

## The Ziegfeld Cure

Based on a True Story -- 6,400 words

It was Billie Burke's annual Halloween party at Burkeley Crest, her three-acre estate on the Hudson River, and she had plans for Vera Camtro, a guest who should arrive any minute. Billie had even dressed for the role in a black widow spider costume. A web topped her head like an open Japanese fan.

She checked the clock -- 7:35 p.m., not much time to act. Flo Ziegfeld, her husband, would be home in a half hour, and she needed to get Vera crawling on the floor. Flo was a Broadway producer and sire of *The Ziegfeld Follies*, a series of annual variety shows parading half-naked women on the stage to live music. He'd been staging them for 22 years. Vera, his floozie, was one of the women.

The Broadway theater world was here tonight, the ideal audience for Billie's show. She'd embarrass Vera in front of Irving Berlin, Ruth Etting, Eddie Cantor, gossip columnists, and the 100 or so others milling about, a crowd Vera would want to impress. They were actually here to ingratiate Flo and Billie, the king and queen of Broadway, but she'd give them a little extra. She was an established Broadway lady in her own right, and she could make or destroy a career just by whispering in a producer's ear. She'd exercise some of that power tonight.

Billie had never done anything like this before, and she wished she didn't have to. But she was on the defensive and had no choice. If there was anything this business had taught her over the last 30 years it was to "take the stage or be buried by it," and she'd shove Vera into the wings. After all, Vera had pursued her husband. It wasn't because she loved him -- none of them did. It was because she wanted better parts in his shows. Vera knew Flo's flesh was weak, and she'd gone right for it.

That floozie hadn't been the first. Flo had had a string of affairs over the 15 years of their marriage, and some had been in the papers. She'd tried to stop them by using techniques most wives did: screaming, smashing plates, threatening to kick him out. He'd apologize, mean it, and then do it again. Most men *could* stop, but Flo couldn't. It was an addiction for him, like gambling or drinking was for others. But tonight, he would stop. People quit drinking and gambling after a dramatic event, so she'd create one for him. Billie loved Flo and didn't want to lose him. She also needed to protect their 13-year-old daughter, Patty. She was daddy's little girl, and it had been wearing her down too.

Keeping news about the affairs from Patty had been like trying to hold back reporters from a Lindbergh crash. When gossip hit the press, Billie threw out the papers and didn't discuss his shenanigans when Patty was home. But her daughter attended school where gossip travelled from parent-to-child-to-Patty faster than a Duesenberg could carry it. Whenever Patty had found out, Billie would try to smooth it over by saying things like, "You know how things are, dear. Scandals sell papers. These women are just Daddy's friends. It's good to have friends of many kinds." But she wasn't fooling Patty anymore and was starting to lose her daughter's trust. How could a mother teach and protect her daughter without trust?

Billie's fans were also starting to doubt her, and that put her career in danger. She lived to act. She lived for the applause. She lived to create imaginary worlds. But reporters had started implying that she wasn't satisfying Flo's needs and wasn't supportive of *his* work. The nerve of those men, trying to damage her career to protect Flo's. If the fans turned against her, they'd quit caring and would stop buying tickets. She used to get letters from admirers saying, "I named my daughter after you," and "Miss Burke, I want to marry you." But now, they read, "I thought you were better than that," and "You should be a wife first." Her heart sank every time she read one.

She didn't know why she loved Flo, but the thought of losing him made her heart race. It also made her feel angry and confused. She needed him, and he felt the same about her. But would their 15 years together be enough to hold him? Could he get the same feeling from someone else?

It was 7:40 p.m., and Billie was waiting in the foyer for Vera, passing the time talking to composer Richard Rodgers. He was a delightful young man with an open face and almond-shaped eyes, and this morning he'd put the final touches on the music for the February opening of Flo's show *Simple Simon*.

"Which is our favorite song?" Billie asked.

"Oh, I like them all," Richard said, raising his hands in a truce.

She lightly touched his arm. "Pick one. Our secret."

"I guess it would be 'Dancing on the Ceiling'."

"Sing a verse for me."

"It doesn't have many lyrics, and Mr. Hart wrote them."

"I know that, but you know the words."

"I'm not much of a singer."

"Don't sing loud, then. Really, I'd love to hear it."

He sang with a tremor in his voice. "She dances on the ceiling, over my bed, on my side through the night."

Bad choice. She'd been talking to him to avoid thinking about what she had to do tonight. A dancer had bedded her husband. She didn't need new imagery to make it worse.

She held up a stop-sign hand. "Lovely," she said, trying to stay cheerful.

"You didn't like it?"

“Oh, I loved it.”

Then a cold breeze saved her. Mr. Jamieson, her butler, had opened the front door for some guests.

“Sing me some more later,” she said as she squeezed his arm and excused herself.

Billie walked to the door and flipped on her hostess role. The first to walk in was a *Follies* girl, Mary O’Connor, dressed like a butterfly. As Billie greeted her, she saw three more *Follies* girls behind her: a witch, a bunny, and a magpie. The magpie was Vera, and on her head was a black cap with a bobbing yellow beak.

This was Billie’s chance. She’d been up half the night figuring out how to pull this off. If it worked, she’d feel safer. If it didn’t, she’d be embarrassed. But whichever happened, Vera’s beak would be swinging like a palm branch in a hurricane by the time Billie was through with her.

Vera saw Billie, stopped in the doorway, and turned to leave. Billie reached for the girl’s arm and grabbed her black sleeve.

“Dear, please come in,” Billie said with a smile, pretending she didn’t know about the affair. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. There are at least four here, but they won’t hurt you. Please come in. I’m so happy you’re here.”

Vera hesitated. Billie reached for her hands and clasped them in her own. Vera’s was cold. She had a blank look on her face.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Burke,” Vera said, her voice thin, her lips tight. “I thought you were in Chicago.”

“Flo’s mother is better, and I certainly didn’t want to miss tonight.” She squeezed Vera’s hands a little tighter. “Really dear, come in and enjoy yourself. It’s cold out there.”

Mr. Jamieson took their shawls as the bunny reached out to Vera and pointed toward the sun room. There, a group of people danced to ragtime music. As the young women passed Billie, the bunny sneered. Billie sneered back. She'd stay aware of the bunny.

While Vera danced with a vampire, Billie made the rounds of the bartending stations – enclosed porch, front parlor, and finally the sun room. At each stop she let the mixers know that Vera was here. Billie waited 10 feet away from Vera while the eight-piece band finished playing “Ain’t Misbehavin’.”

Over the years, Billie had learned of Flo’s affairs from a variety of sources. She'd learned about this one from *Follies* girl Elsie Earl. Elsie was one of three dancers Billie had tapped to tell her about Flo's dalliances and intrigues, each beholden to Billie for her job. She'd discovered them as waitresses, bit players, and office clerks, and would recommend them to Flo for the *Follies*. She knew what her husband liked, and he always hired her suggestions. After the girl’s first performance, Billie took her out to lunch and made two things clear: stay away from my husband, and you’re going to be my eyes at the theater. In return, Billie assured the girl she’d remain employed. *The Ziegfeld Follies* was the most professional and well-paid opportunity in New York and had launched the careers of many women and men, including Fanny Brice, Myrna Loy, and Will Rogers. Once in, a performer wanted to stay in.

When the last chord of “Ain’t Misbehavin’” played, Billie froze. Would this really work? Would the floozie cooperate? She nervously tapped the girl on her shoulder. “Darling, you’re such a good dancer.”

Vera turned around, and the vampire raced to the bar. Billie studied her. She was the classic *Follies* girl: slender waist, erect posture, peaches and cream complexion, straight white teeth. Billie understood why Flo wanted her.

“A blood and sand, dear?” Billie asked.

The girl looked left and right, searching for an escape. Billie was tickled by her angst and enjoyed the torture, but she had to move on to the next stage: befriend the girl. A drink would help.

“Miss Burke, really, I must--”

“I’ve heard so many good things about you from the girls. And you dance so beautifully.”

Vera looked tense and confused.

Billie glanced at the cocktail table and gave a quick wink to Sammy the bartender, a thin, attractive young man with dark hair and sharp features. He winked back. He knew about Billie’s plan and was happy to do it. His wife had abandoned him two years ago for another man, leaving him with two kids under five to raise. He’d been the head bartender at The Savoy before Prohibition, and had made tonight’s liquor and hired the mixers. Billie’s parties paid for his Ford Model A woody.

Sammy brought over two drinks. He gave the blood and sand to Vera, who accepted it with a polite smile, and then gave Billie a glass of tomato juice. Billie didn’t drink alcohol; it wrinkled her beauty. She might be 45, but she looked 30 and wanted to stay that way for as long as she could.

“Do you have a part in *Simple Simon*?” Billie asked Vera. “I can’t remember.”

“No. I’m doing the *Follies* tour.”

Billie stopped breathing. Flo would join the tour in a couple of weeks. She’d better stop the affair before her left.

Vera sipped. “My, this is good.” A little smile snuck out.

As Billie sipped her juice, she noticed a wedding band on the girl's finger. She didn't know Vera was married. Usually, the floozies were single. She felt sorry for the girl's husband; he could be part of Billie's team. He might be valuable later, if tonight's plan failed. Certainly, he'd want to know.

Vera pointed at Billie's glass and asked, "What's in the juice?" She'd made it sound like a polite joke.

"Just juice. I have to keep my wits about me. Now, I'll let you in on a little secret." She leaned in and patted Vera's arm like a best friend would. "Every cocktail table has a different drink using Sammy's special recipes. It's mint julep on the porch, and the ones in the front parlor include his special bee's knees. You should do a complete tour of the tables. I'll take you around."

"Oh, I'm not much of a drinker."

Terrific news.

"This is a party," Billie insisted.

"Oh, I--"

"There's delicious food and drink everywhere, and it cost me a fortune. Sample it all."

She made a sweeping gesture with her arms; the spider web unfurled beneath. "And dear, where's your husband? Too bad he couldn't come." She dropped her hands to her hips.

Vera's smile faded. Her eyes turned to slits. "He hates these things."

"Such a pity."

Billie felt an ounce of worry for the girl. Did Vera's husband ridicule her? Did he cheat on her too? She hoped he wasn't physically abusive. She wanted to stop the affair, not kill the girl. She'd check with Elsie before she contacted him.

"Where are you from?" Billie asked.

"Ohio."

"Oh, what a coincidence. Where? My parents were from Ohio."

"Cincinnati."

"My father was from Knox County and my mother not far from Cincinnati. How did you get to New York?"

"My father died when I was a baby, and my mother died when I was 17."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear." Billie felt a twinge of empathy. She touched Vera's arm. "Both of mine died years ago."

"How horrible."

"It's been awhile. I've adjusted." She felt a sudden ping of loss and took a quiet breath.

"Now, you were saying?"

Vera took a sip of her drink, which was down to half full. "I've always wanted to be an actress, you know, like Mary Pickford. I didn't want to live with my aunt anymore, so I hopped on a train and came here. I got bit parts and worked in a dress shop. But then I got in the chorus of *George White's Scandals*. People thought I was pretty good, so I went to Mr. Ziegfeld -- uh, your husband -- and got an audition."

As Vera drank, she went on her about stage work, her love of New York, her cat, Penelope, and her family scattered across Europe. She hadn't mentioned her husband. Billie nodded and said things like "that's interesting" and "of course." Vera seemed to need a friend, and that made her feel sorry for the girl. But then Billie saw someone's husband flirting with the butterfly. The feeling vanished as fast as it arrived.



"Your glass is empty," Billie said with renewed determination. "Let's get you another. We'll try the mint julep on the porch."

"I really should join--"

"Nonsense." Billie waved the comment away. "When she's ready for you, she'll find you. This is a big house, but it isn't the Waldorf." She took Vera's glass and set it on a table.

"Well, it *was* delicious," Vera said.

"Besides, I want to hear more about your grandmother in Ireland. My father's family was from there."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"Come, dear."

Billie took Vera's hand and led her through the foyer to the covered porch, keeping her eye out for the bunny. She didn't see the floppy ears, thank goodness, but she moved quicker just in case. Once there, the space felt relaxed, quiet, and there were only 10 people milling about. She winked at the bartender. He winked back.

Vera eyed the buffet covered with cheeses, meats, and deserts, all choreographed on silver platters, making them look like cathedral rose windows. "I'm hungry," Vera said, patting her flat stomach.

*Follies* girls rarely ate, so the alcohol must have flooded her self-denial. Billie offered to prepare a plate, not wanting Vera to eat bready things that might absorb alcohol.

"Go easy," Vera said.

"Certainly, dear." Billie realized she could fatten her up too; Flo preferred trim women. She filled a small China plate with salty things – cheese chunks, olives in brine, Brazil nuts, and

then gave it to Vera. The bartender walked over and gave the girl a drink. Vera set the plate down on a small table, popped two cheese squares into her mouth, and took a sip.

“Yummy,” Vera said. She ate two Brazil nuts and took a gulp. Her normally ice-blue eyes were turning smoky-gray.

“Tell me about your grandmother,” Billie said.

The bunny appeared. “There you are,” she said to Vera in a loud, lilting voice. She gave a strained smile to Billie as she reached out for Vera’s hand. “Come join us. We’ve found the most wonderful men in the parlor. Come, come.”

Vera finished the drink, set it down, and took the bunny's hand. “Excuse me,” she said to Billie. “It was lovely talking to you.”

Billie placed her glass on a table, grabbed the girls’ joined hands, and squeezed. “But we haven’t finished our chat.” She pulled their hands apart, held Vera’s, winked at the mixer for another drink, and motioned to the bunny to move on. “She’ll be there in a minute. We’re talking about Ireland.”

“But I just met Mr. Shubert,” the bunny said. “He’d like to meet her.”

Lee Shubert was a competing theatrical producer. *Follies* girls switched to his company when they wanted more serious roles. Did Vera want to become a genuine actress? Billie had seen her perform. Lee wasn’t going to hire her.

“I’ll come back in a shminute,” Vera said to Billie. But she was in no condition to meet Lee Shubert.

“I’ll bring her over,” Billie told the bunny.” It won’t be long. Go. Enjoy yourself. Have you tried the bee's knees in the front parlor?”

“Yes. I’ve had two.”

“Splendid,” Billie said.

The bunny pointed at Vera. “Find me when you’re finished.”

Vera was too fogged to carry a conversation, so Billie kept it going. The girl wasn't quite drunk enough for the next step, so she had the mixer give her another drink. As the girl sipped, Billie chatted about Patty's short stories, the repair costs for the tennis courts, and on other mundane topics. In the midst of describing the 10 different kinds of cheeses on the platters, Vera finished her drink and put her hand to her mouth to cover a belch. Her eyes had a sleepy-time look. She was almost ready for the next stage.

Billie helped Vera onto a chair and then heard commotion in the foyer. She stretched her neck and saw that Flo was home; the noise was from the dozens of guests shouting out to him. She was happy to see him, wanted to be with him, and needed to get out there and show the crowd that they were a loving couple.

She motioned to the bartender to get Vera another drink; he nodded. The girl was pretty gone, but not all the way there. Billie needed someone to watch her while she joined her husband. She looked across the room and saw singer Ruth Etting in a clown costume sitting on a bench. Ruth's exaggerated red lips formed a smile as Billie approached. Her husband sat next to her dressed as a gangster, a costume fitting his personality.

"Ruth, dear. Could you keep an eye on that girl in the chair over there?" She pointed. "The poor thing got a bit tipsy, I'm afraid. I'll come back and sober her up. It'll only be a minute. Her name is Vera, and she likes to talk about her career. Maybe you can help her."

Ruth smirked. "Does she work for your husband?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. Sure. I'll watch her."

Ruth's husband butted in. "Can't you see we're busy?" He had a reputation for possessiveness. Ruth cowered, so Billie backed-off and apologized.

The noise grew louder in the foyer as Billie hunted for someone else. She saw Fanny Brice at the buffet table loading a plate. Fanny worked for Flo as a comedienne, but tonight she was a flapper. She probably didn't know about the affair (she was out of the gossip loop). But it didn't matter. Most who worked for Flo respected Billie.

The bartender gave Vera another drink. Vera guzzled it, spilling some on her black dress. Billie motioned to him for another. She'd keep the girl drinking until she was licking the floorboards.

"Just keep her in here and out of sight," Billie said to Fanny. "I'll be back in a minute to help her."

"She looks gone, Miss Burke," Fanny said as Vera drank like a boy slurping an orange soda. "What are you gonna to do with her?"

"I'll think of something."

"Alright, I'll do it." Fanny scanned Vera with eyes of disgust.

"I shanta wanta drink," Vera said.

"You shanta wanna nothing," Fanny said. "Do you want to get fired?"

Vera shook her head "no." Billie left to join her husband.

In the foyer, Flo's valet had taken her husband's gray Homburg, mahogany cane, and suede gloves and hung them on the coat tree. Billie wiggled through the crowd; it was freezing in there. She grabbed Flo's arm, put her head on his shoulder, and he kissed it. He felt so warm, so strong, so loving. She wanted to stay like this for forever and wished she didn't have to through with her plan, but she hated the thought of losing him.

“Mr. Ziegfeld,” Joseph Urban yelled from 10 feet away. Mr. Urban was Flo's set designer, a portly man with a triple chin. He motioned for Flo to follow him. “I have something to tell you.”

“Mr. Ziegfeld,” yelled Eddie Cantor, dressed as an aviator. He ran in from the sun room. “How the heck are you?”

And on it went, greeting after greeting, men saddling-up to her husband. Their immediate needs stole her moment, which made her think of Vera. She had to get back to her. She whispered to Flo, “Dear, I have something to tend to.” She let go of his arm, regretfully.

“Certainly,” he said, turning up his public smile and squeezing her hand.

As she waved goodbye to everyone, she saw the bunny eyeing Flo from the rear. Her whole body tensed. Was the bunny next? How many more would she have to deal with? There had been dozens already. Maybe if she made a huge scene with Vera, the bunny would get the message and back off.

Billie returned to the porch with fast steps and determination. She found Vera sitting in the same chair, head drooping, her dress stained by tomato sauce. Fanny must have given her some meatballs to sober her up, but it'll take more than that. Billie smiled. She had her own cure for Vera's drunkenness, and she was ready to administer it.

“I think she's had enough,” Fanny said to Billie. “She asked for another, but I said 'nooo'.”

“Thank you, dear. You did the right thing. I'll take over from here. Could you go out and remind Mr. Ziegfeld that Mr. Urban wants to speak with him. Ask Mr. Jamieson to take them to the library.” She needed to clear the foyer so she could Vera upstairs without causing suspicion.

“Will do, Miss Burke.”

Fanny left.

Vera belched. "Ooo. I'm a bit sloozee."

"Would you like to freshen up, dear?" Billie asked. "I'll take you upstairs. Flo asked about you." She lied. "He'd like to see you refreshed. And we have to get that stain off your dress."

"He's here?" Vera managed a crooked smile and looked up. Her flimsy fingers tried to adjust her hat.

"Oh, he can't see you like this."

"S'pose you're right."

Billie looked in the foyer and saw Flo and Mr. Urban heading for the library. The others had left for food, drink, and dance in the other rooms. The space was clear, and enough people had seen Vera drunk. The next stage was meant to be private, and she didn't want people to suspect anything. She helped Vera up and put the girl's arm over her shoulder. Vera was a few inches taller than Billie and at least 20 pounds heavier. Billie puffed and strained, but adrenaline kept her going.

"Here, lean on me," Billie said as she plodded through the foyer to the oak stairs. She checked for the bunny and saw her dancing in the sun room with the vampire. He grabbed her behind and she slapped him. That vampire was really something. She wondered who he was.

When Billie reached the first step, the Venetian vase she'd bought in Italy blocked her. She'd asked staff to place it there to keep guests from going upstairs. She couldn't move the vase and keep Vera steady, and she couldn't drag her around to the back stairs off the kitchen. That path would take them through the dining room and past a group of *Follies* girls playing cards at the table. They'd insist on helping and would asked questions.

Billie moved to the left of the vase and tried to take Vera around it, but the girl bumped into it, rocking it to-and-fro. The price of that vase equaled two months of Patty's tuition, so she threw her leg out to catch it and motioned with her chin to the returning Mr. Jamieson for help. He took two steps toward her when Eddie ran in from nowhere.

"Can I help?" Eddie asked, his eyes showing concern.

Billie was caught in her sin. But then again, Eddie didn't know what she was up to. "You can move the vase," she said, nodding toward it, hoping he'd leave afterwards.

Eddie strained to lift the vase and set it on a table along the wall. "Can I help you up the stairs?"

"No. I've got it. Thank you." She wasn't proud of her plan, and she didn't want him to see any of it. She liked him, and she cared about what he thought of her.

"Really. You can't manage it," he said. "She looks awful. Isn't that Vera?" He put his arm around the girl's waist.

"It certainly is."

He gave Billie a warning look. "Watch out for her."

"Oh, believe me. I know. Now, Eddie. This is a woman thing. You can't go up with us, and I'm just fine."

He gave her a twisted look.

"Oh, my gosh," Vera said, trying to hold her head up.

"But Billie," he said. "You can't possibly--"

"Really. I'm fine," she said, trying not to snap at him. He certainly was a helper. It was one of his good qualities; but it was also one of his bad. Billie's back and arms were getting weaker, so she glared at him. "You can't come into the powder room. I can handle this."

He removed his arm from around Vera and backed up.

“Good luck,” he said as he waved and left.

On the way upstairs, Vera got vocal. “Oh shmy. Yessa, yessa.”

“Shh, dear.” Billie put her finger over Vera’s lips.

“I’m frine.”

“Shh.” She tried to speed things up, but Vera was too heavy.

Once in Flo’s bedroom, Billie sat the girl down in a red velvet chair and then caught her breath.

Vera patted the tomato sauce stain with her fingers. “Whatch ya gonna shoo?”

“I’m going to freshened you up. And we’re going to clean up that dress too.”

“My shair.”

“You have a hat on and you’re in costume. We just need to tidy you up. You don’t want Mr. Ziegfeld to see you like this, do you?” She almost said “my husband.”

Vera didn’t answer. She couldn’t answer. She was slumped in the chair. Billie removed the girl’s shoes and the beaked hat, threw them on the white bedspread, and then pulled the chord for the help. Within a minute, Deirdre, a tiny girl in a maid’s outfit, appeared.

“Oh, Miss Burke. She looks awful,” Deirdre said. She put her hands over her mouth.

“Please get Mr. Ziegfeld from the library, and bring him here right away.”

“Yes ma’am.”

After Deirdre left, Billie got Vera on her feet and took her into the subway-tiled bathroom. “Close your eyes, dear. Your makeup is running. You don’t want it in your eyes.”

Vera closed her eyes and touched her face. “Really?”

No, not really.



Billie opened the glass door to the shower. “Now, keep your eyes shut. There’s one step up. Lift your right foot.”

Vera stepped into the shower, Billie turned on the cold water full blast, and then closed the door. The wall jets sprayed hard from all directions, stinging and pricking Vera all over. In the mean time, Billie grabbed three white towels from a shelf, set them on the toilet seat, and used one to dry her wet sleeves.

"Oh, oh, oh. Get me out of here," Vera screamed as she banged on the door.

Billie set the towel down, leaned her back against door, and felt Vera's pounding fists.

"Shlet me out. Shlet me out," Vera yelled, her pleas muffled by water jets and the closed door. She pounded harder, and then pushed on the door.

Billie dug her feet into the floor and held her ground as the door bulged in-and-out against her back. She was proud that she could keep a larger woman in there and wondered where the strength had come from. It seemed so easy. But Flo had better get here soon. She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold out.

"Let me out of here," Vera insisted, as the door rattled.

"In a shminute," Billie said, chuckling. "It's good for you. You'll be refreshed." She turned her head just enough to see the girl's face through the glass. Vera's golden hair had come undone and looked brown and clumped.

"My costume," Vera cried.

"We're cleaning it up. Don't worry."

Flo appeared at the door, hands on hips, brown eyes the size of boulder marbles. “What's this about?”

“Flo?” Vera cried out.

He took one step into the bathroom, but Billie raised her arms. He stopped.

“Let me out,” Vera pleaded.

Billie dropped her hands and moved away from the door. Vera pushed and tumbled out, slipping on the wet floor but then catching herself on a towel rack. Flo moved to help.

Billie stomped her foot. “Stand back,” she snapped.

He stopped.

Vera was a sopping, puffy mess. “Oh, God, look at me. Oh God.”

“One of your dearest friends,” Billie said to Flo.

Vera’s face showed embarrassment at first, but then she smiled, revealing her crush. “I’m glad to see you, Flo,” she said in soft, calm voice.

Billie clenched her fists. “Towels are on the toilet.”

“What in the world?” Flo scratched his head. “What is she doing here?”

Billie stood between her enemies, vibrating with nervous energy. “Here’s your floozie. How does she look?”

“What do you mean ‘my floozie’?” he said.

“Just cleaning her up for you.”

“I’m not a floozie,” Vera said.

Billie’s jaw locked.

“She’s not--”

“Don’t, Flo,” Billie said. “I know all about it. Last Thursday night when you came home late, you weren’t at the theater. You were at your apartment in the city -- with *her*. Do you want me to keep going? I have lots of details. I always do.”

He looked like a naughty boy unable to defend himself. He knew she had a system, but he never seemed to learn. Men could be so stupid. He took a step forward, and Billie's arms went up. She wasn't finished. Her body shook. He'd never hit her before, and he wasn't a violent man. But doing this to Vera was something new.

"Stay where you are," Billie said. "She got a little tipsy, your floozie, and I sobered her up. She had five or six, oh, I don't know, maybe seven drinks. Really, Flo. Couldn't you find someone better?"

He winced. "You did this to her."

"I had that many?" Vera took the towels off the toilet, raised the lid, vomited, and then pulled the chord to flush.

"She did it to herself," Billie pointed at Vera. "This is the kind of woman you want?"

Flo took two steps toward Vera, but Billie stepped in the way.

"Why is she even here?" he asked. "We never invite the girls."

Vera heaved into the toilet again. Billie's stomach churned. "All the Follies girls were invited." Billie swallowed to keep from vomiting. The toilet flushed.

"Who invited them?"

"I did. Only six or seven came, though."

Vera wiped her mouth with a towel. "Elsie invited me. She told me Miss Burke would be in Chicago visiting your mother."

Flo inflated like a blow fish, his Roman nose widening. But Billie stayed solid, unafraid, and righteous. His anger fed her power; it's what she wanted to see. She wanted him to explode with it. When this was over, he'd still be hers, and she'd have had her revenge.

Vera patted her shiny soaked dress with a towel.

"How could you be so cruel?" Flo said to Billie, half under his breath. He ran his fingers through his brown hair.

"Cruel. *Me* cruel? You're the cruel one." Billie clenched her fists. "You betrayed me. And your daughter too."

"Leave Patty out of it," he shouted. His face turned red.

"I want to, but *you* drag her in. And you dragged the floozie's husband in too. Did you know she was married?"

Flo's jaw dropped. "You're married?"

"She has a ring on her finger," Billie said, pointing at the girl's hand.

"Still. You had no right to do this," he said.

"You're correct. I had no *right*. I had an *obligation*. I did it to protect our marriage. I did it to protect Patty. I did it to protect our careers. And I'd do it again."

"I need to get this dress off," Vera said. "I'm freezing. Do you have something I can wear?"

"Yes, dear. We're almost finished here," Billie said.

Before the party, Billie had laid a white cotton sheet across Flo's bed. The girl could wear it like a toga, sans undergarments, unless she wanted to wear her own wet dress, or perhaps Flo's bathrobe. It was the floozie's choice. Oh, how delicious this was. She couldn't wait for Flo to see his floozie in her new costume.

"I'm sorry this happened," he said.

"Who are you apologizing too?" Billie asked. "It had better be me."

"Maybe if you were a better wife, he wouldn't have done it," Vera said.

Did that floozie just say "better?" Did she imply that Billie was a shrew? Too old? Not pretty enough? Not loving enough? Billie sometimes wondered if it were true. Wasn't he getting enough from her? Were his affairs her fault?

No, they weren't, God damn it.

Billie lunged at Vera, grabbing for the girl's hair, but it was plastered to her head, so there was nothing to grab. Billie had never fought anyone before and wasn't sure what to do. Vera shoved her. Billie shoved back, hard. Vera's back hit the shower door.

Flo grabbed Billie around the waist, pulled her to the side, and kept Vera away with his left arm. Everyone panted. Billie struggled to get loose, but he was too strong. Every inch of her was on fire. Her heart pounded. She wanted to pull out every all of Vera's hairs, starting with the ones in her nose.

"He never loved you," Vera yelled.

Billie pounded Flo's arm to let her go. That floozie loved him, and that was far more dangerous. She felt better when she thought the girls were just using him. She wanted to tell Vera's husband and let him kill her.

"Vera," Flo snapped.

"You don't want her," Vera said. "You want me. You told me so."

Flo dropped his head and scratched his scalp.

That line was the last emotional sting she could stand. Was it true? He must have told her that, or Vera wouldn't have said it. But her certainly hadn't mean it. He'd probably just used the line to keep her interest. All men did that. Billie reminded herself that he came home to his wife and child every night, so she stopped struggling and took a deep breath.

"You do love me, don't you?" Vera asked Flo, looking hurt.

How stupid had the girl been to risk her marriage for an afternoon in Flo's bed? Vera deserved all the pain she was feeling.

Flo looked up. "No, I don't." Billie looked at his face. He meant it. She relaxed a notch.

Vera wept, and the power went out of Flo's hold. Billie slipped out.

This drama was ready for its curtain. Her heart raced as she walked to the door, turned, and clasped her hands in front of her. She was looking forward to the toga-girl parade.

"Here's what's going to happen," Billie said. "Have Darryl pull up a car and take her home. She can use the back stairs and go through the kitchen. If somebody asks where she went, tell them she was sick and went home." Then, she addressed Vera. "And if you ever come near my husband again, I'll tell yours."

The fight flew out of Vera's face. Her shoulders slumped. "No, no. Please don't do that."

Then it was true. Vera's husband had abused her. Billie could see it in her face. She didn't want to hurt the girl, but wanted the affair to end. She wasn't responsible for Vera's life, and Vera didn't care about the Burke-Ziegfeld family.

Flo looked back-and-forth between them seeming lost and not sure what to do or say.

"Let me get her something dry to wear," Billie said. "You, go and get a car to take her home." She pointed to the hallway.

"We'll discuss this later," he said to Billie.

"You're damn right we will."

As he left the bedroom, he bumped into the witch, the one who had arrived with Vera. She was standing in the doorway. He stopped, and the witch smiled at him, but he looked away and kept going. Billie saw it in her eyes. She wanted to yank the broom out of the girl's hand and beat her with it. Instead, she folded her arms across her chest.

"Help your little magpie friend out," Billie said. "But before you do, let me be clear." She pointed at Vera behind her. "That was a warm up. You come near my husband, and you're next. And it'll be worse. You're little magpie friend is fired from the *Follies*, and I'll see to it she never works in this town again."

"No," Vera cried out.

"And the same goes for you," Billie said to the witch. "And realize this: I'll know. I'll always know. And you'll never know how I found out. And tell the others, too."

The witch smirked. Billie looked at the girl's hands. No ring, so she couldn't use her husband as a tool. But she'd think of something. She might have to.

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