicked to Anise's eyes. He remembered she was the one who had gotten Dixie the newspaper articles on him. She knew who he had been. And suddenly he knew who she reminded him of - Susan Profitt. Susan, who was now in an insane asylum for killing her brother, partly because she loved him too much. There was the same desperate hunger for love in Anise.

"Thanks, sweet cakes. I need that."

"I want you to take Galvin to the crypt," Anise said in determined tone. "I oil the hinges every week so you can put him in, quiet-like. Then get out of here. If you go away, no one will know what happen and we won't have to tell on you, Mr. Lococco."

"And if I don't do this?" Lococco said quietly.

Anise moved to a few inches behind Elliot, her gun pointed directly at his spine. "I'll kill him, and then I'll kill you."

"Anise, let me have the gun," Dixie said coaxingly. "You didn't have to kill Galvin, Anise. The contract wouldn't have held. I don't own the house. You do."

"But I don't want to live here without you, Dixie," Anise pleaded. "You're the first person who ever really cared about me. He would have taken it all away. Now things will be the same again."

"Mm, Roger," Elliot said, uncomfortably aware of how close he was to dying. "Could you do something please?"

Roger looked from face to face, then bent over and hoisted Galvin's body over his shoulder. "I know where the crypt is. I expect him to be alive when I get back, Anise."

"He'll meet you outside the gates," the girl promised. "I don't want to hurt you. I want things to be the way they were."

From Dixie's expression, nothing would ever be the same again.

Roger had been waiting for an hour before he saw Burch come out of the house, carrying the kit bag Lococco had been forced to leave behind. Anise came close behind him, still holding the gun. They were followed by Dixie, who was wearing a towel as a turban.

Lococco swung open the gates to let him through. Then Anise pulled them shut and slid closed the bolt.

"Have a good day," she said sunnily.

"Give me the gun," Dixie commanded holding out her hand. "They're gone now, Anise."

The teenager obediently handed her the gun, and ran up into the house.

Dixie looked through the iron lacework at the men, lines of worry showing on her usually-immaculate face. "I'll get her some help."

"It's going to have to be reported, Dixie," Burch warned. "Even Johnny Galvin can't vanish without someone noticing."

She smiled with a trace of bitterness. "You're always sending the cops after me, Elliot. Are you sure they're gonna find a body? Besides, I don't think your friend wants the police involved and I don't think you do either," she concluded.

Roger and Elliot exchanged glances.

"Justice isn't being served here," Lococco said in a mocking tone.

"Probably more than you think. Galvin hunted poor Lavvy for years. I don't think she'd mind at all if he was dead. He might have been the one who gave her the infection," Dixie said bitterly.

"I thought she wouldn't see him," Lococco asked.

Dixie suddenly looked twice her years. "That didn't stop him occasionally, from what she said. But she could've been off her head. Get out of here, guys. Leave this to me."

"Dixie," Roger said quietly. "What was Anise's name before Lavvy named her?"

The blond woman stared at him for a second. "She told me it was Paula. I think it was a lie."

"Take care of yourself, Dixie," Burch said, stepping back.

After a block Burch shook his head, and let down the bag. "What the hell just went on?"

Roger took the kit bag from him. "Thanks for getting my stuff."

"Anise insisted. I packed it under her supervision while you were taking care of Galvin." Burch

shivered suddenly.

"What?"

"Someone walking over my grave. We could see you putting the body in the crypt. You can see it from the window."

Roger flicked him a glance. "You're pretty cool for someone who doesn't deal with guns much, Buckwheat."

"It isn't the first time I've been on the wrong end," Burch said ruefully. "This time I walked out on my own two feet. You're pretty good with that self-defense stuff, Lococco. You had Galvin pinned before he knew what was going on."

"Product of an ill-spent youth," Roger said, hitching the bag over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I know. I picked up the Xeroxes in your room."

Roger looked straight into the other man's eyes suspiciously. He saw traces of understanding. He felt a little uncomfortable.

"What do you mean?"

"I used to do architectural drawings with C-SPAN in the background. Didn't realize you were the C.I.A. guy involved with the Ketcher scandal. Come on. Let's stash your stuff at the hotel, and call the cops."

Roger realized that Burch trusted him. That was dangerous to them both. "Dixie's going to move the body."

"Yeah, but they can still match bloodstains from where he fell. And they'll shut down the bordello," Burch said confidently.

"I doubt it," Lococco replied lightly. "I saw some fairly highly ranked cops there last night."

Chapter 4

Burch was seated in the *Cafe Du Monde* eating his second plateful of beignets. The lightly-fried bread was covered with powdered sugar, the same sugar that dotted his jeans. Beignets were fattening and addictive, especially with lemonade to wash it down.

Lococco had been gone when Elliot awoke. The blond man had scorned the idea of a roll-away bed and curled up with the comforter on the floor, leaving Elliot to enjoy the pleasure of the very hard bed. Elliot packed and checked out, paying with travellers' checks since he had cancelled his credit card, and cashed a few more for the trip. He'd left a message for Roger to meet him at the restaurant. Lococco had left the kit bag behind and it was in the back of the truck parked nearby.

It was another scorcher of a day, the sun blazing from a glassy blue sky. Sparrows darted among the wrought-iron tables, squabbling over beignet crumbs, almost within reach of the eaters. Burch held out a fragment to a large one that eyed him suspiciously and hopped forward then back. He held perfectly still, enticing it.

The bird took sudden flight, as Lococco sat down unexpectedly.

Burch frowned at him. "He was almost eating out of my hand."

Roger took the tidbit and tossed it at the bird, then bit into a beignet. "Got any more?"

"Where have you been?" Elliot inquired testily. "I thought maybe Anise had been down to take you away. Or the cops."

"You would've heard if they had," Lococco replied around a mouthful. He swallowed and took a sip of Burch's lemonade. Elliot gave him a dirty look, and waved for a waiter to bring some more lemonade.

"I went to see if our tip caused Dixie any discomfort"

"And?"

"Nothing. Place looks like a tomb. I can smell a wood fire burning though."

"What ... Oh. She burned the flooring in the office."

"Sure seems likely. Better way of getting rid of bloodstains than most."

Burch took the fresh lemonade. "You can have that one. *The Heart of Dixie's* going to be her tomb if she isn't careful. Wait a couple of years till Anise is old enough to not need a keeper. Dix's going to have a partner whether she wants one or not."

"Who knows what a couple of years will bring?" Lococco said whimsically. "Where you headed now, Burch?"

The man grimaced. "Well, Galvin kicked off before he paid for any of the work, so I'm headed back to Miami."

"A scenic tour of North Florida highways?" Roger said curiously.

"And byways. How about you?"

Lococco stood scattering crumbs everywhere. "I have to make a call. Stay here. Order some more of these things."

Burch raised an eyebrow but waved at the waiter. Five minutes later, Roger strode back at a fast pace.

"You said you were going to Miami?"

"Yeah, but it's gonna take some time," Elliot replied.

"Time's short, but I need to get to Miami quietly. Got a lost friend whose trail starts there."

"If you don't mind the long road, hitch a ride with me." Burch held out the ball bearing that Roger had dumped on his bed. "Roll with it, Buckwheat."

"Bring the beignets."

END