

"CANDY GIRL"

For Tiffany, each and every Saturday and Sunday was welcomed as both an opportunity and an adventure. Though her teenage coworkers griped and whined about the hours, the pressure, and the fact that they were missing the chance to hang out, play video games, or simply chill, weekends to her meant two new chances to venture into neighborhoods devoid of rusted pickups parked on lawns, *No Trespassing* signs, and meth labs.

As important as the money Tiffany made was the possibility of viewing worlds that had seemed as off-limits as London, Paris, or even the moon: communities with spacious houses, expensive cars, and often pools, tennis courts, or both.

Just after dawn, she and other needy kids would be picked up by vans and driven to affluent areas where they would ring doorbells, then go into their pitch.

"Along with other local teens," Tiffany would say with well-practiced innocence and emotion, all the while displaying an official-looking document, "I'm raising money for charity by selling candy. Since I'm making a sacrifice by giving up my weekend for a worthy cause, I hope you'll pitch in with a generous purchase."

For a fifteen-year-old living in a trailer with an alcoholic mom who scraped by on disability checks, Medicaid, and a steady diet of soap operas, the fifty, sixty, or sometimes even seventy dollars given to Tiffany at the end of each shift was nothing short of a blessing. But no more so than the awareness that came from spending time in Beverly Hills, Studio City, Torrance, and other places where people lived the kind of lives Tiffany had only previously witnessed on-screen.

The pleasure derived from the long Saturdays and Sundays increased substantially when

Tiffany was befriended by the daughter of the crew leader, an otherwise standoffish sixteen-year-old named Chloe, who always seemed to have a secret stash of weed. Together the two girls would smoke, sell, sneak off to snack on brownies, bagels, or burritos, then sell some more chocolates, jelly beans, and mints.

"You down for it?" Chloe would ask several times each day, knowing full well what Tiffany's response would be. "Am I ever!" Tiffany would happily reply.

As the friendship grew, Tiffany began spending Saturday nights with Chloe. Though in truth what was becoming a home-away-from-home was nothing more than a tract house in an undistinguished town called Valencia, thanks to the hot tub, the plasma TV, and the weekly delivery of a large pepperoni and pineapple pizza, it seemed to Tiffany like the closest thing to heaven.

Best of all was a wonderful combination of available cash and little parental scrutiny. Because of an acrimonious divorce, Chloe's domineering mom – "The Witch," as Chloe called her – was a non-factor over the weekend, when it was her crew leader dad who had custody. He, in turn, made life for the girls even more relaxed by insisting that away from work Tiffany call him Casey, rather than Mr. Olson.

As weeks of sleep-overs stretched into months, instead of simply leaving the girls to their own resources, Casey Olson assumed an even greater involvement in the post-work events, taking them out for ice cream, movies, or trips to various malls. Those jaunts, after a certain point, were followed by three-way computer games at home, plus forays into shared joints or an occasional rum-and-Coke.

But everything changed dramatically on a rainy night in March when, thanks to more grass and booze than usual, Chloe passed out on the living room sofa. After covering his daughter with a blanket, Casey took Tiffany, who was equally blasted, by the hand, then led her into his bedroom.

The following morning came what Tiffany later thought of as *The Great Unsaid*. Waking up naked in Casey's bed, she found herself far too confused and embarrassed to ask what had taken place. Nor did Casey offer anything other than a chaste kiss on the forehead. Chloe, as well, made no mention of the event.

Yet the following Saturday evening, and the Saturday after that, the sequence was repeated. Complicating matters ever more, Casey took to picking Tiffany up after school on Tuesdays and Thursday for what he called *private time*, followed by dinner.

Gifts became part of the ritual: blouses, sweaters, and jewelry for Tiffany, plus smoked hams, boxes of gourmet beef jerky, and assortments of candy for her mother.

For Tiffany's birthday, Casey took the two girls to a steakhouse. After dinner, a cake with a candle was brought out by singing waiters. Then came a bevy of presents, including a plane ticket.

The destination Casey selected for Tiffany and himself was Montana. But only when the two of them arrived there did it become clear that the purpose was not simply a vacation. Casey had chosen, Tiffany discovered, a state where the legal age for marriage was sixteen.

Tiffany's initial shock was overcome by Casey's repeated assurances that love could – and more importantly *would* – conquer all. As for questions about Tiffany's age once they returned to California, that, too, was covered thanks to phony ID transmogrifying the new Mrs. Olson into a twenty-one-year-old.

Overnight Tiffany's life had changed in ways that would have seemed unimaginable. No longer a high school student who peddled candy door-to-door on weekends, she had become not merely a grown-up, but the co-leader of a crew of what once had been her peers.

After her mother had been placated by Casey with gifts ranging from a used Chevy truck

to a new refrigerator, plus a case of Southern Comfort, and Chloe, for pledging not to utter a peep, had been given a Kia, Tiffany started to learn the real truth about the candy business. The first revelation was that despite the patter used in the sales pitch, the percentage going to charity was zero. Then came the news that since most purchases were paid for in cash, virtually nothing was paid in tax to either the state or the federal government.

As she became more and more knowledgeable, all the while shopping for a new wardrobe with a Visa card, and driving a white Lexus instead of being picked up in a van, Tiffany began to pose questions. Why, she asked, was Casey satisfied with the way things were? Why not add additional crews? And, more importantly, why not new territories?

Goaded by his enterprising new wife, Casey recruited first one new crew, then another. Despite serious misgivings, he also began adding additional turf.

When incursions into other parts of Southern California engendered protests from rival crew leaders, Casey's inclination was to back off. But Tiffany was undaunted.

"Show me you're a real man," she taunted.

Beyond merely pressing Casey into action, Tiffany took to accompanying him on forays that began with breaking one crew leader's leg with a baseball bat, continued with firebombing another one's Mustang convertible, then escalated from there.

Swiftly, Tiffany and Casey acquired both a reputation and nicknames. They were the "Bonnie and Clyde" of an industry with more than peripheral ties to organized crime. Respected by some, feared by others, but aware of the potential for reprisals, they made a key decision: to send Chloe, whose troubles with her mother were escalating, to boarding school.

With Tiffany's last tie to childhood gone, their violent expansion continued until they were inevitably summoned to a sit-down with one of the national candy czars: a guy named Ronny Angelo who flew in from New Jersey.

"Seems to me the two of you have serious ambitions," Angelo said after drinks were

brought to their corner booth at a San Fernando Valley steakhouse.

"Which means good things for you as the business grows," Casey stated.

"Not if you keep turning this place into the Wild West," Angelo countered.

"Want to hear the solution?" Tiffany asked.

"I'm listening."

"Let us run things out here."

"Whoa," Angelo said coldly. "That goes way beyond ambition."

"She didn't mean it," Casey interjected.

"Like hell, I didn't!" Tiffany insisted.

"What if I say you're finished in this business?" Angelo sneered.

"And what if I say you're about to sing soprano?" Tiffany shot back.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Angelo snarled.

"Take a peek under the table," Tiffany said icily.

Sliding back a little, Ronny Angelo peered under the table so as to see the .45 that Tiffany was aiming at his crotch. Then, after studying Tiffany carefully, he burst into laughter.

"Where'd you find this broad?" Angelo asked Casey. "She's got bigger balls than Mike Tyson!"

With Ronny Angelo's blessing, the his-and-hers business blossomed into a burgeoning empire that encompassed much of Southern California, with plans underway for Arizona and Nevada as well.

For Tiffany, though the sudden power and affluence provided an adrenaline rush unlike anything she had ever experienced, retaining focus never became a problem. Every waking moment was devoted to the business.

Not so for Casey. Drugs and alcohol began to assume an ever-increasing importance in his

life, and not just rum-and-Cokes or weed. Despite constant denials, Tiffany started finding evidence of both crack and heroin use, which Casey dismissed as merely recreational, as he did the rumblings about excessive gambling and hookers.

But even with Casey promising to toe the mark, money started slipping away faster than it poured in.

Yet still their team's success seemed both boundless and endless.

Everything changed, however, after a 3 AM phone call from Ronny Angelo.

"They're on us!" he warned from a phone booth somewhere in North Jersey.

"Who's *they*?" mumbled a still half-asleep Casey.

"The Feds."

"Feds as in?" asked Tiffany, who had picked up an extension.

"The FBI, the Justice Department, and for all I know the goddamn Marines!"

"Which means?" Tiffany demanded.

"No activity, no taking money out of accounts, no nothin' until further notice."

"B-but –" Casey protested.

"No *buts*! No motherfuckin' *buts* whatsoever!"

For the next few days, Casey's mood fluctuated between blind rage and utter despondency, which translated into zero communication with Tiffany. Then, without a word, he disappeared for a day-and-a-half, failing to answer his cell or to return calls from Tiffany.

Yet when he at last returned home, his mood was surprisingly sunny.

"Yours truly has got a solution," he announced to Tiffany. "A way for us to keep our heads above water."

"Tell me."

"Movies."

"Meaning?"

"Say hello to your husband the producer."

"And what does that make me?"

"A star," Casey stated proudly.

What that meant, Tiffany discovered to her chagrin, was an entry into the world of porn. When she balked, Casey tried sweet talk and promises, then assurances that the experience would be great. Faced with continued resistance, he pleaded with her, stating that it would only be short term – just enough time for the two of them to get back on their feet before relocating to a simpler life in farm country.

Still apprehensive on the morning of the first shoot, Tiffany allowed Casey to slip her some Ecstasy so as to override her inhibitions, then heard for the first time the screen name that he had chosen for her: Candy.

In the aftermath of the first shoot, Tiffany found Casey to be surprisingly grateful and attentive. That changed, however, when she balked at the mention of a next session. Called an ingrate after all he had done for her, she found herself being smacked around by Casey, who then dragged her into the bedroom by her hair.

"This is what you're good for!" he screamed, ripping off her clothes, then forcing himself upon her.

No longer able to play the mature toughie who stood up so successfully to Ronny Angelo, Tiffany found herself breaking down, then remaining inconsolable for hours afterward, even when Casey tried to apologize.

Faster than she and Casey had become rising stars on the candy circuit, the newly dubbed "Candy" became a sought-after commodity – literally the new girl in town – in the Southern California-based world of porn.

Once again money began to flow. With that came the return of Casey's indulgences. Considering himself the Spielberg or Scorsese of adult film, he dove full-force back into the realm of drugs, gambling, hookers, and, if the rumors were true, even boys.

Knowing she had to do something, but no longer feeling either competent or capable, Tiffany spent sleepless nights tossing and turning in bed while searching for an answer.

With Casey becoming more and more dissolute with each passing day, Tiffany's sole source of solace was exercise. Swimming, jogging, and yoga became almost a religion, occupying her time and quieting the voices in her mind.

It was while strolling home from a jog, with an iced latte in hand, that Tiffany saw two men who were almost certainly Feds leading a handcuffed Casey out of the house toward a government car.

As inconspicuously as possible, Tiffany turned the corner, then stopped to gather herself.

Choosing not to go anywhere near either her house or her car, she walked instead toward a bus stop, then boarded the first one bound for anywhere.

Arriving in Hollywood without even a change of clothes, Tiffany bought herself a slice of pizza and a bottle of water, then wandered the streets aimlessly until dusk.

At the sight of a church, she went inside and, for the first time in ages, sat down and tried her best to pray for guidance. But no celestial voice responded. Nor was there any sort of revelation or epiphany.

Exhausted, Tiffany found a nook where she was unlikely to be noticed, then curled up and

fell asleep on the church floor.

Waking up at dawn, Tiffany sat and tried again to pray, which once more yielded not one iota of enlightenment. Knowing that something must be done, but not sure what, she then stepped out of the church, only to find herself confronted by kids on the way to school.

Struck by their innocence, Tiffany could not help but feel that a significant part of her childhood had been stolen from her.

Friendless and feeling almost hopelessly lost, she wiped a tear from her eye, then pulled out her iPhone and searched for a number for the FBI.

"I think you folks are looking for me," she said once she connected with an agent.

"Your name please?"

"You know me as Tiffany Olson."