



The
VENUS
VENDETTA

ROSE
PRY

The VENUS VENDETTA

Rose Pry



Spinsters Ink
2009

In Chapter 24 lines from the song “Snowin’ in Brooklyn” by Ferron are reprinted by permission of the composer/artist. “Snowin’ in Brooklyn” was copyrighted to Ferron and published by Nemesis Publishing 1983. It is from her album, Shadows on A Dime.

Copyright © 2009 by Rose Pry

Spinsters Ink
P.O. Box 242
Midway, Florida 32343

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
First Edition

Editor: Katherine V. Forrest
Cover designer: LA Callaghan

ISBN-10: 1-883523-98-2
ISBN-13: 978-1-883523-98-5

*To Linda. You've been the wind in my sails and my safe harbor
in life's storms. Twenty-eight years—never ever dull.*

Acknowledgments

The mystery writer Mary Roberts Rinehart took me for an ice cream cone in her chauffeured limousine when I was seven or so. I was impressed with the writer's lifestyle. Forty-three years later Katherine V. Forrest came to speak at a Women United of Nevada meeting here in Las Vegas. I was not only impressed, but inspired. I went to work writing. Today her divine editing elevates my work. Thank you, pen-sisters.

My firstborn daughter, Kaanii, helped me find my voice and to listen to the sound of my own words. Thank you.

My youngest girl from the first batch, Bobbie, taught me to put the tension and the "Auggggh!" into my stories. Thank you.

My sweetie, Linda, supported me these last ten years as I wrote *The Venus Vendetta*, had it edited and finally published. Thank you, Lindyloo.

My youngest daughter, Roslyn, keeps me young and in touch. Thank you, Rozzie-roo.

My cadre of women has loved me and always told me the truth. Thank you, all.

About the Author

Rose Pry was born in Peekskill, New York, on August 27, 1936, to a first-generation American-Ukrainian mother and a German-born father. Just before the end of the Second World War, after a particularly bitter cold winter, her brave folks pulled up stakes, packed Rose and her sister Evelyn into the backseat of a friend's brand-new 1946 Buick and struck out for the West Coast and a better place to raise a family. She always wrote, even as a child. She kept her scribbles secret but enjoyed reading them to herself.

After a short stint in the air force, a twenty-year marriage to a San Diego cop and having three children, Rose divorced, went back to school, came out, not only of the sexual closet but the housewife closet as well—she became a barber. After a year's apprenticeship in La Jolla, California, she moved to Las Vegas to become one of the first female barbers in Nevada.

She now lives there with her partner of twenty-eight years, a sociology professor, and their sixteen-year-old daughter. The Pry clan now includes five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

She was known quite simply as The Rose when she began penning her comedy column in the *Las Vegas Bugle* twenty-two years ago. And again when she did stand-up comedy in her late fifties. Rosie was her byline when she was a columnist for *What's On* magazine.

Now Spinsters Ink is publishing her first novel, *The Venus Vendetta*.

"My life has provided the research and grist for my literary mill," Rose said recently, "now I'm having such a good time putting it all to work."

Prologue

Encinitas, California

October 1998

There was a salty bite to the air. Tracked-in beach sand grated under Jazz's Armani sneakers. The air in the dingy hall, a complex brew of low tide, pine cleaner and hot chicken wings, made his eyes water. He pulled a clean folded handkerchief from his pocket, daubed his eyes and the cold sweat from his brow. He clutched the cloth over his nose and mouth and peered through a bamboo-bead curtain. His ragged breathing was due more to unbridled anxiety than his sprint down the dirt alley behind the bar.

The burly man he had seen get off the Solana Beach train earlier sat at the bar looking half-again as wide and fourteen shades paler than the pub's late afternoon congregation. He hunched over a tall bottle of beer intently fixed on removing its label in narrow strips. A rank of "dead soldiers" stood empty before him, a naked tally of his bar tab.

Jazz sucked a breath through the hanky and swallowed hard. “This guy is a behemoth,” he exclaimed and fought the urge to turn and bolt back into the gathering night. Grisly police photos of one of the man’s victims flashed unbidden before his eyes. “Oh, God,” he gasped and made a conscious attempt to shift his thoughts to Reggie. His big sister needed him. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment and forced his mind back to the task at hand.

After he took a few deep breaths his heartbeat settled down a bit and the whole beachfront bar came into a sharper focus.

A dozen lean and tanned surfer types clustered at tiny tables around a dance floor. A few loners were scattered around the bar. Palm-frond fan blades swirled smoke with snatches of conversation and vintage Beach Boys.

Jazz reached in his jacket pocket to check the time on his cell phone. 4:48. He made sure it was set on silent. After a few more heartbeats and a deep breath, he sliced through the curtain into the convivial atmosphere of the place. The beads chattered in his wake as he walked halfway down the bar and hoisted himself up onto a stool. “Mickey’s,” he said to the bartender. The man nodded and dropped two stained coasters in front of him.

Three empty stools filled the space between him and the brawny trainman. The stale air felt so thick with his own fear, Jazz was sure the lout could smell it.

He forced himself to count to twenty before he raised his eyes to the angled, overhead mirror that ran the length of the bar. In back of his own reflection, Southern California beachfront bar-life played itself out on this early Saturday evening.

His eyes snapped back when the barman set a frosty mug and a squat green bottle on the coasters in front of him.

“Go, Rebels!” The barkeep smiled and knuckled the UNLV Rebel logo on Jazz’s Windbreaker. Jazz raised the bottle to him and waved away the change. His phone vibrated. It was Gillian. He ignored it.

Three thousand miles away Gillian Waters sat on the floor of a darkened elevator. The door was propped open a couple of inches with a patent leather wingtip. The light from the outer hall cast a narrow beam on a lock of gray hair falling across her strained eyes. “Good grief, Jazz,” she rasped. “Pick up. Pick up.” His cell went to voicemail again. She took hers from her ear and heaved a sigh.

Jazz tipped his head back to swig directly from the wide-mouth bottle, bringing his gaze back to the mirror. Gradually he eased his eyes to the right. From this angle the huge man’s sweaty bald crown, surrounded by a ring of closely cropped hair, seemed to rest directly on his massive shoulders. A fringe of curly back hair crept above his wrinkled collar, and his banana-thick, tattooed fingers were busy stripping his fourth longneck Schlitz. Jazz transposed the mirror images of letters on the man’s fingers. The left fist read, ROAR, and the right, RIP ’N’.

A shudder waved through Jazz’s body. If he held any doubt about this guy’s real identity, Ripley’s nickname was . . . Rip.

The hum of casual barroom conversation mimicked a bass line to some circa ’70s Creedence Clearwater on the jukebox. In the far corner, a leathery cadaver of a man with a gray ponytail perched his bony butt on an old wind-up piano stool and played along on a tinny upright.

A woman’s abrupt shriek of laughter pierced the drone. The big man’s startled gray eyes jerked up to search the dusty mirror. His raptor-like gaze swept left and locked onto Jazz’s frozen, wide-eyed gape.

Jazz felt the muscles of his inner thighs go weak.

Steady now, he admonished himself as he tore his eyes free and chased the acrid taste of anxiety with a swig of beer. After mustering a degree of nonchalance, he swiveled his head and said, “Have we,” his voice cracked, “have we met somewhere?”

The big man looked directly at Jazz with shrewd, suspicious eyes. His expression relaxed visibly once he assessed Jazz’s slight frame and

the rainbow of six stones piercing the rim of his right ear.

“Could be,” the man answered with a smile. “I’ve been there.”

His shaggy, unkempt eyebrows and knobby nose made him look less menacing, but his chilly smile was purely a contraction of facial muscles and did not involve his eyes. After several silent moments he nodded toward the rear exit and said, “What’s say we grab some air and see if we can remember?” He dropped a folded bill next to the pile of peeled labels and drained the longneck. He picked up a scruffy suitcase and headed for the back door.

“We could just talk here . . .” Jazz said to the man’s retreating back as it disappeared through the swaying beads. “. . . Or not.”

His phone vibrated. Once again he ignored it and downed the last of his beer. It slid into his churning stomach like ice-cold thumb-tacks. He gave his option cards one last mental shuffle as he parted the curtain. Everything in his being willed him to avoid the dirty alleyway, but as far as he could see, his options leaned heavily toward . . . none. He wasn’t willing to give this randy guy what he seemed to be expecting but at least getting him out the back door was a good start.

Maybe I can convince him to leave the area and avoid Reggie all together. He caught the closing door and started down the five steps to the dimly lit alley.

The last traces of daylight were fading fast. A murky layer of slate-gray fog lowered the sky and muffled the surf. The air was chilled and heavy with the fetid smell of rotting seaweed.

Various scenarios reeled through Jazz’s mind as the heavy door clicked shut. The abrupt silence roared in his ears and jarred his equilibrium.

“Sir,” he began, feigning a casual air, “I do need to talk to you.”

The bruiser dropped his suitcase to the gritty concrete. At the grating sound, Jazz intuitively twisted to vault back up the stairs. The huge man was fast. He grabbed a handful of Jazz’s jacket and yanked him around into a jackhammer punch to the left side of his face. R I P ’N’ exploded into Jazz’s left peripheral vision just before the fireworks burst behind his eyes. He bounced off the metal railing

and landed face down on the littered concrete.

“Pervert!” the man spat. “Fuckin’ boys upstate don’t mean a fuckin’ thing, don’t give you fuckin’ punk pansies the okey dokey to come on to me on the outside,” he snarled, “so maybe I’ll just teach you not to jump to fuckin’ conclusions.”

The searing pain in Jazz’s head didn’t stop him from musing snottily that the jerk managed to use fuckin’ four times in one sentence. He struggled to push himself upright with one hand as he held out the other in an ineffective effort to stave off the attack.

“You don’t understa—” he began.

The big man sliced off Jazz’s protest with a field-goal kick to his ribs that lifted him slightly and rolled him to the murky edge of the puddle of light.

The man threw his arms into the air and did a lumbering jig in mock end-zone triumph. “He kicks! He scores!” he announced skyward and simulated a cheering crowd. “I just love doing that,” he gushed.

All Jazz could do was struggle to suck air into his deflating lungs. He knew then he was going to die and couldn’t think of a reason why or a single thing he could do to change that fate. He curled into himself like an injured armadillo. Hugging his pain, he felt it . . . the cell phone in his Windbreaker pocket. He peered through thickening webs and managed to press one button and then another. More than anything now, he wanted to sleep.

With the pointed toe of one scruffy boot, the savage flipped Jazz onto his back, his finger hit the speaker button as the little phone scudded from his limp hand into the shadows next to the stairs. Jazz abandoned his body then and let his mind slither like the little phone into its own darkening void.

A doleful foghorn mourned offshore.

The brute unbuckled the young man’s belt and yanked his leather pants and white briefs to his knees. He lit a cigarette, dragged deeply and surveyed his work. He bent over and grabbing a fistful of the young man’s jacket dragged him toward the stairs.

They didn’t hear the whispered, “Jazz?”

The damp, sandy concrete abraded Jazz's naked buttocks and nudged him upward toward wakefulness.

"Oh, God! Reg, the alley!" he sobbed in desperation, before drifting far away to search through his past to find a time and place where he felt true safety.

"Oh, God! Reg, the alley!" the big man mimicked in a prissy falsetto.

Jazz's mind was already far, far afield when the man tossed his cigarette aside, picked up the limp body like a duffel of dirty laundry and threw it onto its belly halfway up the steps to the bar.

Part One

Chapter 1

Indian Summer

1972

Jazz sprawled on his belly in the fine dirt under the scarf-draped plywood shelves that formed The Family's booth. His left cheek rested on one outstretched arm as he dropped small polished stones into little piles in the dirt. The pebbles landed with a click and a teeny puff of dust.

Today, he decided, this was his *very* special place and the silky smooth stones were his *very* best things. *Very* was his new word. He liked the way his teeth bit his bottom lip when he said the word.

"*Very, very, very* good," he whispered. "Star's here. I wonder where Kali and Reggie are—or if that *very* teeny ant can see me."

Vestiges of summer warmed the late afternoon air. Gleeful voices of children at play wafted from an adjacent meadow. A garland of

makeshift booths fringed a clearing in a small, roadside forest. Dingy lengths of clothesline anchored The Family's booth to nearby trees. From these anchor ropes a colorful chorus line of shirts and dresses danced and fluttered in the autumn breeze.

People ebbed and flowed around the circle of booths. Most of them wore tattered jeans or bellbottoms, variegated shirts or peasant dresses. There was lots of laughter and music. The weekend hippies had turned in their platform shoes for suede moccasins or leather sandals. Upwind, charcoal stoves grilling assorted foods threaded on sticks sent up fragrant smoke.

Jazz liked to let the silky stones slip from his fingers as he counted, "One, two, seven, nine, twenty-two." He liked silk.

He was a slight boy with skin tanned almost the same color as his faded shorts. A sprinkle of freckles dusted his perpetually peeling nose, and tousled white-blond curls framed his face.

He fingered the hammered silver charm that dangled from a supple, knotted hemp cord tied around his neck and listened to some of The Family making music down by the food booths. He mouthed some words about a peace train. *Trains with whistles and engineers are . . . groovy.* He snickered at the word. He could hear the V sound. Reggie had shown him how to pump his fist up and down so the engineer would toot his whistle. "Groovy," he said and laughed.

He liked it here under the counters of the booth hidden by the scarves and stuff that draped down. It felt familiar, like a secret cave that never changed much no matter how far The Family drove in the old flowered bus.

He remembered Reggie, his sort of sister, telling him the story about how they became The Family—at the very beginning.

"*Very,*" he chanted in a whisper.

"The times were too-mul-chew-us," he crooned to himself in Reggie's creepy story voice. That word meant bumpy she had told him. Jazz didn't mind bumpy. He even liked it.

In The Family everybody loved everybody but Star and Kali cared for Jazz and his best friend Reggie most of the time. Reggie was Jazz's special person. He wasn't her "bellybutton" brother. She said he was

her “Bonus Brother.”

He closed his eyes and heard Reggie’s voice reciting from memory word for word.

In spring and summer the commune in upstate New York is home. But, before the onset of the coldest months, like birds, they migrate toward a warmer winter. Never later than September, they gather their motley collection of brightly flowered vehicles to form a caravan and wend as far south as local tolerance will permit.

He always forgot to ask her what motley and tolerance meant.

The grownups make music, cast candles in the sand and roll fat sticks of incense, Reggie recited in his head. Some make beadwork jewelry and guitar straps. Kali and Star sew filmy dresses and shirts with random bursts of brilliant colors. They call all these things “wares” and sell them at “Happenings” like fairs and flea markets, Love-Ins and sometimes music festivals, she had explained.

They had joined this fair a week ago on Reggie’s sixth birthday.

Jazz thought the powdery dirt smelled like sunshine and old leaves today. His smooth stones were like the magic beans in that story about the giant that Star read him a bunch of times.

“Virginia,” Jazz said just over his breath. “We are in Virginia . . . Ver-gin-ya.”

This morning he heard some Ver-gin-ya people call The Family flower children and hippies. He would ask Reggie about that.

Sometimes he and Reggie stretched out on their backs in a field or on the beach and peeked at the sky through his translucent stones. But, he remembered he mustn’t ever look right at the sun, even with the stones because Reggie told him he might get “eclipses” and never see ever, ever again. He promised her he would never do that—not even a little squint.

Jazz rolled over on his back and looked up at Star. With short stubby fingers she lifted her long, dark hair from her soft shoulders and bent to one side to shake it loose. She spotted Jazz under the counter and gave him a sleepy smile. Her eyes looked soft and drowsy.

“Hi, Jazzyboy,” she said.

“Hi, Star,” he answered.



Star straightened and tilted her head toward a gust of wind as it rustled through the trees. A flurry of yellow and orange leaves released their grip on the branches and drifted down to herald the fall. She turned her face to the confetti shower and Jazz laughed at the sight.

“It hasn’t rained once since we got here,” she said, and turned slowly, her face upturned and her arms outstretched, “What’s it been, a week?” she asked of no one in particular. She drew a deep breath of sweet autumn air. It carried the scent of decomposing leaves and the freshening hint of an Indian summer storm. “I think maybe today.”

The old school bus was parked between the trees a few yards away. Bright flowers, vines and peace signs covered most of the original yellow paint.

“I’m glad we parked the bus close by,” Star thought out loud. “If it rains, I can get most of the dresses under cover in two trips.”

She was deep in detailed thoughts of how she would sweep the things off the counter into boxes underneath when a tall, thin, bearded man emerged from the crowd and sliced into her fuzzy periphery. He wore a stark, ill-fitting black suit with a skinny black tie.

“Look at that guy,” she said, annoyance creeping into her reverie. “He looks like an Amish hit man,” she chuckled, amusing herself.

The stranger’s dark angular looks seemed out of place here amid the colorful booths and the casual dress of the crowd, but her little inside joke left a broad smile on her lips when she greeted him.

He glanced at the wares on the counter and picked up a gritty, gray ball. “This feels like sand,” he said and indicated the round ball of a candle in his hands. He lifted his ice-blue eyes to hers. Star felt little snapping synapses scamper up her neck and prickle her scalp.

It only took a moment for her to shrug off her weedy paranoia. “Yes, sir,” she said in a pleasant, friendly voice. “The gritty sides of the candle come from the beach.”

He looked at her, his eyes void of understanding.

“We cast the candles in the beach sand,” she elaborated, “at the

beach . . .” she trailed off redundantly.

She remained aware of him as he fingered the soft, cotton scarves, the shiny pebbles and beadwork. He picked up a small ceramic smoking stone, set it down and drew a fat, fragrant hand-rolled stick of incense from a bunch sprouting out of an empty peanut butter jar on the counter. He passed the pungent stick under his nose.

Jazz listened to the voices as he fingered little bits of subtly tinted, translucent sea-glass worn smooth in the ocean. These were the most magic.

When the dark stranger made his selection Star placed the gray, sand-cast candle in a small brown paper bag and took his money. She dropped the incense stick into the bag and waved off further payment with another smile.

Jazz clenched a piece of smooth, yellow sea-glass in the socket of each eye. He scooted out a bit from his hiding place and peered skyward. The startled man looked down at the tousle-haired, yellow-eyed boy.

“That’s just Jazz,” Star assured him noting his surprise.

Jazz looked directly into the stranger’s gaunt, yellow face. His own eyes shot wide and the pieces of glass fell to the dirt. He felt creepy-crawlies in his chest. It looked as though there were two holes in the man’s head and he could peer clean through those holes into the pale blue sky. A brief smile escaped the man’s somber face and Jazz ducked back under the shelves.

The man looked back at Star, held her gaze a moment too long then turned away. She shuddered and felt her tiny neck hairs bristle. *Weird.*

A girl had been watching the whole scene unfold from the lowest branch of a tree behind the booth. She wore a dress like the ones swaying from the booth moorings. Under it was a pair of tattered, olive drab and moss-green camouflage pants. Her crinkled reddish-blond curls flipped and twined around her serious face and her two bottom front teeth were missing. She slipped down to the ground with a thud and scuttled under the counter beside Jazz.

“Hi, Reg,” he greeted her. She grunted a response. Together they

peeked out between the colorful scarves and watched the tall stranger as he left with two other dark-clad men.

Star squinted her eyes and tilted her head. The suits' retreating legs looked like angular, black birds crisscrossing into a sunset.

"Jeez," Star commented as she, too, dropped down cross-legged into the dust. She held the sputtering flame of a wooden match to the twisted cigarette she pulled from behind one ear. The paper burned unevenly and smelled like home. Gripping the doobie with her lips and squinting her eyes against the rising smoke she held a fat incense in the flame before she shook out the match and ground the charred remains into the dirt. After the incense burned a few moments she waved it in circles until the flame died and the tip glowed burnished orange. Wisps of patchouli and tangy THC spiraled into the air joining the fragrance of impending rain and roasting food.

A tall, slender woman with a tangle of shoulder-length auburn spirals stepped into the booth and dropped to the dirt beside them.

"Hey, Kali, girl," Star greeted her.

Both women wore gossamer dresses. Kali's tawny hair was dotted with tiny, purple wildflowers. Six-year-old Reggie's face mirrored the slender woman's but the child's bore a more serious expression.

Each woman in turn sucked on the doobie through pursed lips. They made loud hisses when they drew the heady smoke deep into their lungs and smiled at the children with half-closed eyes. They held their breath for several seconds before the pent-up smoke expanded and whooshed out amid coughs and sputters. Soon they started to giggle. The children giggled, too.

A gust of wind swept through the clearing. More leaves rained down. Star felt a chill. She pulled down a little tie-dye shirt and slipped it over Jazz's bony, suntanned shoulders.

The boy scooped up his polished stones and funneled them into a soft drawstring bag tied to a belt loop on his shorts. He shoved the bag deep into his pocket.

Kali reached up on the counter and got a small brown paper bag of dried apricots. She popped one into her mouth and gave one to Star and each of the children to chew. Syrupy sweet drool dripped

down their chins. She pushed a few more of the wrinkled orange discs into the children's pockets.

"Share," she said as she cupped Jazz's little upturned face in her hand. Then with kisses on their foreheads, she shooed them toward the meadow and the other children.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

