

# SNOWCHUTE



# **SNOWCHUTE**

**By NH Bruce**

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*This book is dedicated to all my family and friends who have made my life easier than most single parents should expect. While I haven't always relied on them as much as I should have, their presence in my life has been a blessing that has been instrumental in helping raise my children. For everyone who has helped us over the years, thank you!*



Georgie pulled his hand back from the shot, staring at me blankly. I was intimately familiar with this stare from years as his best mate. Once he got an idea, I wouldn't hear the end of it until the idea failed, or Georgie replaced it with another idea. I waited patiently for the ridiculous thought to form in Georgie's mouth.

"Bloody hell!" Georgie said with eyes wide. "You might become the writer to the Stars!"

I nearly choked on my ale and did everything in my power to keep from spraying it across the pub. "Me?" I said. "Admiral Boring?"

"Your books aren't that bad," Penelope said.

"Are you kidding, luv?" Georgie said in a mocking tone. "They are the epitome of boring because he had no one worth writing about!"

I sighed. Georgie had called me Admiral Boring ever since I published my first book about the 17th Century Admiral Mansell. He was famous for his battles against the Muslim pirates of the Barbary Corsairs, and while the history of naval leaders did not appeal to everyone, that book gained notoriety in academic circles for its illumination of an often overlooked period in history. To this day, they often quoted the book in modern papers on naval tactics.

"They are worthy people of note," I said for the millionth time.

"Crap!" Georgie said loudly with his arms spread wide for emphasis. "Nobody cares about dead admirals except nearly dead admirals. Oh, and egg heads like you."

"Thanks, mate, appreciate your support," I said, frowning. He and I have a long history, so I allow his eccentricities.

Georgie frowned and walked over, grabbing me around the shoulders. "Don't be so glum, mate," he said through a thick breath of fish and chips. He's a heavy drinker and started long before I arrived, so the bitters hung heavily in the air. "Those LA types will love your bleeding accent and fawn all over you. Ricki Heart is only the first in a long line of clients," he stopped and stared skyward spreading his arms as if viewing a billboard. "Harry Holden, writer to the Stars!"

"Georgie!" Penelope said. "I don't think Harry wants that."

"It's alright, Pen," I said calmly. "If this one goes well, I wouldn't turn down other offers. I have to pay the bills."

“Damn right you do!” Georgie said. “And I will be the one who helps you do it. I’ll be your bloody agent. I always wanted to see Hollywood, especially Grauman’s Chinese Theater.”

I sighed and tried not to roll my eyes. “You are not an agent, and I already have one.”

“Manager?” Georgie asked hopefully.

“I don’t need one!” I said a bit forcefully.

Georgie placed his hand on his chest in mock pain. “That hurts, mate,” he said before turning to Penelope. “You see? He hasn’t even left yet, and already he’s treating us peasants like dirt. You watch. He’ll forget all about us little folk after he’s famous.”

Penelope smirked. “Famous,” she said. “Wouldn’t that be nice? Can you bring me back a T-shirt?”

“A what?” Georgie asked. “How crass, luv! Perhaps a pair of Giorgio Armani’s from Rodeo Drive?”

“Ha, ha,” I said. “I’ll see what I can find for you, Pen.”

Penelope smiled. “I would love to see Hollywood. Take pictures, won’t you?”

“I will,” I said, raising my glass. “To Hollywood!”

Penelope and Georgie raised their glasses before we all drank heavily. Georgie slammed his glass down hard and signaled the bartender. “Pints for my friends!” he winked at me. “You can pay now that you’re rich.”

I sighed and nodded. “Why not?”

Georgie and Penelope are my two best friends, and if I were being truly honest, my only friends. Penelope is a librarian I met shortly after publishing my first biography. We dated for a while, but it never quite clicked, especially after she met my friend, Georgie. Now they are dating, and to be quite frank, it works.

He is outgoing, swarthy, and makes more money in a month selling expensive cars than I do in a year. Penelope is shy, attractive, but understated in her dress, and nearly the opposite of Georgie. But the look she gave him and he gave her when he thought no one was looking spoke volumes. They were madly in love.

I’ve never known love, but not for lack of trying. I supposed part of my problem was my obsession of dusty shelves in antique bookstores rather than flashing lights of nightclubs. I still believed there was someone out there who might find that charming, and maybe our paths had not yet crossed.



I eyed Georgie as he gave Penelope a hug and one of those intimate smiles. No one ever looked at me that way, and it depressed me. Aunt Lucy said I was a hopeless romantic, but she had never married, so she was not the greatest source for love advice.

I supposed I was a romantic. To be honest, I spend most of my time reading about love in old books that spin fantastic tales written by other hopeless romantics. We writers are great in our minds, but often less so in actual life.

My deceased parents left me little more than the flat I lived in with my parrot, Finn. He was an African Grey named after one of my favorite childhood characters, Huckleberry Finn. After reading about his wild and reckless antics, I yearned for travel and adventure. I wanted to be like him, free from all cares, blowing in the wind wherever it took me. It spurred on my interest in pirates.

In the deepest depths of my soul, I knew it was romantic rubbish. But it was all I had growing up in London. I could not fight, did not have significant looks or athletic abilities, and was just slightly above average at school. Books were my only escape, so naturally, I began writing them. I met Georgie in third grade after a severe beating at the hands of other lads at school. He took me under his wing, and no one beat me again.

Georgie came from a large family of boys. Fighting was their natural way to interact with each other. Georgie's father constantly preached about fighting for whatever you wanted out of this world. He said if you did not stand up for yourself, you would be ground underfoot. Perhaps Georgie hadn't wanted that to happen to me, so he adopted me as his younger brother. We even went to university together. Despite his constant scheming, he was an excellent mate.

Now, I was finally on my way to a real adventure, and it scared me to death. I had never been outside England. Considering I would write a book about a famous South American pop star, it overwhelmed me. Maybe Georgie was right. If I didn't fail, it might lead to similar work. Unfortunately, Admiral Boring seemed closer to failure than success.

"You okay, Harry?" Penelope asked, concerned.

"What?" I said as I roused from my musings. "Oh, sure. I am just a little nervous, I guess."

"Don't be, mate," Georgie said as he took aim at the dart board like he would win the World Darts Championship. "If you can make those old admiral's come to life, imagine what you can do with a crazy pop

star like Ricki Heart,” he released the dart as he finished, and it plowed dead center for a bull’s eye. “If you want success, take it!”

“Easy for you,” I said. “You’re successful no matter what you do.”

“Am I?” Georgie said in mock surprise. “Oh, sure, if you need a car I am your man, but anything else? What else have I succeeded in?”

“Oh, I know this,” Penelope said. “You helped win the cricket championship at university.”

Georgie frowned. “Yeah, but what else?”

“City league championship for your dart division,” I added.

Penelope raised her hand. “Oh, you won that Tough Mudder ten-K last year.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Perhaps I have won occasionally,” Georgie finally conceded. “But I am not famous or wealthy, but you could be, mate!” he grabbed my arm and raised it high like I had just won a gold medal in the Olympics. “Harry bleeding Holden, winner!”

“He’s right, Harry,” Penelope said, beaming. “You can do this. I know you can.”

I pulled my arm back and looked around the pub. Thankfully, most of the patrons have learned to ignore Georgie’s outbursts. “I hope you are right, because if I’m not successful, I may never get to write again.”

“Oh, bloody hell!” Georgie said in mock distress. “Have you learned nothing from me? Ah, you’re on your own, mate!” he scoffed.

“Don’t say that, Georgie,” Penelope chastised before turning to me. “We will always be here for you, Harry, whether you are successful.”

“Thanks, Pen. That means a lot,” I said seriously. I would miss them and didn’t want to disappoint them. Our world was barely four blocks on a side and bringing something adventurous into our lives was a welcome change. I mean, how hard was it to write about a pop star? The tabloids wrote about them all the time.

\* \* \*

‘I’m Having Ricki Heart’s Baby!’ is the headline on the tabloid held by the woman across the aisle from me. While I doubted the claim was true, Ricki’s well-known libido had left the wreckage of notable women in Hollywood and the music industry. Because of this, he had never married.

I was flipping through the details about his life sent to me by his manager, Leonard Goldstein, but they were Cliff Notes about specifics

and really nothing about the person. It gave me a rough idea of his background, but nothing about who he was. At least with old naval officers, I typically found a diary or personal memoir passed down through the family to offer a view into their personality and thinking. With Ricki, I would have to use the limited time I would spend with him to pry intimate details loose.

I was to meet him in Aspen, Colorado, where he was filming a Christmas music special with country singer Allison McCawlie and then travel by car to Los Angeles where I would have only four days to interview him before he left for the start of his next tour. The trip would be less than two weeks, and I had little doubt it would be chaos with someone so famous. Nonetheless, I steeled myself for the challenge.

Ricki Heart was Ricardo Corazon, but even that was not his proper name. He was born David Ramirez in a small jungle village in the mountains outside Bogota. Drug lords killed his father when Ricki was only eight years old, and after that, his mother picked coffee beans to support them.

Ricki spent much of his childhood hunting exotic birds with his brothers, selling them on the black market for extra money. When he was eleven, someone discovered his incredibly youthful voice and selected him to be part of a boy band called Los Muchachos Pequenos. The band was an instant success in Columbia and soon gained celebrity across South and Central America. They were the Latino version of the Backstreet Boys.

Unfortunately, the band's fame was fleeting, and the promoters took advantage of the young men, leaving them penniless shortly after their voices changed with puberty. The promoters eventually abandoned the band in New York City with little to their name and no way home. That is when Ricki met Leonard Goldstein, an aspiring agent.

After Goldstein became Ricki's agent and manager, Ricki recorded a solo album in English for a small label that took a chance on the young star. His first album, *The Big Apple*, held the top two spots on the charts for nearly six months with songs *I Need You*, *Mi Amore* and *Broken Hearts Don't Heal*. Within a year the album went platinum, and Ricki Heart became the heartthrob of every teenage girl across the country. At only seventeen, Ricki Heart became one of the biggest teen singers to hit the music scene in decades.

At age twenty-three, Ricki was the hottest pop singer possessing seven chart-busting hits from his last two albums. His latest work, *Wiser*, had already garnered exceptional accolades before being released. He lived the American dream, and everyone wanted a piece of him. To take advantage of his newfound stardom, Ricki wanted a written account of his life released with his new album.

While it mystified me why Ricki chose me to write his biography, I would put my best effort into it. I had received the call from Leonard Goldstein about the job before he had even contacted my agent. I was as overwhelmed by the call as my agent and didn't really believe it until my travel itinerary and tickets arrived by FedEx a week earlier.

I was still dazed by the opportunity and felt a swarm of butterflies when I thought about the responsibility. There were so many great biographers they might have chosen, yet they selected me. Why?

"Crisps?" A voice said to my left. I stared at the flight attendant like she was an inner demon brought to life, but finally found my voice. "Um, please."

The salty taste reminded me how hungry I was, but they would not serve the free meal for hours. I washed down the crisps with a seltzer and assuaged the butterflies temporarily. My lack of confidence did not let me relax, and I had a persistent feeling I was forgetting something critical.

I grabbed my tablet but decided the in-air Wi-Fi was too expensive on my limited budget. While they gave me an advance on the book, it wouldn't last long if I splurged on extravagances like expensive Wi-Fi. I was already nervous about Aspen, even though they paid for all my accommodations. I would most definitely not fit into that world.

I had bitten off more than I could chew, and the trip ahead seemed more like a sentence than an adventure. I wanted to be with Georgie and Penelope back in our pub. But I couldn't disappoint. They had faith in me, even if I didn't have faith in myself. I would have to do my best and pray it was enough.

The ride to the hotel was awe-inspiring through the majestic Rocky Mountains surrounding the Aspen Valley like fortress walls built to keep out the common and mundane from the expensive playground for the elite.

The hotel was far too expensive for me, and I was thankful Ricki was footing the bill. I looked ridiculous in my oversized down coat as I checked in among guests dressed in designer outfits from Italian producers whose names I doubted I could even pronounce. Even the bellman eyed me with suspicion as he took me to my room, especially after I tipped him. It was apparently far less than his regular fare.

I took a quick shower and changed my clothes before I received a note to meet Mr. Goldstein at the theater where Ricki was filming the special. After consulting with the concierge, they directed me several blocks down to a modern building somewhat out of place in this rustic mountain town. Considering all the money supporting this community, it was no surprise.

Security checked me in, including a weapons scan, before escorting me backstage to where Mr. Goldstein was watching the filming on a small monitor. The large headphones covering half his head made him look rather comical.

Though I had seen pictures of Mr. Goldstein in the tabloids, seeing him in person confirmed all my preconceived notions of a New York talent agent. He was short, portly, and boasted a head full of riotous dark curls interspersed with highlights of grey that needed a trim. He wore a thin, ragged goatee and three-piece suit out of place in Aspen. His rumpled suit needed a good pressing, but so did my tweed sport coat.

"Mr. Goldstein?" I asked. I waved my hand to grab his attention with the motion.

He turned to me without recognition as he put one index finger in the air to urge me to wait. I chose one of the nearby chairs and took a seat while he finished watching the show. I heard muffled music, but it was difficult to make out any words. Whatever it was, it sounded American.

My own musical leanings were more classical, though there was a brief period during university when I listened to some grunge my

roommate played while I was studying. A nice enough chap to room with, but he preferred drinking to learning. However, he was the only one who woke up with someone next to him.

When I was writing, I preferred to listen to the sounds of Bach or Beethoven, or even an occasional dramatic piece from Wagner if I was writing about epic naval battles. While I had heard American Country music before, it fell on my deaf ears. I sensed a romantic aspect to the music, but the overall sound was not appealing to my tastes.

Mr. Goldstein removed the headset as the music stopped and walked over to meet me.

"Sorry, just needed to see the end of the show," he said in a soft, understated yet commanding tone. "I am Leonard Goldstein, what can I do for you?"

I stood to take his hand. "Hello, I am Harry Holden," I said, but my name did not register with him. "The writer?" I added.

Mr. Goldstein's thick eyebrows rose in recognition. "Ah, yes! Glad you got my note," he said as he ushered me along behind him as we moved towards the entrance to the back of the stage. "How was your trip over?" he added.

"Long," I said with little emotion.

"Indeed," he replied with little attention. "Ricki wanted you to have dinner with us. I hope that is okay?"

"Oh... yes, that would be an honor," I said with a self-deprecating tone.

He took notice of my deference and turned towards me. "Look, Ricki is not much for formality, and while I may appreciate the deprecating tone, he will not," he said before looking behind him for his client. He turned back. "Just act normal, like you would with friends."

I nodded. "Is my outfit adequate for dinner?" I asked.

Mr. Goldstein grinned. "It's Aspen," he said in a sarcastic tone. "Denim is the outfit du jour, so your English wool is fine. Relax."

Mr. Goldstein turned around and scanned the crowd waiting for the celebrities. I spotted Ricki walking arm in arm with Ms. McCawlie. They were deep in conversation as they pulled up in front of us. Ms. McCawlie turned to Mr. Goldstein.

"Well, Lenny?" she asked with a smirk. "Did I ruin your pop star with my country ditties?"

Mr. Goldstein gave her a curt smile. "Certainly not, Ms. McCawlie. I am sure this will sell plenty of his albums."

She grinned. "I'll bet!"

"It was fantastic, Lenny," Ricki said, "like a new frontier for me. I like this country music,"

I could tell this topic was tender with Mr. Goldstein, so I inched backwards to remove myself from the line of fire. Ms. McCawlie noticed my movement.

"Who's this?" she said in her slow, Oklahoma drawl. "One of your minions, Lenny?"

Despite his annoyance, Mr. Goldstein held himself. "What? No. This is Harry Holden."

Ricki's eyes lit up. "He's my biographer, Allison. All the way from England!"

She eyed me critically, making me self-conscious. "I can tell," she said. "Son, you need a wardrobe change," she smiled. "Ricki, dear, get this man some cowboy boots and a hat," she laughed.

Ricki laughed with her as he spoke to me. "Don't worry, Harry, I love you the way you are. I can't believe you are here!" he reached out to take my hand in a firm shake. "He usually writes about famous English admirals, but I convinced him to write my story."

Ms. McCawlie smiled. "Well, nothing wrong with that," she took my hand and placed her other one on top of mine. "Don't forget to add me in, darling. My pa always said any publicity was good publicity," she laughed. "'Course, that was before he went to jail for being with a fourteen-year-old girl."

Everyone fell silent, and I felt awkward holding her hand. I pulled it back just as she let out an enormous laugh that we joined in cautiously.

"You city slickers are so uptight!" she pointed her finger at Mr. Goldstein. "Especially you, Lenny!" she grabbed Ricki's arm once more. "Be a dear and walk me to my dressing room."

"Hmmm..." Mr. Goldstein hummed. "Be prepared for more in Los Angeles," he said to no one in particular. It was for my benefit. "I hate the west."

I remained silent as he grabbed my arm and led me towards the rear exit. "We will wait for Ricki in the car," he said.

These interactions were outside my little world in London. Though a cosmopolitan city, my little niche in it was quite provincial, and I felt like the proverbial fish out of water. I got a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach, like I was in over my head and a tsunami was building over the horizon. I swallowed hard and followed Mr. Goldstein.

\* \* \*

We were sitting in a cozy corner booth in a rather ostentatious restaurant, even for Aspen's standards. Based on the surrounding outfits, I was confident this was one of the most expensive places in Aspen. I fidgeted as I stared into the menu written in French.

Lenny sipped his scotch as though he was getting ready to meet someone dangerous. Ricki looked flawless, wearing a pair of designer washed-out jeans and a shirt and sweater combination that may have been on the cover of GQ magazine. In fact, he looked like he had just finished a GQ photo shoot.

His skin was a light tan color, and his cropped hair and dark features made me look near death's door. He was everything a woman fantasized about, and I was everything no one fantasized about. Who could break a stallion like him? I was in awe that I was sitting at the same table with him. I was out of place, but nobody paid any attention.

"Lenny, they have lobster!" Ricki said as he put the menu down. "I think the show was a success. What did you think, Lenny?"

Mr. Goldstein nodded with little attention and pulled in a draw of his scotch before signaling the server for another.

His lack of reaction didn't put off Ricki as he turned to me. "Harry, what did you think?"

"Well... I, uh... didn't see it," I admitted.

"Poop," Ricki said, sitting back dejected.

Mr. Goldstein jumped in to ease Ricki's disappointment. "Ricki, it was fabulous and will open up many new opportunities. Ms. McCawlie is a wonderful singer, and the two of you harmonized like a pair of lovebirds. The public will eat it up."

Ricki smirked. "You say that about everything I do. All you care about is money."

Mr. Goldstein turned serious. "That's my job. Remember what happened with the other agents you had before me?"

Ricki nodded. "You're right, as always," he turned to me. "He doesn't like country music or Allison."

Mr. Goldstein remained quiet as though agreeing with the comment.

"See," Ricki concluded. "Now, tell me about yourself."

His South American accent was light but added a pleasant touch to his amazing good looks. I wondered what women thought when he



whispered to them in Spanish. Best to shake such thoughts from my head.

"I uh... um... well, I work in an antique bookstore in London," I started before the server interrupted us.

"Are you gentlemen ready to order?" he asked in a lilting tone.

He was a very trim and attractive young man who gave Ricki a brief glance I recognized. Ricki even attracted the same sex. I wished I had such sex appeal to either sex.

Ricki ordered his lobster, and Mr. Goldstein ordered a steak with a baked potato. I settled for the veal medallions and handed my menu to the server.

"You're going to eat a baby cow?" Ricki said, surprised after the server walked away.

Mr. Goldstein jumped to my rescue. "Leave the boy alone, Ricki, you've been hanging out with those L.A. snobs too much," he turned to me. "Eat whatever you want."

Ricki didn't appear put out but looked compelled to respond. "Well, you didn't see those PETA videos."

"And I never will," Mr. Goldstein said. "Remember, my father ran a deli and butchered his own meats."

Ricki looked ready to protest, but shrugged instead. "You're right. Even I used to eat wild monkey. Sorry, Harry."

Their familial relationship stunned me. "It's alright," I said. "Penelope would have said the same thing."

"A girlfriend?" Ricki asked.

"Well, we were at one point, but now she is with my best friend," I admitted.

"Oh, my!" Ricki said, surprised. "You British are far more forgiving than us Latinos. Though to be honest, I have stolen a friend's lady before."

"It's okay, they are in love," I said, trying not to sound like a sore loser.

"Oh, Harry! You're a hopeless romantic. You could be Latino," Ricki said as he turned to Mr. Goldstein. "I told you he was the right guy!"

"Whatever you want, Ricki," Mr. Goldstein said.

"Well..." I was not sure how to respond. Sure, I dreamed of romance and pictured myself happy some day. I wanted a woman by my side and the requisite family, but every year that passed made the dream more distant.

“Of course you are, my friend,” Ricki stated without rebuke. “I see in your eyes someone on a quest for adventure and romance. Perhaps on this trip?”

“Oh, I would never,” I said, eyeing Mr. Goldstein. “I am very dedicated... to my work, I mean.”

Mr. Goldstein jumped to my rescue once again. “Yes, you are, or I wouldn’t have hired you. Leave him be, Ricki. He is here for a job.”

Ricki wouldn’t stop. “I don’t care. You cannot schedule love. When it happens, you must embrace it! You must jump in headfirst and see where it leads you,” he finished, defending his heritage. “I dove in many times, but I am waiting for that one... who will steal my heart. *Mi Amor*,” he finished. “Trust me! Do not turn from love when it slaps you in the face. You will forever regret it, wondering what might have been.”

I grinned. “Well, that’s the problem. They usually end up slapping me in my face.”

Ricki grinned back. “They were not the one, Harry!” His eyes grew wide, and he stared into the ceiling like it was about to crash down upon us. “Lenny, my next new hit, *You Were Not The One*,” he looked down at his agent. “Well?”

Mr. Goldstein cracked a rare smile. “I love it. Work on it while we travel to L.A.”

Everything felt surreal. Deep inside, I wished Ricki was right. However, a million kilometers from home in a strange land surrounded by famous people didn’t feel like the place I would meet my true ‘one’. I needed to focus on the book and forget about such fanciful notions. If I didn’t get the book right, I would never find love.

Ricki poured another bottle of Perrier into his glass while speaking about his home country. The large, black SUV sped through the Rocky Mountains at a pace that made me nervous on the white roadway, but the incredible vistas around every corner amazed. Soaring peaks with granite faces peered down on us, ushering us into the wilderness and whatever adventures lay beyond. It was a far cry from London, but a thrilling opportunity despite my trepidation.

“The mountains back home are taller. However, they’re covered in a thick, green jungle carpet,” Ricki said, gesturing as his sparkling water threatened to spill from the glass. “The heat and humidity are unbelievable. What is it like in London?”

“Wet,” I said without embellishment.

“So is Bogota,” Ricki nodded in agreement. “I do not miss that.”

Engrossed in his laptop, Mr. Goldstein sat opposite Ricki in the renovated limousine-styled SUV. The vehicle was equipped with all the bells and whistles, including tinted bullet-proof glass. Mr. Goldstein had warned me about crazy fans and paparazzi, one of many reasons we were taking a scenic drive through the middle of America’s mountains.

In the front seat, the driver/bodyguard, Laser, drove next to Mr. Goldstein’s assistant, his daughter Vivica. She was a very attractive young woman who took her looks from Mr. Goldstein’s ex-wife, except for the nose she shared with her father. Shortly after I met Vivica, Ricki confided in me that the young woman had a thing for him, which he was careful not to exploit. He loved Mr. Goldstein like a father and would do nothing to upset him. But I saw something in her gaze, and I wondered how long he could fend her off.

I was comfortable with my tablet on my lap, taking notes while Ricki recounted his childhood. I was torn between duty and the views rushing past my window, but tried to remember why I was here and focus.

“I was only five when the cartel killed my father,” Ricki said. “I remember his face, but little else. He farmed vegetables he and mama would take to the market to sell. It barely supported us, but we were pretty happy, I think.”

He took another drink. "I guess it sounds like one of those rags-to-riches stories, but I loved growing up there. We were free to roam the forests, chasing many animals, catching birds, snakes and any other beasts that someone might want to buy. It could be very dangerous considering how many were poisonous, but we were careful. Few children have that kind of reckless freedom in America."

"Nor England," I added.

"Exactly!" he said, raising his glass in a toast before sipping generously. "Those were carefree days. My mama, she worked hard picking coffee beans for the plantation owners, many of whom were drug lords, but we had to survive, so we took what we could get. They paid her very little, but with the money me and my brothers made selling the animals we caught, we were comfortable and well fed," he paused again, his eyes glancing out the window in reverie. "When I was only nine, I met someone who changed my life forever."

Mr. Goldstein's head popped up from behind his screen, and he glared at Ricki. "Ricki, I thought we talked about this?" he said. "I don't think Harry needs to know every aspect of your life."

Ricki stared back in indecision, and I felt awkward. "It is fine, Ricki, I need not know everything."

Ricki turned to me. "I trust you, Harry, and I trust you will handle this information delicately with grace."

"Ricki!" Mr. Goldstein urged.

"No, Lenny," Ricki said before raising his voice. "It is a very important part of my life, and I cannot leave it out!"

Mr. Goldstein looked frustrated as he turned to me. "Please, Harry, I am begging you, do not put this in the book," he took a deep breath. "It could ruin him."

"Why?" Ricki protested.

"You know why!" Mr. Goldstein said, raising his eyebrows. "In this day and age? No!"

Ricki looked angry, but softened as he turned back to me. He placed his hand on my arm and squeezed. "I trust you, Harry."

"Okay," I said, though I did not feel okay.

Mr. Goldstein looked exasperated and leaned back as he slammed his laptop shut. "Ricki, I swear to God..." he bit back the rest of his comment and gritted his teeth.

Ricki ignored him. "Her name was Antonia Ruez, but you cannot use her actual name."

"Why not?" I asked as I jotted down her name.

“Well, if you do, I think her brother will kill you. And me... and probably all of us,” Ricki said rather matter of fact. “He is the infamous drug lord, Alfredo Ruez.”

My jaw dropped as the name registered in the deep recesses of my mind. Anyone alive knew that name. Many tabloids claimed Ruez was responsible for a two-hundred-victim mass grave found in the jungles outside Bogota. Many of the victims were lawyers, judges, and police officers. Rumor was one of the military generals in league with Mr. Ruez had his own troops pull the triggers to eliminate those poor souls.

A year later, they found the general dead in his car with a Columbian necktie. A brutal and gruesome way to die. For a moment, I considered backing out of this story and swallowed hard.

“I told you,” Mr. Goldstein warned. “And it gets worse.”

“Worse?” I asked, wishing I didn’t have to hear what might be worse.

“Oh, yes,” Ricki said. “She and I became lovers before I came to America.”

“Wait,” I said, working through the timeline of his life. “I thought you came to America when you were fourteen?”

“Yes, I did,” Ricki said.

“Then, you were fourteen when you became lovers?” I asked.

“No, no,” Ricki said. “We became lovers when I was thirteen.”

“Oh, dear!” I said, realizing what he was admitting.

“I told you,” Mr. Goldstein said in a mocking tone. “We cannot put that in the book!”

I was both confused and scared, but also curious or maybe envious. It was every adolescent male’s fantasy come true, an older woman. Ricki was the hottest man on earth, as all the newspapers claimed.

“She taught me how to be a great lover,” Ricki said.

“Please!” Mr. Goldstein said, raising his hand to stop him.

Ricki snapped out of his remembrance. “Anyway, she changed my life when she became my benefactor. I was just a wild boy from the jungles sent to deliver a special bird for her birthday, but she took me in, cleaned me up and fed me one of the best meals of my life,”

He stopped to take another drink, and I noticed Vivica listening from the front seat.

“I... uh... assume she helped you with your singing?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said with a smile. “One day she heard me singing in the shower a song my mama used to sing to us, and after that she brought

in a singing coach for lessons, and eventually I signed a deal with Los Muchachos Pequenos. That was the start of my career.”

Mr. Goldstein remained silent but shook his head back and forth like a nervous tick. Vivica shifted to rotate more towards our direction. It was an awkward or maybe disturbing story, but fascinating.

The adolescent crush of a young man could have a direct impact on who they later became. It was clear Ricki harbored feelings for this woman, regardless of the inappropriateness of the relationship. I remembered my first crush on a teacher when I was only twelve. Georgie called her a beast, but I kind of liked her frumpy dresses, glasses, and pulled back hair. I would imagine during class that she would let down her hair and we would embrace.

I stopped recounting the memory and swallowed. “Um, was she related to the people who managed you early on?” I asked.

“Those criminal bastards? Hardly!” Ricki said. “She knew of them, and they had backed other bands before ours. Had she known what they would do to us...” he left it hanging.

“What happened to them?” I pressed. “Did you ever get the money back?”

“Well, Lawrence, the leader of these criminals, overdosed on cocaine after returning to Bogota. Adolfo died in a boating accident a year later, and Carlos hung himself after that. It was likely guilt for what he had done to us,” Ricki concluded.

Mr. Goldstein shot me a look, but it took a second for me to realize what had happened to these men. I erased the name Antonia Ruez from my tablet.

“I got none of the money back. They blew it all while we were together and after they left us in New York,” Ricki said. “It just goes to show, crime does not pay. Well, except for maybe the Ruez family.”

I smiled, thinking I might not mention her or anything about her in the book. This was a dangerous and perhaps silent presence in Ricki’s life. A mysterious benefactor working from afar. I vowed not to poke this hornet’s nest. It seemed Mr. Goldstein was correct in wanting to suppress this.

“Don’t forget you signed a non-disclosure agreement, Mr. Holden,” Mr. Goldstein warned as though reading my thoughts.

I looked up, and he was staring at me with great intensity. I gave him a nod that said I understood the very delicate nature of this information. I don’t think I will ever tell anyone, including Pen and Georgie. An adventure and change in my life was welcome, but not

Columbian thugs visiting me in my flat late at night. I didn't want an 'accidental' cocaine overdose.

\* \* \*

After driving for three hours, we stopped for petrol in a small ski town named Snowchute. The sign as we drove in claimed an altitude of nine thousand two hundred feet, and to my non-acclimated lungs, it felt as if I were underwater gasping for air. I felt as though I was hungover.

The small ski town had four blocks of quaint shops, bars and restaurants, and was overlooked by a dominating ski lodge at the base of a mountain. A light snow fell from gray skies, and the temperature was bone-chilling cold outside the vehicle. The holiday lights that adorned the buildings sparkled against the snowflakes, providing an illusion of being inside a snow globe.

I shook my head, clearing the illusion created by the thin air. However, I needed a break from the tension building inside the vehicle after Ricki recounted his questionable history. I purchased a soda and bag of rather delicious snacks from inside the petrol station and enjoyed them in the snow as I stared across a vast white valley rising several miles away into more mountainous terrain.

It was a stark beauty that frightened me. I'd never been in such a desolate area before, and I wondered how people kept from going crazy this far from civilization. I suspected there wasn't even a bookstore, let alone one that specialized in antiques. Such a rural existence did not appeal to my city sensibilities.

I turned back to the vehicle and watched as Laser finished filling the tank. He was a handsome, fit man with dark features and an intense gaze I tried to avoid. Mr. Goldstein took me aside before we left and informed me he was Lazarus Ramirez, Ricki's older brother. The man had spent time in a Columbian elite special forces unit and was not someone to trifle with. Just the size of his arms were enough to convince me to steer clear. This man of few words scared me.

I smiled weakly as he eyed me. He nodded to indicate we were leaving, and I disposed of my empty bag before climbing into the vehicle.

It was a chilly atmosphere in the vehicle as Ricki and Mr. Goldstein glared at each other, neither speaking. The awkwardness hung in the air, and I opened my tablet and pretended to review my existing notes.

With eighteen hours left to L.A., I did not look forward to the uncomfortable atmosphere.

Mr. Goldstein stopped Laser before we started moving. "Hold on a minute, Laser, I want to sit in the front and discuss our route. Vivica, can you please switch with me?"

"Sure!" Vivica said.

Ricki ignored the exchange and refused eye contact as Mr. Goldstein got out and moved to the front. The open door brought in a fresh flurry of snow from the increasing intensity, but it didn't faze Ricki. He smiled as Vivica entered and closed the door.

"Brrr," she said, trying to lighten the mood. "Sure is cold out there. You get snow in London, Harry?" she asked.

I smiled. "Yes, but not this cold. More like a wet snow," I admitted.

"This is one thing I miss about New York City," she said, happy to speak. She was pleasant, and at the moment, a thankful diversion.

I nodded. "Yes, it is beautiful with all the holiday lights."

"This feels like the holidays to me," she said, bunching her shoulders as she smiled. "Los Angeles is so, I don't know, dry."

I kept the small talk going as the car pulled out of the station. "Yes, I am curious to see it. I suppose it isn't like what's seen in the movies or on television."

She tilted her head, thinking. "Well, I think it's kind of like that," she concluded. "However, the movies can never prepare you for the incredible traffic that clogs the highways there. The roads are enormous and filled with bumper to bumper cars for miles," she shook her head in disgust.

"Isn't New York City like that?" I asked.

"Sure, but I don't have to drive there," she said. "Everything you want is close. In L.A., you drive everywhere," she frowned, and I saw why Ricki tread carefully around her. She was beautiful and animated when she talked. The polar opposite of her father.

Ricki finally looked in our direction as we passed through the small ski village on our way out of town. "I like my pool," he said. He noticed our confusion and continued to explain. "My home is in the hills around Los Angeles, and I have a beautiful pool that overlooks the immense city. At night, the lights twinkle below me like a pool of shimmering fish. I can float free in my pool and watch the car lights flow like red and white rivers into and out of the ocean beyond," he stopped to see if we understood. "That is the L.A. I love."

I nodded and made a quick note on my tablet.



"That's beautiful, Ricki," Vivica said, turning up the charm.

"Thank, you," he said, smiling back. "However, I like New York City, too. But it is a very different city from L.A."

I nodded. "So is London."

"Have you ever been out of England?" Vivica asked.

My reclusiveness was embarrassing, but I admitted my lifestyle. "No, in fact, I have rarely ventured out of London. Like New York, I have just about everything I need within four blocks of my flat. I suppose you could say I am rather stunned by everything on this trip."

Vivica looked out at the increasing snow and smiled. "I suppose this is nice if you like mountains," she said. "But I'm a city girl through and through."

Ricki looked at the snow and muttered. "I love the mountains. They remind me of home."

Vivica changed her mind. "Yeah, they are beautiful."

"To be honest, I am scared by the remoteness," I said. "Like we will somehow get lost in the wilderness."

"Well," Ricki said, "get used to it. It is wild most of the way."

"I never knew America was so empty. I suppose I thought it was like England. Big cities, suburbs, and rural farms."

"It is," Vivica said. "But a lot of space here."

"Amazing," I said as the car pulled to a stop. We all peered out the windows at a roadblock comprising a large truck and police car with flashing lights.

"What is happening?" Ricki asked.

Mr. Goldstein turned and looked back. "No idea, but stay in the car while I talk with the officer."

Mr. Goldstein exited and pushed his way through the snow towards the police officer standing next to the truck driver. The truck was a bright yellow-orange dump truck with a very large plow attached to the front. The driver was standing in the snow, consulting the officer as Mr. Goldstein approached.

"Maybe they have a road blocked up ahead, and the truck will clean it off?" I said.

"An avalanche," Laser said in a thick accent. "Common this time of year."

"Really?" Ricki asked. "Think we will get to see one?"

Vivica inhaled. "God, I hope not!"

"It could be cool?" Ricki said, smiling.

"Not if you're underneath it!" she said through heavy breath. "I knew we should have flown. I tried to tell dad, but he insisted."

Ricki reached out and took her hand. "I insisted," he said.

His touch appeared to soothe her, and she calmed down before placing her other hand over his. He tried pulling it away, but she clung to it obviously. She finally relented. "Sorry."

"It is okay," Ricki said. "Sometimes it is good to be afraid. We won't let anything happen to you, will we Laser?"

"No," Laser said.

An avalanche filled me with unease. It never occurred to my domesticated mind. Did they exist in England? I knew they didn't exist in London. The snow now obscured all but the base of the mountains. We wouldn't even see it coming.

The front door opened, and Mr. Goldstein climbed back in. "Apparently, they are doing avalanche control."

"How does one control an avalanche?" I asked.

"Believe it or not, you set off an explosive," Mr. Goldstein said with little concern. I didn't share his obvious fortitude.

"Seems like that might cause an avalanche," Ricki said.

"Exactly," Mr. Goldstein said. "They are starting a controlled avalanche about a half mile down the road. The plow driver will clean it up after it is over. Nothing to fear. They do this all the time. Should take about thirty minutes."

"Well, that makes me feel better," Vivica said, relieved.

"Lunch?" Ricki suggested.

"Good idea if we can turn around," Mr. Goldstein said.

Laser put the vehicle in gear just as a loud explosion rattled the car. He stopped, and we pasted our faces to the windows, searching for signs that something was happening. Nothing but silent snow fell until the sound of distant thunder rumbled across the valley.

The truck driver and officer were waving their arms as they approached the vehicle, so Laser rolled down his window.

"Shouldn't be long now," the officer said. The truck driver stood behind him, smiling as he blew out a gigantic cloud of smoke.

With the window open, the rumbling intensified and sounded closer. We all watched as the truck driver dropped his cigarette and grabbed the arm of the officer, pulling him back to the rear of our vehicle. Laser noticed their fear and put the vehicle in reverse, but a car behind us honked wildly as he tried to back up.

"What is wron..." Ricki asked, but the distant rumble drowned out his question. We watched in horror as an avalanche poured down the mountainside, burying the truck and dragging the police car into the ditch off the roadway. Only its red taillights protruded from the snow. The avalanche covered the road in a ten meter wall of white intermixed with dark rocks and enormous trees.

The rumbling stopped, and we remained frozen in fear as snow vortices whirled around us like tiny whirlpools. As it subsided, I realized Vivica was screaming. Ricki wrapped her in his arms to comfort her. Visibly shaken, she searched wildly as though trying to find an escape.

"Holy cow!" the officer said as he walked back to the front of our vehicle. "I thought you said this area was safe!" he yelled at the truck driver, who stared dumfounded at the mess now blocking the road.

"It... it... was supposed to be," he said.

"What if it killed these fine people?" the officer said, pointing at our vehicle. "Their families could have sued us and ruined this town!"

"It wasn't me, Bob. I swear," the truck driver said. "Rudy assured me this area was clear."

"I swear to God I am going to kill that man!" the officer said. He turned towards us, and his demeanor lightened. "Folks, I am so sorry about this. I am glad nobody got hurt. Is everyone okay?"

Mr. Goldstein snapped to life as the lawyer took over. "Do you know who this is? We may yet sue you!"

Ricki let go of Vivica and leaned forward to grab Mr. Goldstein's arm. "It is okay, Daddy, it was an accident."

"Accident my foot!" Mr. Goldstein said as his face turned bright red. "This is a blatant case of negligence if I have ever seen one!"

"Now, sir. This is not an exact science. You can't always predict these things," the officer said.

"Then, why do it?" Mr. Goldstein demanded.

"To keep the public safe," the officer said.

Mr. Goldstein shook his arms violently as he yelled through the driver's window. "Does this look safe to you?"

The officer was at a loss for words as he surveyed the wreckage. He looked at the truck driver, whose mouth was open in shock. "No, sir, you are correct, this is not safe."

"Damn right it's not!" Mr. Goldstein said. "Roll up the window and take us back into town."

Laser shook his head at the officer before closing his window. He put the car in drive and pulled forward, forcing the officer and truck driver to move as he negotiated a U-turn before heading back into town. We all sat in stunned silence, and I swear my life played out before my eyes. It was a short and boring movie.

As we left the area, I spotted a vehicle shooting across the fields on the other side of the stream from us. The driver wore all white and almost blended into the background. Only the fur rimmed hood gave any sign there was a person controlling the vehicle. Through the snow and distance, I made out their shape, and it looked distinctly female.

Elk Horn Ski Resort was carved in relief on a large placard hanging over the log façade. Laser drove under the entrance to get out of the snow and stopped the vehicle. We waited for someone to help, but there wasn't anyone manning the door, so I hopped out onto the wet pavement cleared of snow. Slush and ice still covered the ground as the temperature plunged with the increasing snow.

A female voice caught my attention, and I looked up to see who was hailing us. She ran towards our vehicle dressed in black slacks, modest brown shoes, and a white blouse covered by a gold jacket with the Elk Horn Ski Resort crest embroidered on the left pocket.

I barely heard her voice as she stormed towards me, but she couldn't stop on the icy pavement. She tried slowing down, but her dress shoes slid in the slush, forcing her headlong into me. I caught her, but fell backwards as she held on. I slammed into the vehicle, and we both crumpled to the ground. I felt no pain, but my backside stung with the cold of freezing water soaking my pants. I stared into her light brown eyes, and for a moment we were motionless in shock.

"I... uh... I am so sorry, sir," she said, attempting to extricate herself from my arms.

I pushed her shoulders to help her up, but my hands slipped down to her breasts. Embarrassed, I let her go, and she fell onto my chest, striking my chin with her forehead.

"Ow!" she exclaimed as she pushed against me to get to her knees. She stood and shook her jacket before smoothing it to reassemble her professional appearance.

She extended a hand to me. "So sorry, sir, I guess it is slippery."

I stared in disbelief and declined her hand as I dragged myself from the wet slush. "It is fine," I said, but my tone said otherwise.

"I will get salt out here to melt this ice," she said. "I am Mercy, and I can assist you."

Mr. Goldstein stood behind her. "I think we have had enough Mercy for one day. Stand aside and we will find our own way."

Ricki and Vivica came around the vehicle and stared at me.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Ricki asked, concerned. "You hit the vehicle pretty hard. Vivica thought it was another avalanche."

She slapped Ricki on the arm. "No, I didn't."

"You look frozen," Ricki said, grabbing my arm and helping me onto the sidewalk.

"I'm fine, Ricki, thank you," I said, brushing at the snow and slush on my pants and coat.

"At least a change of clothes," Ricki urged.

Mercy interjected. "Yes, sir, we have fabulous locker rooms with all the amenities. You can change in there, and I will have the resort clean and press your clothes while you wait."

"We are only here for lunch," Mr. Goldstein said.

"Of course, sir, we have some of the best food in town," Mercy said. "I am sure we can take care of your friend, uh, Harry, while you all enjoy a fabulous lunch fireside."

Mr. Goldstein raised his hand. "No need to pay for our lunch. We can take care of ourselves," he said before turning to me. "Harry, you want to freshen up and have your wet things cleaned while we eat? Laser can grab your bag."

As though reading Mr. Goldstein's thoughts, Laser had already opened the back of the SUV and pulled my bag out before setting it on the curb next to me.

"Thank you, Laser," I said as I bent down to grab it.

"No, let me take it, sir," Mercy said as she lunged at my bag. She was too fast, and we banged heads. "Oh, my God!" she said, pulling back. "I am so sorry, sir."

Mr. Goldstein jumped to my rescue and led the young lady aside. I saw him slip something into her hand before signaling to me. "It's okay, Harry, she will only lead you to the locker room."

My head ached, and my wet trousers were chilling. I grabbed my bag and followed her from a distance. The double doors slid open, and I walked into the well appointed, though rustic foyer leading to the main desk. Two ladies stood waiting to serve.

I smiled politely before turning right to follow Mercy into the interior. I watched her, wondering who she was and why I was so fortunate to be the one to bump into her. I realized she was only trying to help, and I took pity on her. However, after our awkward ride, a long flight from England, and bitter cold soaking into me, I felt less than gracious.

She turned left down some stairs, and I followed. We descended a couple flights before stopping in front of a large door with the word

‘Gentlemen’ written on it. I waited a distance from her until she backed away for me to pass.

“Thank, you,” I said as I stared at her before entering the warm spa of the resort.

She yelled at me as the door closed. “Just bring me your clothes once you’re undressed!”

An older man passed me as he was leaving and glared at me after Mercy’s unusual comment. I smiled and continued past him to the line of lockers. Setting my bag down, I went in search of clean towels to dry off before I changed.

The experience had soured me on adventure, and I felt a sense of foreboding after the near-death experience of the avalanche and reckless fall with Mercy. Writing a biography was far from my mind, but I had to turn this around if I was to complete my job. A sense of homesickness and a churning in my stomach made me think of Georgie and Pen. I doubted cell service extended this far into the wilderness, but resolved to try.

\* \* \*

With a fresh change of dry clothes, I walked into the dining room where the others were enjoying cocktails at a table next to a roaring rock fireplace. The table overlooked the ski mountain, now obscured by heavy snow. Though I was less chilled, the fire would fully warm me.

A large man in a suit talked with Mr. Goldstein as I approached the table. He turned towards me and spoke in a deprecating tone. “Mr. Holden, I am John Cummings, the general manager, and I want to apologize for the incident out front. Mercy is still learning the ropes here.”

I shook his hand and nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Cummings. I am fine.”

“I told your colleagues the resort will reimburse lunch, so please order anything you like. We have a fine chef, and I will make sure your experience is nothing but the best,” he let go of my hand and clapped both of his together as he turned to the table. “Call me should you require anything else or if your service is not to your liking,” he bowed before leaving.

Such service was beyond my experience, but considering who I was traveling with, it did not surprise me.

“Here, Harry,” Vivica said, pointing at the empty seat next to hers. “We saved you this one by the fire.”

“Thank you,” I said, moving around the table. “I could use a little heat.”

“And a cocktail I would wager,” Mr. Goldstein said. “What is your poison, son?”

“Uh... cognac, I guess,” I said, not quite certain what I should order. To be frank, a pint of bitter would hit the spot. However, I felt something stronger and more expensive was in order. When you were eating with the largest pop star in the world, why not act the part?

“You should order their best champagne,” Ricki said, sipping a glass of white wine. “The least they could do.”

I shook my head. “That won’t be necessary, cognac is fine.”

Mr. Goldstein waved the server over. She was an older woman who looked like she’d been doing this most of her life. The worry lines creasing her eyes, mouth, and face gave her a rugged countenance, and she eyed Ricki with a knowing smile.

“Yes, sir?” she said with perfect deference. “Have you all decided?”

“My friend here will have a double of your finest cognac, and we will all have the surf and turf special with lobster and filet mignon,” he said. “House dressing on the salads and please bring us some bread while we wait for our meal.”

She nodded and turned towards the bar to order my cognac.

“Daddy!” Vivica said. Like a petulant child, she contorted her face angrily. “I don’t want that! You know I don’t eat meat.”

“Too bad,” Mr. Goldstein said without argument. “It’s all you’re getting.”

She sat back pouting, and that persistent feeling of awkwardness reappeared. I realized I shouldn’t judge. I was just the outsider given a short time pass to enter this inner circle. This was likely normal family behavior, and I needed to respect that. It wasn’t impossible to do my job with a constant state of awkwardness.

Laser appeared oblivious to the antics at the table. What must it be like to work for your younger brother? It seemed odd, and I hoped I would get more details from Ricki or Laser himself. However, I was afraid of the imposing man and didn’t quite feel like speaking with him.

Ricki stared out the window with melancholy. He watched the multitude of skiers, enjoying the incredible snow piling up on the slopes. Bringing up his past made him homesick like me. This



adventure wasn't quite what I had expected, and I wanted to hear the voices of my friends or the squawking of Finn as he greeted me when I returned from work.

My world was small but comfortable. I often found it lonely, and a part of me hoped I might find someone to share it with. But here, in the wilds of America, I held little hope. Was it time to resign myself to a lonely existence? Weren't my friends enough? Maybe this was destiny and okay. Even though I dreamed of adventure, I often found it wasn't as wonderful as the fantasy.

Ricki raised his glass. "I have decided my next album will be a reflection on my life and my quest for love."

Everyone stared at this proclamation, and I hesitated before raising my glass. Mr. Goldstein raised his, and we all followed suit.

"Here, here," Mr. Goldstein said. "To continued success in your artistic endeavors, my son."

I noticed the 'my son' comment and watched Ricki come alive and light up. They had a very special relationship, and I wondered how I could weave that into the book without upsetting Mr. Goldstein. He was not a man who sought the spotlight, and I believed he enjoyed being in the shadows. But if I left him out, it would be a travesty.

"To continued success," I echoed as I took a drink of my water.

After the toast, the server brought my cognac. The first sip confirmed the excellent choice I had made. Its complex flavors danced around my tongue and warmed me inside. For a moment, it suppressed my sense of foreboding. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

\* \* \*

The scalding water in the shower removed the last of my chill, and I reluctantly turned it off. There was a pleasant ski vibe to the room with rustic furnishings and paintings of scenic mountain peaks surrounding wintry valleys. I never imagined myself in such a place.

After lunch, the general manager reported the highway wouldn't be cleared for at least a day. He assured us we could backtrack to another route, but it would add five or six hours onto our journey. At that point, it was whiteout conditions, and Mr. Goldstein chose to stay the night. There was a persistent edge of anger in his voice, and I suspected he did not tolerate change well. When he put a plan in motion, he probably expected nothing less than flawless execution.

However, when weather and avalanches were beyond your control, you conceded defeat.

The resort had plenty of vacancies, including a presidential suite for Ricki. That was on the top floor while I had a more practical room on the lowest level near the washing machines. Vivica and Mr. Goldstein shared a two-bedroom suite while Laser's room was like mine.

After the day we'd had, I felt relieved to be staying the night. A good night's rest and hot shower were what I needed to turn my head around and focus on the task at hand.

After drying my hair, I hung the towel around my neck as I stepped out of the bathroom. I was not alone and stared dumfounded at Mercy with mouth agape and eyes fixated on my nakedness.

I was in shock and paused before grabbing my towel to wrap around my waist. "What are you doing?" I exclaimed.

She snapped out of her shock and stammered, searching for words. "I... uh... uh... um... I only wanted to return your clean clothes. I knocked, but no one answered, so I came in to put these in your closet."

She blushed, and terror contorted her face as she realized the horrific predicament she was in. She placed my clothes on the bed and stared at the floor as she backed towards the door.

"Please forgive me, I... uh... only... uh... wanted to help. Please don't tell my uncle. I need this job!" Her tears caused a pang of guilt. She was hopeless but seemed to have a good heart.

"Your uncle?" This was news.

"Mr. Cummings," she said, backing to the door until she bumped into it. "Please, I won't ever bother you again. I promise."

Realizing this might be funny in other circumstances, I nodded. I wasn't a prude, but this was shocking when you didn't expect it. It was like the dream where you walk into work naked and try to explain why you are. It was awkward.

"It is fine. I won't tell anyone."

She fumbled with the door knob. "Thank you, Harry. I mean, sir."

She fled the room after wrestling the door open, and I yelled at her retreating form. "Thank you!" It was unlikely she heard me.

I shook my head in disbelief and once again wondered what strange universe I had fallen into. Was this the proverbial Twilight Zone I remembered watching in my childhood? And this poor girl? It was as if someone set her on me as a punishment for some transgression.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the folded pile of clothes she had delivered. Did she fold them herself? I could tell she felt guilty for all the trouble she had caused, and deep down, I knew she was just trying to help.

Her eyes drifted through my mind, and I wondered who this young woman was. She had brown hair below her shoulders, pulled back into a braid. If I had to guess, maybe twenty something. She was pleasant enough, and pretty, but this reckless behavior made her seem cursed.

I stood up and decided she had picked the wrong line of work, considering her propensity to clumsiness. A girl like her was better served working as a cashier or behind the front desk where she could inflict less harm. I thought about her name and chuckled. She was the one who needed Mercy, and I decided I could forgive the poor girl, though I would try to keep my distance.

I walked into the pub next to the dining room, determined to drink after my uncomfortable run-in with Mercy. The snow was coming down so hard the far wall of windows was solid white as the exterior lights illuminated the blizzard.

There was a small stage in the corner by the windows with acoustic guitars, stools, and microphone booms. Live music was the entertainment tonight, and I looked forward to it despite its American roots. I sat at a table next to the window and eyed the server filling a tray with drinks.

No one knew I was coming here, and I hoped no one would join me. I stared at the heavy snow and enjoyed the peace and solitude after the day's antics. I chuckled to myself as I recounted the mishaps of avalanches and overzealous resort workers. The further from the events I got, the easier it was to see humor. Perhaps an ale or two would further brighten the experience.

"What can I get you?" A young voice asked.

"What kind of beer do you have?" I asked, not knowing what to expect in Colorado.

"Oh, you're British," she said. "That's cool! Love the accent."

"Oh-okay. Thank, you," I said. "Do you have anything from England?"

"Sure do! We carry a full line of bottled beers from around the world." She had an exuberance that was almost too much for me. "Let's see, England?" she paused in thought with her hand on her chin. Then she smiled. "We have Bass Pale Ale."

I nodded. "That would be fine."

"Coming up, sir," she said before skipping to the bar.

I shook my head. It felt strange getting a Bass Pale Ale in this part of the world. Perhaps people from the Commonwealth skied here when visiting America, though I suspected most would go to Aspen instead. The few I had known over the years skied Switzerland.

I looked around the pub, admiring its rather impressive size. There were perhaps ten guests spread throughout the space, so it felt rather empty. Everyone wore sweaters or fleece in a multitude of colors, and I felt rather dreary in my plain dark woolens. But I was warm, and that was all that mattered.

I gazed into the distant dining room where we would have dinner later. The servers were switching out the lunch settings, so it, too, was empty.

The server placed my ale on a small napkin and winked. "On the house, or so I am told! My name is Annie. I hear you are traveling with Ricki Heart. That true?"

"Yes," I said, realizing every young woman in America would know about Ricki Heart.

"Wow!" she said with genuine excitement. "Is he coming down to join you?"

"I don't think so. Dinner, maybe." I offered.

"Cool. I usually work in the restaurant, but Emily is out sick tonight," her eyes lit up. "Personally, I think she is faking it so she can see that hot ski patrol guy she met last week."

I took a drink without engaging her. She was cute but looked about sixteen. I wondered why she was serving drinks in a pub. Maybe it was just a sign I was getting older.

She noticed my indifference. "Sorry, let me know if you need anything else. Snacks, another beer, whatever. Remember, Annie!" she said, pointing at her name tag before skipping back to the bar. I got that same alternate reality feeling once more, but this time the ale made it more tolerable.

I peered over the rim of my glass and spotted Vivica entering the pub, heading in my direction. With no preamble, she took one of the empty seats.

"Ugh, my room looks like someone vomited an Indian pow-wow in it. While I can sort of appreciate the rustic look of this place, that room is too much!" she said exasperated.

It wasn't my style either, but I liked the unique departure from my conservative London roots. I imagined Vivica was accustomed to a higher class of accommodations while traveling with Ricki Heart. This was a definite downgrade.

"It's okay," I said without further comment.

She smiled and almost laughed. "I suppose it is a big change from London?"

"Rather," I admitted as I held up my glass. "But it is growing on me. At least they have ale from the motherland."

"Touché!" she said. "That's what I need," she waved at Annie, who smiled as she skipped back over.

"Hello!" she said, and her cheerful disposition had an immediate impact on Vivica. "I'm Annie, what can I get for you?"

Vivica pursed her lips. "I will have a Cosmopolitan, please?"

"Great choice. Our bartender makes the best!" Annie blurted before turning for the drink.

"Wow, she looks sixteen," Vivica said when Annie was out of earshot. "What goes on out here in the sticks?"

"She knows we are with Ricki," I explained.

"Ah, a fan," Vivica said with disdain. She checked herself. "Sorry, sometimes they can get rather annoying. In some ways, it is refreshing to not have the paparazzi following us. Typically, it's dinner in our rooms unless there is somewhere exclusive to dine."

"I gather this adventure is not your typical routine," I said.

"Hardly! It's usually private jets and five-star accommodations," she paused. "Adventure? I like that. It definitely describes today."

Annie returned with the Cosmopolitan and placed it on the table with a sweet smile. "Are you Ricki Heart's girlfriend?"

"What?" Vivica said. "Certainly not."

"Oh, I am sorry, I don't mean to be rude. You are just so beautiful that I assumed..." Annie started backing away.

Vivica recovered from the initial shock, and her features softened. "It's okay, dear. You a big fan?"

Annie stopped and moved forward. "Well, I listen to country music, but he is so hot! I mean attractive. I guess I... yes, I am a fan."

"Don't worry, dear, he has that effect on everybody," Vivica said like a big sister coaching a younger sibling. "And, yes, I agree, he is hot," she winked at Annie.

I grabbed my ale and sipped as the conversation turned awkward.

"I'll let you in on a secret," Vivica said, leaning forward as though to keep anyone from hearing, "he doesn't have a girlfriend."

Annie was in awe. "Wow," she said, "that is hard to believe."

"Oh, sure, he may spend a night or two with models or other pop stars, but he is looking for someone who isn't famous. He complains about it all the time. That special someone," she left it hanging and Annie's mouth had dropped to the floor.

"Hey, Annie. Drinks up!" the bartender yelled across the pub.

Annie shook her head and closed her mouth as she turned to retrieve the drinks.

I put down my ale and stared at Vivica, trying to decide if she was being nice or mean. I couldn't tell with her, but she acted genuine.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Oh, she is young and full of many fantasies. I’m just priming them for her. She’ll have fantastic dreams tonight,” she said with a smirk. “I know I did for a long time.”

I decided it was best to leave the subject alone and took another drink to hide my embarrassment. Her comment sounded like something Georgie might say about a beautiful starlet after a few pints. While I am not a prude, I feel somewhat uncomfortable with these kinds of admissions from a woman.

Vivica raised her glass for a toast. “To getting out of here tomorrow!”

I smiled weakly and raised my glass. We drank, and I realized I would never have peace or solitude on this trip. I found Vivica pleasant enough, but her world and mine might as well be on opposite sides of the Universe.

\* \* \*

Dinner was excellent. It satiated me, and I leaned back in my seat sipping another ale. Ricki drank a seltzer, and I made a mental note to ease up on the beer while on the job. But they tasted so good after today. I felt like I had earned them and decided on one more before I retired for the evening.

“Are your accommodations acceptable, Harry?” Mr. Goldstein asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes, sir. Thank you.” No need to complain when I wasn’t paying. I could not afford my room.

“Thank Ricki. He is paying for this trip,” Mr. Goldstein said.

“Thank you, Ricki,” I nodded.

Ricki smiled, and I understood why women melted. “I want you to be at your best so you can tell my story the way it should be.”

“I will try,” I said, wondering if that was good enough. “If I may ask, why did you pick me to write your story? Most people have never heard of me.”

“Don’t be so modest,” Ricki teased. “I have read two of your books.”

“Really?” I said, dismayed.

“Oh, sure,” Ricki said. “Many people don’t know this about me, but I love military history. There is great romance in epic battles and wars

to secure the oceans for merchant ships and adventurers. What could be better?"

It was as if Ricki and I were kindred spirits. "I agree," I said, smiling.

"The way you write about the admirals is unbelievable. They are heroes come to life on the pages of your books. I want to be that kind of hero, too," Ricki said. "People only appreciate my looks and my voice, but there is more to me than meets the eye. That is what you will reveal to the world."

"Well, thank you for the opportunity. I will do my best," I said, feeling a little overwhelmed by expectations. There was more to this man than met the eye, and I appreciated his desire to be more than just a sex symbol.

I leaned back and took a sip of my ale before spotting a beautiful woman walking into the pub. She wore a solid white ski suit with brown fur around the rim of the hood thrown back across her shoulders. Her long blonde hair flowed past her shoulders, and I almost spilled my beer watching her backside move into the bar. An image of the person I'd seen earlier came to mind, and I wondered.

She sat alone at the bar, and my heart skipped a beat. I didn't want to be rude and leave, but I wanted to join her. I dashed that thought on the rocks before it fully formed. She was out of my reach but mesmerized me. Did being with Ricki Heart mean anything? These were childish musings, and I checked myself, resigned to a lonely existence.

Music emanated from the pub. The sound of guitars was a perfect backdrop for the female singer accompanying them. I didn't recognize the song.

"Who is that?" Ricki asked, staring into the pub. "She is beautiful."

It must have been the woman who captivated me with her beauty. I felt jealousy, but realized the futility.

A melancholy swept through me as a small part of me wanted his stardom. I stared across the room until she spun around to watch the band. Before turning away, she had glanced in our direction and smiled.

"I must go see," Ricki blurted before standing. He moved in a trance towards the pub but disappeared around the corner, leaving the mystery woman alone at the bar. Ricki had ignored her.

"He likes the singer," Mr. Goldstein said. "She has a beautiful voice, though raw. She is singing one of Ms. McCawlie's songs."



"I am going to watch," Vivica said, standing.

"I am going to bed," Mr. Goldstein said. "Breakfast here at seven AM. I want to get an early start, assuming they have it cleared by then."

I nodded and stood. Laser didn't wait and disappeared before I could tell Mr. Goldstein goodnight. I figured the driver would want a good night's sleep before the long drive ahead.

"Thank you, sir. I will see you bright and early," I said, offering my hand.

He grasped mine but didn't let go. "I see what Ricki sees in you, Harry. Do him right."

"I will, sir," I said as my hand ached from the grip. He released me and left. I walked to the pub, but the seat where the beautiful woman had sat was empty. It was a letdown, but I took consolation in the fact I wouldn't end the evening with a rejection.

I decided another ale might help me get past the ridiculous notion of me with a woman like that. I had a job to do, and I needed to keep my mind focused. There was no person in America for me, and I might as well get used to that idea so I could do what they hired me to.

I moved to the bar and took a seat, letting the bartender know I needed another Bass Pale Ale. He nodded, and I stared at the shelves of bottles reflected in the mirror behind him. I was not paying much attention to the band until a male voice sang. I looked in the reflection and noticed Ricki on the stage holding a microphone.

I spun my stool around to watch, and my knees bumped into someone who had just walked into the pub. She stumbled, and I grabbed her arm, trying to hold her steady.

"I am so sorry!" I blurted before letting go of her arm.

Mercy stared at me, and we both laughed. Was there some invisible force pulling us together? She sounded nervous after our last meeting.

"Now, who is the klutz?" I said to ease her mind.

"I am so sorry..." she began, but her fear was palpable.

"Mercy, this one was my fault," I assured her. How weird to run into each other again.

"I'll... I'll leave you be, sir," she said.

"Please, call me Harry," I said. "Want to join me for a drink? Least I could do for knocking you down."

Her indecision softened until she agreed. "Okay, but knocking me down seems fair after everything I did earlier."

I turned back to the bar as she slid onto the stool next to me. "Whatever she wants on my tab."

"A lemon drop please, Dave," Mercy said. Dave smiled before turning to make her drink. "Is that your friend singing?" she asked, trying to relax.

"You mean Ricki Heart?" I said.

"Yes," she agreed.

"Not my friend," I admitted. "My employer."

"Oh, you work for him? What is it you do?" she asked. "Security?"

"Hardly. His brother is security. I'm writing his biography," I said before taking a drink. "I usually write about English admirals, but Ricki asked me to write his story."

"You are from England?" she said before realizing her error. "Sorry, where in England do you live?"

I smirked. "London."

"I guess this is pretty different, huh?"

"A lot," I said, hoping she would relax. "I assume you're from here?"

"No. I only work here with my uncle. I'm going into hospitality, so I came out here for a job. I am from Delaware."

I didn't know where Delaware was, but I thought it might be on the east coast. "Different for you, too?"

"Definitely," she agreed. "I like it here. It's beautiful, though I miss the water."

"Water?" I asked.

"Ocean," she clarified. "Seafood, salt water, and waves. I aspire to be the general manager of a resort by a sea someday. Maybe the Med or Caribbean."

"Are you sure hospitality is the right line of work for you?" I didn't want to embarrass her, but she had issues.

"Well, yeah," she said. "Sometimes I get a little too enthusiastic, but if my uncle approves of my work, he will send me to a school in Switzerland for my hospitality degree."

"Switzerland?" I'd never been there, but I bet it looked like here. Cold mountains and snow.

"They have one of the best schools in the world," she said with authority. "Found it on the internet. Well reviewed."

I smiled. "I see. Well, I wish you luck," I raised my glass.

She raised her glass to mine, and we clinked them together before drinking. She smiled, and I felt a camaraderie with her. We were both

far from home trying to kick-start our careers. I had a few years on her, but I was just starting down this alternative path in writing. Perhaps luck would favor us. She needed luck more than I did.

“What do you know? No one got hurt,” I laughed.

She covered her face in embarrassment but smiled. “Thank, you.”

“For the drink? It’s nothing. In fact, Ricki is paying,” I admitted.

“Actually, I think my uncle is paying,” she said. “I can’t apologize enough.”

“Stop trying,” I said with finality. “No harm, no foul.”

“Thank you, Harry. Your name is like Harry Potter. I’ve read all the books.”

“Yes, I get that a lot here,” I said. “Actually, I am named after Prince Harry. He was born a few years before me.”

“Of course, sorry,” she said. “Dumb American alert! We are so enamored with movies.”

“And music,” I said, laughing.

She turned to towards the stage. “That’s Annie he is singing with,” she said.

I turned around and spotted Annie holding a microphone. Both stared into each other’s eyes while harmonizing the last verses. While not a big fan of the music style, I had to admit they sounded very good.

“Another heart to break?” I said.

“I hope not,” Mercy said. “She’s only seventeen.”

I turned back to watch again. There was something between them, and I hoped Ricki realized how young this girl was. “Why is she serving drinks in a pub if she’s only seventeen?”

“Well, state law says you have to be eighteen to serve them and twenty-one to make them,” she explained. “However, since her dad is the sheriff, I don’t think anyone is going to complain. Besides, she loves to sing with the bands and is saving money for college or something. She makes far more in the bar than in the dining room.”

“What does your uncle think about that?” It didn’t seem like he would allow this.

She thought about it. “To be honest, I don’t think he knows.”

The music ended, but they continued to stare into each other’s eyes as though in love. Only the applause from the crowd broke the mood, and they both turned to take bows. They bowed to each other and finally to the musicians.

Annie moved to the front of the stage to address the crowd. "Thank you, but I better get back to my job 'cause I bet you're all thirsty! Let's hear it once more for Ricki Heart!"

The crowd erupted, and Ricki bowed once more. He took the microphone from Annie. "Let's hear it for the wonderful talent here in Snowchute. To Annie and the Oakley Boys."

Everyone stood and applauded the incredible act they had just witnessed for free. I was certain the internet was abuzz with captured video of this unprecedented performance by Ricki Heart. The applause stopped, and the Oakley Boys started playing an acoustic song.

I turned back around and finished my ale in a single gulp. The taste reminded me of Georgie and Pen, and I wondered what they were doing. Based on a quick time calculation, I knew they were sleeping. I would call them in the morning.

"Well, I'm off to bed for that early start tomorrow," I said. "It was nice running into you... sorry, a terrible pun that. It was nice to meet you."

"My pleasure, Harry. Sorry again for today. Good luck on your book." Her smile was contagious, and it was fortunate to run into each other again.

"Thank you. Good luck to you in Switzerland," I said.

She dropped her head before peering up. "After today, it seems unlikely, but thank you."

"I am sure you'll work it out," I assured her. I, too, had my own doubts, but best to keep my thoughts to myself and let her find her path. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," she said before taking her last sip.

I turned to leave and realized neither Ricki nor Vivica were here anymore. They had probably turned in, which I desperately needed to do if I was to work tomorrow. The ale made me lightheaded and forced me to steady myself on the stair railing to my room.

Visions of the beautiful woman in white haunted me as I stumbled down the corridor. I didn't think I had drank more than usual and chalked it up to being at three thousand meters.

The phone buzzed in my ear, and I roused to take the wake-up call. I had just fallen asleep and dreaded the day ahead with a hangover. Damn altitude was to blame.

I picked up the receiver, blinking my eyes to focus. "I am awake. Thank, you," I said before starting to hang up.

Mr. Goldstein's screams stopped me. "Harry! It's me, Leonard, we have a problem!"

"Sorry, Mr. Goldstein, what's happening?" His voice instantly woke me.

"I need you dressed in five minutes!" Mr. Goldstein said. "Meet us at the entrance!"

"Sure, but wha..." I realized he'd hung up and sprang from bed, reaching for my clothes. The clock read 1:30, and I couldn't figure out what was so important so early in the morning. Was somebody hurt?

I threw on my clothes and eyed myself in the mirror. Red eyes and disheveled hair made me look ill. A raging hangover was to blame, and I tried to erase it by dousing my face with cold water. It did little to help, so I accepted my fate and ran wet fingers through my scalp to tame the hair. After several minutes, I was cold but awake. There was nothing I could do about my glowing eyes.

When I walked into the foyer, Mr. Goldstein and Vivica were already waiting for the car. So early in the morning, no one was at the front desk.

"Good, we're all here," Mr. Goldstein said, pacing. "What is taking Laser so long?"

"It's okay, Daddy, he'll be here soon," Vivica said, placing her hand on her father's arm. Worry lined her beautiful face and was out of place on her normally beautiful features. I wondered what caused so much concern.

"Where is Ricki?" I asked.

Mr. Goldstein glared at me, and Vivica jumped in to answer. "That's the problem! We are going to get him."

"Where is he?" I asked, concerned.

"In jail!" Mr. Goldstein erupted. "I warned him about this... repeatedly!"

"They arrested him for sexual assault," Vivica whispered.

“Oh...” I said, unsure how to respond. “Who?”

“Some little tart he met in the bar last night!” Mr. Goldstein said.

“Dad, please,” Vivica said. “That’s not helping.”

Mr. Goldstein took a deep breath and attempted to calm himself. “You’re right, you’re right. I need to focus. I feel certain this is just some misunderstanding we can easily resolve.”

“Exactly,” Vivica agreed, but her voice wavered.

We fell silent, and I worried about the young server Ricki had sung with earlier in the evening. What was her name? Annie? More than likely, I was the only one who knew she was underage, but I didn’t want to mention that just now. Thankfully, headlights shined through the doors as Laser pulled up in front.

We stepped into the cold air, and it was obvious the snow had not let up since we arrived. I was thankful Laser was driving. It would be a long, awkward ride, and I wondered why they needed me along.

\* \* \*

The police station wasn’t large, and few cars were parked outside so early in the morning. The snow refused to slow, and travel to the station had been treacherous. Laser had adeptly avoided several mishaps as our large vehicle slid through intersections and into curbs while he navigated the deep drifts.

Laser opened the door for all of us to enter, and we stomped and wiped our feet to clear the snow clinging to our shoes and coats. I wore dress shoes, and the cold snow was already leeching into my socks with shocking results. I was quite awake now.

The reception desk was empty, but Mr. Goldstein marched over and pushed the button to use when no one was available. We waited, while Mr. Goldstein tapped his foot against the floor. I eyed Laser, who seemed calm despite his brother’s predicament. Was this a normal reaction for him?

The door marked Authorized Personnel Only opened, and an officer entered the room. He was over two meters tall with dark black hair sprinkled with the white so common in older men. It was combed back with a razor straight part on the right-hand side, and his large mustache matched his trimmed hair with the same signs of age. I guessed forty something.

The uniform was light tan with nametag, black epaulettes, and no tie. The large star pinned to the front showed he was the local sheriff.

His holstered pistol made me nervous, and I knew someone living in the wilds of Colorado knew how to use it. He was a large and imposing man, though Laser scared me more.

"You Goldstein?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes, I am Mr. Heart's lawyer, and you are?" Mr. Goldstein asked.

"Sheriff Wilkinson," the man said, glaring with cold eyes. "Come on back."

"May my associates join me?" Mr. Goldstein said before moving.

The sheriff eyed us, paying special attention to Laser, who held his gaze. "You carrying?" the sheriff asked.

Laser responded. "I don't need a gun."

The sheriff snorted. "I believe you," he tilted his head for us to follow. "Let's go."

We filed in after Mr. Goldstein, who marched with clenched fists.

"Down the corridor and to the right," the sheriff said from behind.

We continued as instructed and turned right into a large office where Mr. Cummings sat in front of an enormous desk. His drawn out face and furtive eyes showed fear. He stood as we entered and extended his hand to Mr. Goldstein, but Mr. Goldstein declined shaking it.

Mr. Cummings pulled it back. "I am so sorry, Mr. Goldstein. Please accept the resort's apology for what is surely a big misunderstanding."

Vivica, Laser, and I moved to the large couch on the opposite wall to take a seat. Mr. Goldstein ignored the general manager and took a seat in front of the desk. The placard read Sheriff Wilkinson.

Mr. Cummings sat down and fidgeted. The sheriff closed the door before taking his seat. Even seated, he towered over everyone.

He shuffled papers, grabbing one to hand to Mr. Goldstein. "Here is the arrest report."

Mr. Goldstein read it and frowned. "It states here the alleged victim was a minor?"

"Yes. Seventeen," the sheriff said.

Mr. Goldstein looked confused. "That's impossible! She was serving in a bar. That means she had to be at least eighteen."

It confirmed my worst fears, and my breath caught in my throat. It was Annie. I remained quiet.

Mr. Goldstein turned to Mr. Cummings. "Well?"

Mr. Cumming's voice wavered. "I am afraid, unknown to me of course, that she was filling in for another woman who works the bar. The person in question usually works in our dining room and..."

Mr. Goldstein interrupted him. "Was she underage?"

"Uh... yes," he admitted.

Mr. Goldstein took this reasonably well, but veins bulged on his forehead. This added a definite wrinkle to his earlier speculation, and I worried this would not be easily resolved. He looked back at the sheriff.

"It would be common for anyone to assume she was eighteen, if she served alcoholic beverages in a prominent ski resort. This is a reasonable misunderstanding, and Mr. Heart is not culpable," Mr. Goldstein said in a reasonable tone. "As far as the assault charges, I am sure there's a reasonable explanation for that."

"Your client confessed," the sheriff said, narrowing his dark eyes. "And as far as the reasonableness of being with an underage minor illegally serving alcohol, we'll let the courts decide that."

"Please, I am sure we can work this out without courts," Mr. Goldstein said. "This is not like my client."

"We have witnesses who watched them sing together, and he was all over her like an animal!" the sheriff insisted.

"That's not true!" Vivica said, standing. "I watched them sing together, and it was beautiful."

The sheriff glared. "Well, I have witnesses who say otherwise."

"She is your daughter, sir. Isn't she?" I said, surprising even myself. If it were true, it justified his anger.

Mr. Goldstein turned to the sheriff. "Is this true?"

The sheriff didn't soften. "Yeah, it is."

Mr. Goldstein took a deep breath to calm himself. "I would like to see my client now, please."

The sheriff didn't move as though he wanted to say something, but finally stood and opened the door so we could follow.

Mr. Goldstein turned to Mr. Cummings. "I suggest you contact your legal team."

As we walked out, I tried to apologize to Mr. Goldstein, but his index finger and dark scowl stopped me. I slid to the rear of the group and remained quiet. We passed through a couple locked doors before entering a room with four cells protected by formidable bars. All were open save one.

The sheriff pointed to the last cell and yelled. "Mr. Heart, your lawyer is here!"

The door swung open from the inside, and Ricki walked out smiling. "Lenny, so glad to see you!"



Mr. Goldstein turned towards the sheriff and frowned. The sheriff didn't flinch. "I know he isn't a flight risk. Take all the time you need. Just push this button when you finish." He pointed next to the door.

Vivica was already next to Ricki, hugging him. "You alright?" she asked. "What happened?"

Mr. Goldstein interrupted. "Please say nothing until the sheriff leaves."

The sheriff muttered something before leaving, but finally locked the door as he left. After a minute, Mr. Goldstein turned back to Ricki and ushered him into his cell.

I grabbed a chair from next to the wall and pulled it up outside the cell. Ricki and Mr. Goldstein sat on the bed, and I urged Vivica to take the chair, but she declined, so I sat down.

"Now, Ricki, before you speak, I want you to know I am here to help you, so please be honest," Mr. Goldstein said, trying to sound calm and assuring.

Ricki looked hurt. "Lenny, you know I cannot lie to you."

"Okay, great," Mr. Goldstein said with an exhale. "Now, tell me what happened. Leave nothing out."

Ricki began his tale back in the pub where he met this angel whose voice was pure magic. They sang together and agreed to meet during her break an hour later. When Ricki met with her, she led him to the resort's parking garage and one of several Snowcats they used to groom the ski runs. They had talked for a brief while before she kissed him. He admitted he was excited, but pushed her away. When she took off her shirt, he stopped her. But she insisted and ripped open her shirt before jumping on top of him. When someone interrupted them, she screamed and claimed Ricki had attacked her. After that, they brought him here.

Ricki leaned back against the wall as he ended his tale. "It was wonderful."

Mr. Goldstein looked relieved. "Okay, so she attacked you?"

"Yes," Ricki said.

"The sheriff said you confessed to the assault charge," Mr. Goldstein said. "Is that true?"

"Oh, yes," Ricki said.

Mr. Goldstein shook while trying to hold in his emotions. "But why? She attacked you!"

Ricki smiled as he stared into the ceiling. "I don't want her to get into trouble. A woman's reputation is special when she is seventeen."

“What?” Veins stood out on Mr. Goldstein’s forehead as he leaned forward. “Why does that matter? What about your reputation and honor? Did you know she was a minor?”

“No, not until later, but it doesn’t matter,” Ricki said.

Mr. Goldstein turned red. “Are you insane? Why not?”

“Because I love her,” Ricki said. “Anyway, she will be eighteen in three months.”

“Wait?” Mr. Goldstein shook his head, confused. “Did you say, love?”

Ricki smiled. “Oh, yes, love,” he turned to me. “This is the one, Harry. Just like I said in the car. The one I have been waiting for.”

I was embarrassed and remained silent, but I thought Vivica might keel over. Her words to Annie were coming back to haunt her, and I cringed. I vowed to not reveal them to Mr. Goldstein. He would never forgive her.

“Love, Ricki?” she said. “For real?”

Mr. Goldstein cut Ricki off. “No! It is not for real!” he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Look, she is a minor illegally working as a server in a resort bar in Colorado. Of course you don’t love her! Enamored and attracted perhaps, but not love!”

Ricki looked concerned because of his friend’s distress. “No, Lenny, this is the one.”

Mr. Goldstein sprang from the bed and paced. “Okay, okay. Everyone take a breath and come back from fantasy land!”

“I think that is wonderful, Ricki,” Vivica said, ignoring her father but sounding hurt.

“No, it is not wonderful!” Mr. Goldstein stammered. “Why can’t you see the ridiculousness of this situation? Love? She is seventeen and doesn’t even know what love is!”

“I knew love when I was thirteen,” Ricki said.

Mr. Goldstein neared a breaking point. “Oh, my God! Do not mention that to anyone. Not even us!”

“But it is true, Lenny,” Ricki insisted.

Mr. Goldstein sat back down agitated and looked like he was hyperventilating. In this thin air, I feared he might pass out.

Ricki wrapped an arm around the man’s shoulder. “It is okay, Lenny. Defending a woman’s honor is a noble and just thing. It is okay if I have to pay a price for that. I really love her.”

Mr. Goldstein bent over and struggled to breathe. “You can’t, Ricki. This will ruin you,” He sounded hopeless.

Ricki frowned before speaking. "We will survive, Lenny. Trust me."

"No. No, we won't!" Mr. Goldstein said as he bolted upright, staring at his charge. "You will go to jail for a long while, and then you will have to register as a sex offender."

"But I love her," Ricki pleaded.

Mr. Goldstein shook his head and raised both his hands. "Ricki, this is a serious charge. They will kick you out of this country, forever."

I knew Ricki didn't understand the gravity of his situation. He stared at the floor before setting his jaw and leveling his eyes with Mr. Goldstein. "I will pay that price to protect her honor," he said.

Mr. Goldstein shook his head. "No. I can't lose you, Ricki. You are like my son!". His eyes began tearing up, and Vivica was already crying.

Ricki was tearing apart this strange and unique family of his, and I began choking up.

"Thank you, Leonard," Ricki said, using Mr. Goldstein's proper name. "You are like my father, and I am sorry."

We sat in awkward silence, and I felt compelled to speak with Annie and convince her to admit the truth. But I feared this fanciful notion was not even legal. Who was I, after all? Another foreigner in this remote land. They would spin it out of control as a conspiracy to coerce a young female to save another rich and famous star from his insatiable desires. Vivica maybe? Oh, sure the daughter of Ricki's agent. It was futile.

Ricki stared into his hands. "Is there nothing you can do, Lenny?"

Mr. Goldstein stood. "This is beyond my expertise, Ricki. I specialize in contract law."

"You can't defend me?" Ricki pushed.

"I can, but I don't feel qualified," Mr. Goldstein explained. "This is serious, and we need a serious lawyer who has dealt with this before."

Vivica jumped in. "Do you know someone, Daddy?"

Mr. Goldstein pursed his lips. "Maybe, but I don't think he would accept the case."

"Pay whatever it takes, Lenny," Ricki said.

"That isn't the problem," Mr. Goldstein said. "He is already wealthy. He defended that actress, what is her name, the one caught naked with that underage surfer she'd met during a drug binge."

Vivica answered. "Bethany Millhouse."

"That's the one!" Mr. Goldstein said. "They did not acquit her, but they dropped the felony charges, and she served community service. She didn't even have to register as a sex offender, but then she was out of her mind on drugs, and you weren't. I think she spent six months in a rehab facility."

"He sounds perfect," Ricki said. "Why won't he take my case?"

"Because of me," Mr. Goldstein admitted. "I was at Harvard Law School with him, and we were very competitive."

"So what? It sounds like he is doing great," Ricki said.

"Well..." Mr. Goldstein said, pacing. "I sort of prevented him from making law review. We were both gunning for it, and I did something that spoiled his chances."

Everyone stared at Mr. Goldstein, trying to imagine what he might have done that was so bad. Blackmail? Physical altercation? None of those things fit Mr. Goldstein.

"I slipped a Mickey into his coffee before his interview with the dean," Mr. Goldstein explained.

"A Mickey?" Ricki asked, confused.

Vivica spoke before her father could respond. "Drugged his coffee, Daddy?"

"I am not proud of it and tried for years to apologize to him, but he won't forgive me," Mr. Goldstein said.

"What kind of drug?" Ricki asked.

Mr. Goldstein hesitated. "LSD."

"Daddy!" Vivica said. "Where in the world did you get LSD?"

"My roommate was a drug user, and I found it in his desk drawer," Mr. Goldstein said as he wrung his hands together. "I never used LSD and did not understand what it would do."

"Lenny," Ricki frowned, "what did it do to him?"

Mr. Goldstein remained silent. "Understand, I was desperate to make law review," he looked into the ceiling and back at us. "Apparently, he couldn't stop laughing at the dean during the interview. Well, not an interview at that point. Later I discovered he had hallucinated the dean's face melting then snapping back."

"Why would that be funny?" Ricki asked.

"Why would I know? Things must be funny under the influence of LSD!" Mr. Goldstein said, clenching his fists.

He was uncomfortable recounting the story, and I failed to believe he could do that to someone. Law school was competitive, but this

seemed over the top for someone going into the justice field. I agreed with Mr. Goldstein, it was unlikely this man would defend Ricki.

"Daddy, they might have expelled him from Harvard!" Her face flushed as she confronted this disturbing admission from her father.

"I know!" Mr. Goldstein said. "He almost was. Fortunately, someone knew my roommate's proclivities, and after threatening to expose him, he admitted someone took his LSD. Naturally, they suspected me, though I never admitted it until later. Because of his excellent record, the dean bought the story that someone spiked his coffee, but he didn't make law review. Though they gave him a second chance, they had lost trust in him."

Vivica choked up. "Why?"

"I am not proud of it," Mr. Goldstein insisted. "I have tried to make it up to him, but he won't have it."

Vivica screamed. "I wouldn't forgive you either!"

Mr. Goldstein nodded. "I am so sorry, Ricki, but he probably won't even take my call."

"What if I call him?" Ricki said. "If I talk to him, he might listen."

"It won't matter. He knows I'm your agent and manage your career," Mr. Goldstein said.

"Be that as it may, I will call him," Ricki said, refusing to give in.

Mr. Goldstein smiled. "Look, first they will arraign you before a judge, and I can represent you for that. After that, you will need expert help."

"When?" Ricki asked.

"I don't know, but you will once I do," Mr. Goldstein assured Ricki. He pulled Ricki up off the bed and hugged him. "We will fight this, but you need to consider recanting your confession."

They released each other, and Ricki smiled. "I won't recant, Lenny. I really love her."

Mr. Goldstein gritted his teeth but remained silent. He turned and left without another word. We followed, and Ricki closed the door to his cell as though punishing himself for this travesty.

We rode to the resort in silence. Vivica was likely blaming herself for leading on the Annie when they had first met, and Mr. Goldstein was probably blaming himself for stopping in this town. Laser? Who knew what he was thinking, but I was sure he felt something for his younger brother. Maybe he blamed himself for not stopping it since he knew Ricki better than anyone else. Or perhaps he just accepted his brother's inclinations. After all, Ms. Ruez had seduced Ricki back when the boys were young.

I was guilty for not telling someone about Annie after seeing her and Ricki sing together. While I was only a naïve bystander, I felt culpable for the unfortunate outcome. I could have told Mr. Goldstein about it that night, but Mercy distracted me. Why was I distracted by her? I had done nothing, and now it was all going down in flames.

When Ricki spoke about loving Annie, I couldn't grasp it. But why couldn't I? People have written about it in stories and song since the dawn of man. Love and relationships have been the mainstay of every culture, yet I struggle to grasp it. I could not understand how a deep emotional feeling would suddenly appear for someone you had just met? Maybe it had also happened with Georgie and Pen after I introduced them, but I rather liked to think it wasn't until Pen and I had broken it off.

Was there something to it? Who was I kidding? I agreed with Mr. Goldstein. I couldn't imagine a famous pop star falling for a young woman serving drinks in an unknown ski resort in the middle of the Colorado wilderness. I mean, what were the odds that they would ever meet coming from two different worlds? Probably the same as the odds of an avalanche stranding us here. Bloody hell.

Did Annie harbor similar feelings for Ricki, or was it nothing more than hero worship? A famous pop star? That was every young girl's dream as Vivica had said. Did it go both ways? Were they both in love, or was it just a mutual infatuation? It felt more like a teenage celebrity crush. We've all had them in our youth. We were mesmerized by someone in the spotlight who inspired us, or touched some inner part of our soul. Someone we couldn't be with, but fantasized about anyway. But for Annie, this wasn't fantasy.

We pulled in front of the resort, and the snow continued to blanket this town in a sea of white. We had just made it back. I sensed we were not leaving soon. I thought again about my involvement in this affair. Would Mr. Goldstein cancel the biography and send me home? The possibility existed, and I braced myself for that eventuality. It was an epic fail before I had even started. Georgie and Pen would be disappointed, as was I.

The SUV stopped, and I stepped out into the cold air, shuffling to the warmth of the resort. I stomped my feet and turned to Mr. Goldstein as he walked through the doors behind me. But what could I say?

He sensed my indecision and pulled me towards the restaurant. "Please, I would like to speak with you."

I would get the sack. My knowledge about Annie being the sheriff's daughter probably had him wondering what else I knew. I would confess and throw myself at his mercy. If I was going home anyway, might as well clear my conscience and absolve my guilt.

He sat me at a small table concealed by a wall on two sides. I sat down and leaned back, ready for my awkward confession.

"Sir..." I began before he cut me off.

"Harry, I like you despite not being my choice as the writer. I believe you have Ricki's best interests at heart, and I appreciate that," Mr. Goldstein said. I sensed a 'but' coming.

"Sir, I am sorry for the..." Again, he stopped me with his hand.

"Don't," he said. "I realize you knew something about this young girl earlier in the evening, but don't make the mistake in believing this is your fault. Ricki is attracted to her, obviously, but that is to be expected. A man of his looks and obvious love of women is at risk because of his inherent nature," he paused in thought. "If he were back in South America, very few would blame him. And if there were punishment, it would be nothing compared to what he will face here. But, it isn't too late to bring him back to his senses. I mean, love?"

"Sir, I knew she was underage when I saw him singing with her," I admitted. "The young woman who knocked me down when we arrived told me while I was in the pub watching them sing," I felt somewhat better getting it off my chest.

Mr. Goldstein leaned back to assess my confession. I couldn't read his emotions but braced for the worst. He would sack me for sure.

"Do you believe he loves her?" he said, catching me off guard.

“Wha...” He should be yelling or telling me to pack my bags. “I... I don’t know, sir,” I admitted. “There was something about them when they were singing together, but I rather thought they were just interested in the other’s voice.”

He nodded. “My thoughts exactly! It is a ridiculous notion, and we need to help him realize this.”

“We?” I said, wondering where this was heading. I didn’t sense I was on my way home.

“Harry, for whatever reason, you and Ricki have some weird affinity, at least according to him. You are his polar opposite, no offense, but he is drawn to your friendship,” he said.

I remained silent but was slightly offended. Friends? Me and this iconic pop star? Not bloody likely.

Mr. Goldstein continued. “He doesn’t have very many friends, Harry. I mean real friends. He has associates from the industry or those who seek to bask in his fame. But a friend? Besides Vivica, me, and Laser, there isn’t anyone. But he admires you.”

“I am not sure what to say,” Once again, the stormy waters were rising, and I didn’t understand why. What did he want? I was a writer, not a therapist.

“I want you to exploit that friendship and get him to see his folly,” he said, confirming my fear. “He will listen to you before he will me. You heard him. I am like his father, and people do not listen to their fathers in matters of the heart.”

The reference was lost to me since I had no father. Then again, I didn’t have any matters of the heart to discuss with a father, anyway. This was a hopeless situation, but he was serious. I would have to do something.

“How?” I asked.

“Continue working on the book. Talk to him about his past, his experiences, his feelings,” he said. “Somewhere along the way you will convince him this is nothing more than a temporary infatuation.”

“What about Annie?” I said.

“Annie?” he said with disgust. “Why did she have to be the sheriff’s daughter? Look, she is just another fan attracted to his fame. He is like some shiny object she wants to possess. But once she has it, she will cast it aside in favor of her own interests. He can’t throw his life and career away over one obsessive fan.”

I did not agree about Annie, but he was right that Ricki shouldn’t throw everything away because of her. She was young, infatuated, and



probably attracted to the ‘shiny object’ that was Ricki Heart. However, I rather thought it was out of innocence and not malice.

“I will try, sir,” I agreed.

“Good!” he said with relief. “I’ll do what I am paid to do and worry about his legal situation. You keep him preoccupied until you can convince him to see the error of his way. Now, get some sleep. I want you down there as soon as possible.”

I nodded, trying to comprehend what I had just agreed to. I understood why he thought I could help Ricki, but I did not believe I could do it. Still, I had to try something. Despite Mr. Goldstein overlooking my culpability in the matter, I felt responsible and owed Ricki my allegiance and whatever help I could provide.

Mr. Goldstein stood, pursed his lips, nodding before he walked away. My head spun from the hangover and the immense responsibility I’d just taken on. I wished the pub were open.

\* \* \*

The phone jerked me awake, and I stared at the offensive device interrupting my sleep. I finally picked up the receiver to silence it.

“Hello?” I said, though it came out a slur.

“Mr. Holden, this is your wake up call!” a young female said in a cheerful voice that contradicted my current state of mind.

“Thank you,” I said, hanging up before she could respond.

The glowing green numbers on the clock read 7:00 AM. I moaned to greet the morning. After my discussion with Mr. Goldstein, I had forgotten about my original wake up call. My head pounded as if the washing machines next door were out of balance. Unfortunately, they were silent. The thin atmosphere made me feel like I’d been through a couple rounds in the ring.

I slowly rolled onto my side and put my feet on the floor. My mind swam through a sea of dark spots, and I nearly fell back onto the bed to crawl under the covers again. But duty called. I needed to force myself out of bed to begin my work with Ricki. At this point, I regretted my promise but steeled myself for the task ahead.

A quick shower and change of clothes eased the pain slightly, but I fought a numbing fog that wouldn’t clear. I grabbed my phone and wondered whether to call Pen and Georgie before they went to bed. I didn’t want to sound too needy because if they knew about our

predicament, it wouldn't be long before every tabloid swarmed Snowchute for a real-life celebrity story they usually had to invent.

When I finally closed my door and headed for the dining room, I was desperate for a cup of tea and breakfast. As I walked into the busy room, Vivica called out to me from a table near the windows. The snow had not let up, and I barely saw the mountain through the whiteout.

"Good morning," I said in a flat voice.

"I know what you mean," Vivica agreed. "It feels like we might never get out of this place. I have never seen so much snow in my life. I understand why they call this place Snowchute. They could leave off 'chute'."

I remembered the avalanche and decided Snowchute was quite appropriate. "It is far more than we get in a year in London," I said before placing my napkin on my lap.

"We sometimes get a lot in New York City, but not every year," Vivica said as her mood lightened. "Did you sleep?"

"A little," I admitted. "But I can't seem to shake the fog from my head. I suspect the thin air is to blame."

Vivica nodded. "I've had a splitting headache ever since we got here. I really don't like Colorado."

I remained silent, looking for something on the menu to ease my hangover. Normally, a piece of toast with jam and a soft boiled egg was sufficient for my morning meal, but I felt hungry despite the hangover. I also chalked that up to the thin air.

"Did you order?" I asked.

Vivica nodded. "Coffee and a bagel."

"I am not sure why, but I feel rather hungry this morning," I said. "But, first I need some tea."

"I'll never understand tea drinkers," Vivica said. "I guess it's whatever you're raised with."

I was about to answer before the server came to our table with Vivica's bagel. "You need something, hon?"

"Yes, please," I said. "Some hot tea with a lot of cream and the vegetarian omelet."

"Home fries?" she asked.

"Sorry?" I said, uncertain what those were.

"Fried potatoes, honey," she said, smiling. "We make them with onions and green peppers."

"Yes, that will be fine," I said with a tight smile. "Might I also get a glass of orange juice?"

She smiled. "You betcha, sugar. Anything else?"

I shook my head, and she walked off to place my order. I was coming off rather dull to these Colorado natives, but I didn't feel normal before tea. Even Finn knew not to talk with me until I had tea. Usually, he would whistle like my kettle until I put it on the stove.

"Your father up?" I asked, wondering what he would do to defend Ricki. Was he contacting his Harvard colleague to convince him to take the case?

"Judging how he looked this morning, I don't think he ever slept," Vivica said. "He is taking this hard. He loves Ricki and will do whatever he can to keep him out of prison."

"You think it will come to prison?" I said.

"Things have changed here in the last few decades. You know, with underage minors," she said. "I don't think he will get a fair trial in Snowchute or Colorado. He is a foreigner from down south, and that alone is a touchy topic. Especially if you aren't a citizen."

"There are many prejudices here?" I asked, wondering how bad it was. While everyone in England was not loving and open to everyone outside our borders, there was a general sense of tolerance.

"Let's just say it isn't a good time for different cultures. We are even less accepting of those from countries down south." She held up her bagel and took a bite.

I was not even going to pretend to know anything about America, but even my presence here did not always seem welcome. Thankfully, no one had been hostile to me. The server returned with my tea and set down a small container with various tea bags. I picked out a packet of Earl Grey and placed the bag in my cup.

"What did my dad want with you last night?" Vivica asked as I poured in the water.

"He believes I can convince Ricki to recant his confession," I said. "I disagree, but will put my best foot forward."

"What if he is in love?" she said, staring into the ceiling. I couldn't ignore the longing in her voice.

"Then, all may be lost," I said before removing my tea bag and adding a healthy dose of cream. I took a sip, and the flavor was respectable. It would soon clear my fog and make this day a little brighter. "He believes he is in love, but I wonder if Annie even feels the same way."

"I can't believe I led her on like that yesterday," Vivica said. "I should know better."

"Well, in all honesty, I knew she was underage and said nothing," I admitted. "I feel responsible."

"Don't," she said. "Ricki follows his libido as he has for many years. But I didn't need to stoke the fires."

"How could we know?" I said.

"Because it is Ricki Heart!" she insisted. "It's in his name for God's sake."

I nodded and took another sip of the life-giving tea. I understood what she was saying, and I supposed we all felt culpable for not assuming the worst and protecting him from himself. It's what friends should do, help each other. Considering what Mr. Goldstein told me, I could call myself a friend now even though I didn't feel like one.

"I will do my best to convince him," I said without conviction.

"Thank you," Vivica said. "It is more than we should expect from you. I mean, you are only here to write his memoirs. This is far beyond that. You are a saint for trying."

"Well, actually, in a way it is very appropriate." I disagreed. "What is more revealing than to work with him through this crisis?"

I didn't feel saint like because of my hangover, but she was right. Most wouldn't help him unless it directly benefited them. They would take advantage of this, selling his sordid story to the highest bidder. I didn't feel like I could profit from this unless they acquitted him. If they did, I supposed book sales might be off the charts. I cast those thoughts aside.

I grinned. "This is new to me. I really don't know what to do or how to act. But I want to help."

"I believe you, Harry," she said before taking another bite from her bagel.

\* \* \*

There was a spacious office chair in his cell, and the remnants of a breakfast sat on a small table by the open door. Even his bedding was different, with a colorful comforter now adorning the bed. He was in jail, but it felt a little more like a hotel room.

"I see they are taking good care of you," I said to get the conversation rolling.

"Oh, yes," Ricki agreed. "Charlotte is a wonderful host."

“Charlotte?”

“She works the front desk and takes care of the meals for the prisoners,” he said. “She brought me a couple things to make the cell more comfortable.”

“Well, that is good,” I said, wondering if Charlotte was another admirer. “What did she think about you being here?”

“She thinks I am innocent,” he said.

“But you are,” I said.

“True enough, but I didn’t tell her that,” he said.

“Sorry, I was just wondering if she liked you, too,” I said. “I sense you have many admirers here.”

“Too many, I think,” he admitted. “But then, that has been a part of me since I can remember.”

I pulled out my tablet and opened it. “A perfect place to start today.”

He eyed my tablet and smiled. “Still on the job, Harry?”

I nodded. “Why not? You paid me to get your story, and I don’t plan on disappointing.”

He laughed. “That’s why I like you, Harry. You are untouched by celebrity.”

“Well, I feel touched but mostly intimidated. Work is the best way for me to get on with it,” I said.

He nodded. “I agree. I have written most of my next album while in here.”

“Great,” I said, “why don’t you tell me about your childhood and when you first noticed people, especially women, paying attention to you.”

“Oh, it wasn’t me at first,” he said. “It was my oldest brother, Michael. Mama named him after an angel because he was such a beautiful baby. He was always mama’s favorito. He is the most handsome man in Columbia and has made a brilliant career from it.”

“He is a model?” I concluded.

“No, an actor,” he said. “He is a star in one of the largest shows in South America. The show is *El Hombres Grande*. He is one of the major characters who owns an enormous ranch where he breeds world-class racing thoroughbreds. It is a popular show.”

I had never heard of it, but remained silent as Ricki’s eyes lit up while discussing his family. This is the Ricki I wanted to see.

“I suppose if Michael had delivered that bird to Antonia, he might be here instead of me,” he admitted. “He was much older than me and

working in the city by the time I delivered that bird to her. I suppose I was always in his shadow, but many people still paid attention to me. I believe it saved us from the cartel many times. They would find us hunting on their property but always let us go.”

I typed as fast as I could. “Okay, just to be certain, it was you, Michael, and Laser?”

He nodded. “And mama, Hector, and Amelia.”

“Oh, five children in total?” I said.

“There were six children, but Maria passed away of fever when she was two. Mama couldn’t afford the medicine. It was very sad, and I think of her often,” he said.

“How old were you when she passed?” I said.

He thought for a minute. “I think I was seven.”

I nodded and made a note of it. “So six children total?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “You can see why mama had such a tough time after father was gone. But we pitched in and made it work.”

I smiled. “I’ll say. A television star and a pop star? I would say it worked out well.”

“God has blessed us,” he agreed.

“Where is your mother now?” I said.

He stared into the ceiling, so I assumed she had passed away, but he set the record straight. “She lives with her angel in Bogota.”

“With Michael?”

“Yes, he is still her favorito,” he said without regret.

“Are you saddened by that?” I asked him, wondering if his love of women was an attempt to fulfill the love he didn’t get from his mother.

“Oh, no, just the opposite,” he said. “I am happy she has a good life. She deserves it after what we went through. My brother built her a bungalow on his property with servants and a chef. I believe she is very happy, and I am thrilled,” he paused. “I just miss her.”

I nodded and changed the subject. “Was Antonia the first woman to pay attention to you in a physical way?”

He shook his head. “She was the first woman, but girls have liked me since I was little.”

I pressed him to elaborate. “Did you have a particular girlfriend?”

He shook his head. “No, but I had several regular girls.”

“Several?” I raised my eyebrows.

He nodded. “Three, maybe four that would give me food and clothing. When we went into town to sell our birds, we would meet

many families and many girls. If one liked you, she would give you gifts.”

“Did you kiss them?” I asked, concerned how this admission might be misconstrued.

“Sometimes, but all very innocent,” he said, smiling. “I knew they liked me, and I was more than willing to reciprocate. Many of them felt sorry for us having to live in the jungle, so they wanted to help.”

“I understand,” I said. “So, Antonia was your first lover?”

He nodded, grinning. “She showed me what love could be. Well, maybe not love, but physical love.”

“And since then, you have many women wanting to be with you?” I concluded.

“Be with me, make love to me, marry me, and have my children,” he said. “But until now, I have never met that special one.”

We were back on Annie, and I knew I had to tread lightly. “Annie? Are you sure?”

“You don’t believe me?” he said.

“Oh, no, not that. Just want to make sure we are talking about the same person,” I said, trying to put him at ease. I was not a therapist and feared I might screw things up even more.

“Sorry, Harry. I guess you are just curious,” he said. “I am, too. I have never felt this way, so it is new.”

“Different from the other women you have been with?” I said.

“Yes, I feel butterflies in my stomach when I think about her. She is like an angel sent to me by God.”

“And I assume she feels the same way?” I said, regretting it immediately.

He grinned and lowered his head. “I don’t know, Harry, but I hope so.”

“Did she tell you anything?” I asked.

He paused. “She said she had a dream about us singing together, and that it came true.”

I nodded. “And you think that is why she might love you?”

“If not, I will win her heart,” he said. “My love is genuine, and I will try everything in my power to bring us together.”

“But if she doesn’t love you...” I left it hanging.

“Then, it will break my heart,” he said, dropping his head once more.

I changed the topic before he stopped talking. “Were there no others you loved? What about Antonia?”

“Oh, I loved her, but not genuine love,” he said perking up. “She was like a teacher who opens your eyes to something new and wonderful. She taught me so much. More than just physical love, Harry.”

“She helped you learn to sing?” I said.

“To sing, to dress, to act civilized, and to read,” he said. “She helped me become who I am.”

I nodded but wrote nothing down. I thought about her brother and decided it was still best to avoid mentioning her. “Any others that were more serious than dating?”

“Yes,” he said. “I was with Julia Price for almost a year.”

This was news to me. “The actress?”

He nodded. “She was almost love, but I knew she didn’t love me. There was someone else in her life that I couldn’t compete with.”

“An old lover?” I concluded.

He shook his head. “No. Her.”

“She was a diva, then?”

He nodded and grinned. “It is okay, I am a diva myself. I believe people in our work shouldn’t be with each other. We care too much about our own fame to allow others to steal it from us.”

“Then, what about Annie?” I asked.

He smiled. “We will sing together like Johnny Cash and June.”

I knew who Johnny Cash was, but not June. “Who was June? His wife?”

“Well, not at first. He was married already,” he said. “But she was his true love. His destiny. It was sad and happy all at once. He eventually divorced, and they lived together for the rest of their lives. It was beautiful, especially when they sang together.”

I made a note to search up their music. If he was basing his relationship with Annie on them, I should learn more.

The door opened, and Mr. Goldstein entered with Sheriff Wilkinson behind him. Mr. Goldstein held his finger to his mouth as he walked towards me.

“Harry, why don’t you get a coffee or something. I need to talk with Ricki for a while,” Mr. Goldstein said.

The sheriff waited for me by the door as I gathered my things.

“You will come back, Harry?” Ricki asked.

I nodded as Mr. Goldstein interjected. “Yes, Harry will be back, but we must discuss things of greater importance right now.”



I moved back through the corridor to the front of the building, wondering what news Mr. Goldstein had. I hoped for something good. The good news for me was it wasn't too late to call Pen and Georgie. I felt a sudden need to speak with them. I looked around the foyer and decided I needed somewhere more private to make my call.

A door opened from behind the desk, and a woman I assumed was Charlotte eyed me suspiciously. "Can I help you?"

She looked in her fifties or sixties with gray hair tied in the back, rustic clothing, and a rugged countenance similar to the sheriff. If she'd worn a holstered pistol on her belt, it wouldn't have surprised me. These Coloradans had a rough exterior and grit in the mountains. A true native.

"Ah, yes," I said. "I was just talking with Mr. Heart and needed to step out while he spoke with his lawyer. Is there a small café or coffee shop where I might make a call and get some tea?"

Her shoulders relaxed after I mentioned Ricki's name, and she turned friendly. "Well, there is Miss Tuesday's café a couple blocks down, but I'm uncertain you'll be able to get there on foot. They haven't cleared the sidewalks on this end of the street yet."

"Yes, it is a lot of snow," I said, wishing I could get that tea.

"Hang on," she said. "I'll see if Robby can take you."

"Robby?" I asked. "He can drive me down there?"

"Yes, she is clearing the parking lot out back, so I'll see if she minds taking you."

"She? You needn't bother," I said, wondering what a girl named Robby might look like. I foolishly pictured a lumberjack of a woman moving enormous piles of snow.

"She won't mind!" Charlotte announced. "She loves taking out the Ski-Doo."

"Ski-Doo?" This was foreign to me.

"Oh, right! You're not from around here," she said. "It's a snowmobile."

"I see. I have never ridden on one," I admitted. Was tea and a phone call worth riding on a snowmobile? I remembered the beautiful woman in white riding on one the day before. "Sure, why not? Sounds fun."

She grinned. "Some folks think it is. Too damn noisy if you ask me. I'll be right back."

After a few minutes, Charlotte returned. "She'll be right out front. Good luck."

I tried to ignore the “good luck” comment, but decided I should at least try it once. What better adventure than riding on a motorbike through snow? I would never be in Colorado again. Why not do as the Romans do?

“Thank you, Charlotte, is it?” I said with a smile.

“Yes, that’s right. How did you know?” she asked.

“Ricki, I mean Mr. Heart told me,” I said.

“Oh, he mentioned me?” she said with a broad smile.

She glowed, and I smiled back. “Yes, he was very thankful for what you provided.”

“Well, we aren’t savages out here, are we?” she said. “He is such a sweet man. I hate to see him locked up.”

“I know what you mean,” I agreed. The roar of an engine signaled my ride. “Well, sounds like my Ski-Doo is here.”

Charlotte was giddy from my admission that Ricki had mentioned her. “You take care, young man.”

A light snow still lingered, and the air pierced my woolen clothes as though I were naked. The ride through snow drifts would take my breath away. Robby wore a helmet and goggles, a heavy brown ski coat with dark black ski pants and thick boots. Even though the engine idled on low, it was still deafening.

“You the guy with Ricki Heart?” she yelled above the noise.

“Yes, I’m Harry!” I screamed. “You Robby?”

“Yep,” she said before throwing me a helmet. “Put this on.”

“Of course,” I said, just catching it. I pulled it over my head, thankful for the additional protection.

She patted the seat behind her and waited for me to swing my leg over the rear of the vehicle and put my feet on the pedals intended for the passenger.

“Grab my waist hard!” she yelled. “You don’t want to fall off when I get going!”

I complied and squeezed my arms around her mid-section.

“Tighter!” she yelled. “You won’t hurt me!”

I squeezed tighter but nearly fell off as she bolted out of the parking lot at full throttle. I desperately clung to her, regretting my decision to accept the ride. Within a couple minutes we had shot down the main street and pulled in front of the café where she turned off the Ski-Doo.

“How long you gonna be?” she asked in a normal tone.

“Not more than a half hour!” I yelled back, before stopping when I realized my volume. “Sorry.”

"It's okay, most people do that after riding," she said with a smile. I spotted a young, attractive face eyeing me through yellow goggles. "You ever ride one before?"

I shook my head.

"Not surprised," she said with a smile. "Probably have little need for them in England."

I smiled. "At least not in London."

She hopped off and pulled her goggles up onto the helmet. "London, huh? Cool," she said. "How do you know Ricki? He your boyfriend?"

"Wha... no," I said, confused. "Why would you say that?"

"I dunno," she said. "It's cool if you are and want to keep it a secret. After all, it took Elton John a while before he came out."

"Just because I am British does not mean I am gay!" I didn't appreciate her presumption.

"That's cool, too," she said, oblivious to my discomfort. "I kind of thought maybe Ricki was one of those pretty boys who pretends to be the playboy but is gay. You know, like Ricky Martin."

"Definitely not!" I exclaimed as I got off the Ski-Doo.

"Huh," she said. "Weird."

I wrestled with my emotions. "Why is that weird?"

"Annie said he wouldn't have sex with her," she said.

"She told you?" I exclaimed. "Then, why is she still telling everyone he attacked her?"

Robby shrugged. "I guess she doesn't want her dad to know what really happened. Have you met him? He would have an aneurism for sure."

I tried to remain calm, but this teenager was pushing my buttons. Her nonchalant attitude about Ricki's predicament was hard to swallow, and I choked it down painfully. "He is my friend and being punished for something he didn't do."

She held up her hands. "Hey, I'm with you! But once she decides, you can't change her mind."

I accepted this and decided the conversation was over. I nodded that I understood she was on our side despite doubting it was true. A real friend wouldn't let a friend do this to someone else.

"I'll be about thirty minutes," I said.

"Cool," she said. "I'll have a hot chocolate and wait with you."

My blood pressure was spiking, but I realized the futility. She seemed oblivious to normal social cues, so I conceded defeat and nodded for her to follow.

\* \* \*

After agreeing to buy Robby breakfast and hot chocolate, she settled herself into a booth and glued her eyes to a cell phone. I sat at a table by the window and steeped my tea appropriately before pouring in cream. The first sip calmed me after the ridiculous conversation with Robby. She was young and didn't understand the magnitude of Ricki's situation. I would forgive her, but I didn't have to like her.

The reception in the café was exceptional, and my call to London went through immediately. I finally felt a bit more civilized in Snowchute.

"Bloody hell!" the voice of Georgie screamed. I could nearly smell the bitter through the phone. "If it isn't Prince Harry looking in on us little folk!" he said, unable to stop laughing.

I heard Pen in the background squealing with delight. "I get to talk with him, Georgie!"

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "So how is America, mate?"

"Very different," I said.

"I bet!" I pulled the phone away from my ear to decrease the volume.

"Been to Grumman's Chinese Theater yet?" he asked.

"No, Georgie, not yet," I admitted.

"Bloody hell!" Other patrons eyed me as they overheard his enthusiasm. I smiled before turning towards the window.

"We are still in Colorado," I said.

"Why? Thought you'd be in L.A. by now," he said.

I knew if I told him what was happening, the media would have it within an hour. Georgie couldn't keep his mouth shut after drinking in a pub if his life depended on it. I would keep it simple.

"Avalanche," I said.

"No bloody way, mate!" Georgie yelled through the phone. I heard Pen in the background complaining she couldn't hear. Georgie yelled back at her. "Avalanche," he said. "Did it bury you?"

"No," I said, not wanting to relive the experience. "Just the roadway. We're stuck in a town named Snowchute."

"Bloody hell!" he said.

I heard a commotion before Pen's voice came on the line. "Sorry, Harry. Georgie has had a few already," she said.

"It's okay, Pen. We are okay," I assured her. "However, I miss home. It has been snowing here non-stop, though I think it is finally letting up."

"How much snow?" she said.

"I am not sure, maybe a meter," I admitted as I eyed the piles lining the street. Much of not cleared yet.

"Wow!" she said. "I didn't even know it could snow that much."

"Well, I am less than enthusiastic about it. However, they have decorated this quaint town for Christmas, so it isn't all bad. I even hitched a ride here on a snowmobile."

"Did you, now? A snowmobile?" she said. "I am not even sure what that is."

I laughed. "I didn't know either, but it is like a motorbike you ride on snow. Big tank treads and skis instead of tires. To be honest, it was rather exhilarating."

"Frightening, more like it," she said, concerned. "How long will you be there?"

"Not sure. The avalanche buried the truck that removes the snow from the roads. I don't know if they have any others," I said.

"America sounds dangerous," she said. "Don't think I want to go there."

"Well, Colorado, at least," I said. "It is very rugged and desolate. People are nice enough, but I miss home."

"Well, rain here, as usual," she said. "You aren't missing much."

"I miss you, Georgie, and Finn," I said. I desperately wanted to tell Pen what was really happening. She would keep it quiet, but I knew Georgie would pull it out of her somehow before broadcasting it to everyone in the pub. They all knew I was in America with Ricki Heart.

"We miss you, too, Harry," she said.

"Well, I better go or I won't be able to afford this month's phone bill," I said, not wanting to hang up. It was difficult to hear them at the pub. I sighed and leaned my head against the cold window.

"Is the book going well?" she asked.

"Yes, I am learning a lot about Mr. Heart," I admitted. "He has had a very interesting life despite his age."

"I'll bet," she said before Georgie's voice came back.

"Learn any dirt about those women he sleeps with?" he slurred.

“Oh, Georgie, please!” Pen said, pushing him away despite protests. “Please call us again when you get a chance.”

“Thanks, Pen, I will,” I said and hung up.

I looked across the café at Robby digging into her breakfast special, so I signaled the server for another cup of hot water. I downed the rest of mine and stared out into the winter wonderland. I grinned at my reflection, realizing this was an adventure but not the one I had expected. For Ricki’s sake, I hoped Annie would realize her mistake before it cost the young man everything. I thought about talking to her again, but that was folly. Who was I, after all? Admiral Boring.

The rest of the afternoon with Ricki was productive, focusing more on their fledgling exotic bird business that helped to support the family. Based on Ricki's commentary, they worked with unsavory characters who paid them for their catches. It was illegal to export birds out of Columbia, but well-placed bribes within the justice system kept scrutiny off their childhood business.

From my perspective, I couldn't blame Ricki and his brothers. They were just surviving in a harsh world that had killed their father. They grew up faster than most children and learned hard lessons early in their lives. The tales, however intriguing, kept me from wanting to visit Columbia. South America could be cruel to those who couldn't navigate the complex web of politics, crime, and justice that coexisted in such a precarious way.

Though Antonia had lifted him out of the abject poverty, she also tainted his innocence and set him on a path that led to the jail cell he now occupied. Our past can affect our future in a real way. Ricki was learning this lesson the hard way. Still, he was the victim here, and I sensed a somewhat naïve and gentle soul lurking within his handsome exterior.

After Ricki left his homeland, his brothers went their own separate ways, abandoning the exotic bird business. The oldest brother, Michael, pursued an acting career and turned his good looks into commercial shoots that led to his current role in the prominent Colombian television drama.

Laser enlisted in the military and through his rugged demeanor worked his way into the elite forces often used to oppress those who came against the government or the cartels. It was unclear how Laser might have viewed this somewhat dysfunctional world and his role within it as a soldier. I suspected he followed orders, and I didn't want to know what unsavory things he witnessed or did while serving.

Hector went to work in a neighborhood grocery and became the manager. After Michael's rise to prominence, he loaned Hector money to buy out the small grocer who wanted to retire. He then expanded to other neighborhoods and owned a modest chain of four small groceries. According to Ricki, a larger grocery concern offered to buy

Hector's small chain for a tidy sum. Ricki didn't know if Hector had sold them or not.

Despite their struggles, or maybe because of them, the family survived and thrived. It was a remarkable story that hinted there may be justice in the Universe. Despite their shared difficulties, Ricki didn't keep in contact with them often. Perhaps he was too busy, or perhaps Laser did it for them both. Either way, it seemed unusual he wasn't closer to them after everything they had experienced during their childhood.

Fame changed a person, and maybe he didn't want to remember his past. But if that were true, I doubted he'd have hired Laser to be his bodyguard. So, maybe I understood the bodyguard part, but why a driver? Wasn't it demeaning? Maybe I was looking at this the wrong way, and I vowed to ask him the next time we talked.

Laser had dropped me at the resort, and I headed to my room for a much-needed nap. Between the lack of sleep and all the information Ricki had shared, I was overwhelmed and needed time to process it with a more rational mind. Considering the thin atmosphere was fogging my mind, that seemed unlikely.

I rounded the corner of the hallway to get ice for my head and slid on a wet floor, falling into the unattended mop and bucket. Fortunately, it didn't tip over on me.

"Bullocks!" I yelled as I rolled away, holding my shin in pain.

"Oh, my God!" A familiar voice exclaimed as Mercy rounded the corner holding a wet floor sign. "I am so sorry, Harry!" she said, panicking.

I kept control. "Isn't that sign used before you mop?" I asked in an agitated tone.

"Yes," she said with a look of horror. "Yes, I forgot and ran to get it, but you must have come just after I..."

Tears formed in the corner of her eyes, and my attitude softened. She was such a nice girl, but was clearly not finding her niche in the hospitality sector. I felt obligated to talk with her uncle, but I didn't want to be responsible for her being sacked.

"I am fine," I said, getting up and gently placing pressure on the leg. There was a definite lump forming beneath my trousers.

Mercy could not hold back the tears, and it pained me to watch the poor girl suffer. My injuries seemed trivial when compared to young dreams smashed on the rocks. I wanted her to succeed, but I didn't enjoy being the practice dummy.



"I can't do anything right!" she moaned as she put the sign down and took a few steps towards me.

I backed away, but that only horrified her. I tried to calm her. "Look, I just needed some ice for a headache," I said, switching gears to distract her.

She looked at the ice machine before dropping her eyes. "You'll need more for your leg," she said.

Something overcame me, and I hobbled towards her in a gesture of a truce. I placed my arms around her shoulders and hugged her. She looked so helpless and despondent, it felt like the right thing to do.

She released a full torrent of tears, and I tried to reassure her by patting her back. "Why are you so nice to me?" she whispered through sobs.

Good question, but there was something about her. She seemed normal, especially after our conversation in the pub. After being with Ricki, normal was refreshing. "I guess I like you," I said.

She pulled away. "What?" she asked, and I realized she took it the wrong way.

"No, no," I blurted. "I like you as a person, not as a girl. I mean, not as a girl I like. I mean..." I was at a loss for words.

"I have to go," she said, wrangling the mop handle to roll the bucket down the hallway.

She left me stunned and had misunderstood what I had meant. But who wouldn't? She probably got propositioned by inappropriate guests constantly. Still, it was innocent. Right? Bloody hell. I limped over to the ice machine and opened the lid, grabbing the scoop before realizing I didn't have an ice bucket. Would nothing go right?

\* \* \*

A long nap, ample dinner, and a couple of ales later, and I felt almost normal. I was sitting in the pub staring out the window at the glowing white darkness. The snow had stopped, but it didn't improve my mood.

During dinner, Mr. Goldstein told us Ricki would go before a judge the day after tomorrow, assuming the road crews could clear the highways by then. They hadn't cleared the avalanche, and the truck in the ditch made the cleanup more difficult. It seemed our fate would prevent us from leaving this place, like a disturbing Twilight Zone episode where the patrons could never leave the diner.

As if Ricki's problems weren't enough to keep us solemn, I kept replaying my encounter with Mercy over again in my mind. My intentions had been innocent, but now I wondered. Did I have feelings for this helpless girl or was it pity? Whether her harm was intentional or not, where was the attraction in it?

But I thought my actions might have been for different motivations. I mean, I was the one to reach out and hug her. This wasn't normal for me, but there it was, I had done it. I knew it was innocent, but now I was second guessing myself.

I downed the rest of my ale and signaled the server for another. She was not Annie, though I felt confident Annie's serving days were over. I felt confident Mr. Cummings had fired her, though maybe not if he feared retribution from the sheriff. More likely the sheriff made Annie quit. After her complicity in taking Ricki to the underground garage, I doubted her father would let her remain in such a precarious job.

The new server was Emily, the one Annie had covered for. I hoped her attempts to woo the ski patrol guy proved successful. It would be a shame if the costs of her efforts had not worked. She looked late twenties, with ample tattoos visible on her arms. What other tattoos lurked beneath her clothing? While the tattoo craze hadn't reached my inner circle, it was far more commonplace than not.

She was attractive enough, and I understood why she was working at the pub. An attractive woman would pull in plenty of tips as she urged drunken men to drink more than their fill. Even I was falling prey to these overt sales tactics, but I felt like I deserved it after everything that had happened.

"Here you go, sweetie," she said with an interesting accent. I assumed something rural.

"Thank, you," I said, handing back my empty.

"Aren't you the one with Ricki Heart?" she asked.

I nodded, maintaining a neutral expression. "Yes, I am the biographer."

"Biographer?" she asked.

I smiled. "I am writing his life story."

She laughed. "Oh, of course. Well, now you have something to write about," she said, oblivious to the callous nature of her comment.

I grinned and remained silent. It was apparent she was unaware of her own role in this unfortunate affair. I couldn't resist and asked. "Did Annie cover for you often?"

"Annie?" she said without surprise. "That poor girl. I can't believe what happened. She shouldn't have put herself in such a position after all the warnings I have given these young girls. You can't be too careful around these guests. Some are just outright leches."

"You think that's what happened?" I asked. She didn't know the full story like Robby.

"Well, I assume you are on Ricki's side, and I can't blame you. He is quite hot. But, sugar, I can tell you that even someone like Ricki can't always control himself when alone with a young woman," she stopped, ignoring my discomfort. "I have seen it happen plenty of times in Alabama. Coaches, teachers, heck, even pastors of the church."

"What about English biographers?" I asked in a bitter tone.

"Sugar, given the right circumstances, even you," she smiled and walked off, leaving me steaming.

Was she right? Is that why I was so angry? Would I take advantage of Mercy given the right circumstances? No, I wouldn't. I may be alone, lonely even, but I did not see myself taking advantage of a young woman to satisfy carnal desires. Those people lurked in online chat rooms looking for casual sex or other obscene perversions. That wasn't me, and I felt pretty certain it wasn't Ricki either.

She was wrong about him, but her attitude was the reason Mr. Goldstein was concerned. Like her, everyone would assume Ricki's guilt. If Ricki would not deny it, the court would come down hard. I needed to redouble my efforts to get him to reconsider his noble notions of saving Annie.

I downed a large gulp of ale and felt the effects. The altitude was working its insidious ways on me, but I didn't care. My anger needed an outlet, and heavy drinking was it. My first visit to America would not end well.

"Can I join you?" A gentle voice asked from behind.

I swiveled around and smiled at Mercy. "I... uh... please?" How should I respond? Why would she want to speak with me again?

She took the seat opposite mine and placed her glass of white wine on the table. I stared like a lost puppy and turned away lest I scare her again.

"I am sorry for this afternoon," I said, looking into my mug. "I just wanted to comfort you. You were so distraught."

"I know," she said, and I peeked into her eyes. "I over reacted. I do more and more of that these days."

Had the incident made her feel like a failure in the hospitality business?

I wanted to help any way I could. "I see you are upset, but I have to ask. Why the hospitality sector?"

She smiled. "You'll think this is ridiculous..." she stopped and left it hanging.

"No, I want to know," I said. "I mean, I work in an antique bookstore. How ridiculous is that for a young man? But I like my job."

She looked uncertain and took a sip of wine. "Well, when I was a little girl, I read a book. In this book, a young girl lived in a grand hotel. She got into trouble, but she always loved the exotic people who came to stay from all over the world. A hotel brings so many interesting people to your doorstep," she stopped and sipped. "I guess I wanted to be a part of that world. I am not rich enough to stay in such a place."

I smiled. "I think I know which book you are referring to."

"The story was a departure from my tiny world, and I liked the glamour," she admitted.

"That is not unlike me and my love of pirate ships when I was a child," I said. "Now I write biographies about long dead naval admirals. I know what it is like to yearn for something different from your own life."

She nodded. "However, that dream seems about as far away as when I was that little girl. I am nowhere near an exotic resort with international glamour, and I can't even do the simple job I have here."

I grinned and took another drink from my ale. Maybe it was the altitude or maybe it was the drink, but I felt a kinship with this girl. We were two starry-eyed dreamers trying to find our way in this world that didn't often support dreams. Reality always tempered the hopeless dreams of romantics.

"Do you have similar problems with other guests, or is it just me?" I asked.

She laughed. "Well, I did pour bleach into the hot tub, thinking it was the chlorine to keep the water clean. Oh, there was a time I hit the emergency button in the elevator. I was stuck in there for an hour before the fire department got me out. Two guests were in there with me."

"So, I am not the only lucky one," I said.

"No, you aren't," she said. "I can't tell you how sorry I am about everything I have done to you. You didn't deserve my reaction this

afternoon. You have been nothing but polite, even though you have every reason to be angry.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Well, after the fact, I find it rather humorous in a pathetic way. Everything about this trip is pathetic.”

“I am so sorry about Mr. Heart,” she blurted. “I know Annie, and she seeks out trouble. Her dad is usually furious with her over something she has done at school, or after school, or whatever. He made her quit.”

“I am not surprised,” I said, wondering how much Mercy knew about what happened. “He claims to love her.”

“Really?” she said, surprised. “Huh. A lover? Like something from a movie.”

“Please don’t tell anyone,” I urged. “It might hurt his case.”

She shook her head. “I won’t. Wow, loves her?”

“So he claims,” I said.

“That is so weird, I mean, someone like him with someone like Annie,” she said. “Though they were chummy on stage.”

“My thoughts, after the fact,” I admitted. “I feel somewhat responsible for not letting Mr. Goldstein know. Maybe he would have stopped Ricki before he and Annie met up,” I stopped when I spotted the mystery woman walking into the pub. She took a seat on one of the barstools.

She wore skintight black pants with heavy fur-covered boots and a signature white ski coat with fur-lined hood. When she removed her coat, her long hair fell down across her back over a beautiful Nordic sweater. I wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“She is beautiful, isn’t she?” Mercy said, breaking my stare.

“I am so sorry. Was I staring?” I said. What was I doing?

“You and everyone else,” she nodded.

I had to ask. “Who is she?”

“Olga Remington,” she said with a grin. “She was Mr. Remington’s wife. Not Remington guns, but the Remington ranch here in Snowchute. His family founded this town.”

I knew nothing about Remington guns but was intrigued she had said Olga ‘was’ his wife. “What happened?” I asked.

“To Mr. Remington?” she said. “He died. He was eighty-three and had a heart attack. Considering his young wife, I am surprised it didn’t happen sooner,” she paused. “Sorry, that wasn’t very nice.”

“Where did they meet?” I pressed.

“In Russia somewhere,” she said. “She was a Russian model he’d met when trying to sell cattle or meat. He said they fell in love, and they were married after he returned. Quite the gossip around town from what I have heard. I wasn’t here then.”

“A model?” I asked, more intrigued. An international model and love at first sight. Did it happen all the time, and I was just clueless?

“I understand what you see in her,” she said before taking a sip. “She is exquisite.”

“What, no, I...” Who was I kidding? I was smitten with this woman, despite all the reasons I shouldn’t be. She was like those pirate ships of my youth. Another escape from my drab reality. “Sorry, I guess I don’t see many models in my world.”

“It’s okay. I am used to it,” she said.

“I am so sorry,” I said again. “It is rude of me to ignore my guest to stare at someone else.”

She laughed. “Well, it isn’t like we are on a date or anything.”

“Right,” I said, laughing. “Not a date or anything.”

She smiled and sipped her wine before staring back at Olga. There was jealousy or envy in her eyes. I understood what it was like having no one show interest in you when beautiful people were around. It was like being with Ricki.

Ricki sat back against the wall with one leg propped up on the bed. He had just finished telling me about his time in New York City before and after being abandoned by his managers. His gaze was introspective and melancholy. It was obvious this was not a high point in his life.

“What happened to your band mates?” I asked.

He turned his gaze towards me. “They weren’t all as fortunate as I was,” he said. “Manuel and Fredo, the two brothers, mixed in with the local Columbian population. They tried to get me to join them, but I didn’t want to sell drugs. It’s wrong, and I couldn’t do that to anyone, no matter how much they begged me. The cartel killed my father, so I would never peddle their poison.”

“Are they still involved with the drug trade?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Since meeting Lenny, my life has been a whirlwind, so I have never looked them up. I suppose if they weren’t killed by other gangs, it is possible they are still in New York. Then again, maybe they were promoted and moved back to Columbia. Truth is, I don’t care. We were never close.”

I jotted down a few notes on my tablet. “And the others?”

“Jaime and Diego?” he said. “Jaime was the best looking of us all. Last I heard, he is being paid for those looks.”

“Modeling?” I said.

He laughed. “No, not modeling.”

“Acting then?” I concluded.

“No,” he said. “Let’s just say women with a lot of money pay him for his companionship.”

Now I got what he was saying. “Ah, I understand. Shame he couldn’t turn those looks into modeling or something.”

“Don’t feel sorry for him,” Ricki said. “He loves his work and is very good at it. No shame in bringing love into the lives of those who have none. Even people of wealth. Sometimes, they are the loneliest people of all.”

“I guess I never thought about it that way,” I admitted. “Do you still see him?”

“If I have time while in New York,” he said.

I nodded and wrote additional notes before saving the file. What a great session. I already had a good idea how the book would flow. His life was interesting to everyone, not just the fans who adored him. Even I was fascinated.

"What about Diego?" I said, forgetting the fifth member of Los Muchachos Pequenos.

Ricki shook his head. "No one knows," he said. "At least Jaime and I don't. He left after they threw us out of our hotel room, and we never saw or heard from him again."

"That's unfortunate," I said. "Do you think he survived?"

He stared into the ceiling in thought. "Diego was never comfortable with the lifestyle of an artist. He would sing and follow the directions given him, but he was moody and introspective. Manuel told me Diego had an even harder life than me. He said Diego's family were criminals. Diego's mother's pleaded with him to join the band and escape the lawless life of his father and brothers."

"That is terrible. Do you think he returned to crime?" I said.

He shrugged. "Who knows, but it wouldn't surprise me."

I wrote more thoughts about this before turning serious. "Could that have been you? I mean, if you hadn't met Len... Mr. Goldstein."

"I do not know," he said. "I think my guardian angel would not have let that happen. If anything, I might have turned out like Jaime."

"Yes, I can see that," I agreed. "I wouldn't mention that in court."

"Court?" he said, snapping out of his reverie. "Oh, yes, that would be wise. In fact, let's not mention that in the book."

"Your alternative future or Jaime?" I said.

"Both. It would not be fair to Jaime. He is a wonderful person, and one of the few friends I have from that period in my life. I don't want to bring too much attention to his business."

"I understand," I said, scratching it from my notes. "I guess I am concerned about your court date tomorrow. Are you?"

He sighed. "I am concerned but ready to face whatever consequences I must."

"I know Mr. Goldstein has harped on this, but I am curious. How did you know you loved her? I mean, so quickly? I've loved no one, so I might not even understand, but it seems unlikely you can fall for someone so fast."

Ricki sat up and stared at me, making me avert my gaze in embarrassment. "It is in the eyes, Harry."

I looked into his eyes, but saw nothing. "The eyes?"



“Yes, the eyes,” he continued. “They are the window into the soul, Harry, and when you look into the eyes of your soulmate, you know genuine love.”

“I guess I just haven’t found my soulmate yet,” I said, struggling with this theory.

I’ve looked into women’s eyes before without seeing their soul. There was no love there, only a passing interest or maybe some romance. Granted, I didn’t travel in a large circle of people, so maybe I missed my special someone. What a sad thought. Surely there was more than one special person, otherwise, what were the odds of meeting them in this giant world? If we were never given a chance to gaze into their eyes, how would we make the connection? I remembered Mercy on top of me in the slush. I had looked into her eyes.

“It may be impossible for anyone who has never experienced it to understand,” he said. “It caught me off guard, but was something real. Deep in her beautiful eyes, I saw her soul mingling with mine. It was kismet, or whatever you wish to call it.”

“A miracle?” I suggested.

“You know, you may be right,” he said. “Perhaps my angel brought us together. Perhaps that avalanche was divine intervention. I mean, what are the odds?”

“Exactly,” I said, wondering how I would convince him to recant his confession.

He believed she was the one, and nobody, maybe not even Annie, could convince him otherwise. I desperately wanted to talk with that young lady again. What was going through her mind? What did she honestly feel for Ricki? Was it puppy love? Genuine love or a celebrity crush? At her age, it could be any of the three or neither.

“Do you think she loves you, too?” I asked, trying not to push too hard.

“I do,” Ricki said.

He would not change his mind, and I was uncertain I wanted him to. It was romantic, though likely naïve. But when I looked into his eyes, I saw conviction. I recalled a quote I’d read in university by from the French poet, Victor Hugo, “The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves.” For a pop star, this was crucial. Did he believe she loved him despite his fame?

“Will I ever see her again?” Ricki whispered. “I mean, before I go to prison?”

He sounded forlorn, and I wanted to bring her here to talk with him. If not for love, then to let her see him locked up. She might recant her testimony after seeing him in jail. Then I thought about her father, the sheriff, and changed my mind. Seeing that man upset frightened me.

“I don’t know, Ricki. Probably not,” I said. “You know her father will never allow it.”

Ricki leaned back against the wall. “My Juliet,” he said.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t end like that,” I said, trying to ease his mind. “Once she is an adult, her father won’t have any say over what she does.”

He brightened. “You are right, Harry. She can come see me in prison. We will get to know each other better until I am released.”

I held my tongue, though I feared she would never visit him in jail. I was being rather cynical, but I didn’t see a seventeen-year-old girl waiting while Ricki served a multi-year sentence. Where was the romance in that? She wouldn’t see any either. Then again, Snowchute was surreal. Was Ricki right? Was divine intervention what brought us here? It sure felt like purgatory.

\* \* \*

Laser pulled up to the front of the police station, so I pushed my way into the bright sunlight reflecting off the sparkling snow. The weather had changed from a snowpocalypse to a crystal-clear sky of intense sunshine. I had never seen such a deep blue in all my life. In London, the sky was either gray or a dull blue.

My pale skin cringed from the intensity, as though it would burn me as I watched. So much sunshine was alien to me, and I had to be careful at this altitude or I would burn. How did skiers endure it all day?

I opened the SUV door and slid inside. Mr. Goldstein was sitting in the back waiting for me. “Oh, Mr. Goldstein. Sorry, did you need the vehicle as well?”

“It’s okay, Harry. I needed to see Ricki about tomorrow. However, I need to talk with you before I do.”

“Certainly, sir,” I said, not sure how to tell him about Ricki’s conviction.

“Have you spoken about her?” he asked, straight to the point.

"Yes, sir," I said, deciding I better not pull my punch. "However, I must admit, he seems intractable about his notion of love."

Mr. Goldstein sighed. "My thoughts exactly!" He placed his hands over his face and dragged them down. "I love that boy, but he can infuriate."

I glanced at Laser, wondering what he thought of this conversation. He didn't move or look in the rearview mirror.

"Sir?" I started, knowing the answer before I asked it. "Do you think it is possible I might speak with Annie?"

"Oh, God, no!" he said. "You want to make matters worse? They would blame us for coercion or some other felony, sinking Ricki deeper into the muck. We must let this play out in court and follow proper protocols, regardless of what we believe. They will not give us leeway."

"Yes, I am sorry, sir. I was just wondering what Annie thought about all of this. Perhaps if someone talked about Ricki in jail, it might change her mind about her own testimony. It was foolish, my apologies."

Mr. Goldstein stared at me before speaking. "It is okay, Harry. I understand your frustration, but after we spoke with her, any change in her testimony would be viewed as nothing short of coercion or bribery. We cannot and must not contact her. Do you understand, Harry?"

I nodded.

"Good," he said, patting my knee. "We might have some good news. My old Harvard associate is considering taking the case, though I had to make some rather large concessions."

"Concessions?" I asked.

He grinned. "Don't worry about it, they only affect me."

He gave a curt smile and opened the door to get out. Before he closed it, he spoke to Laser. "Come back in an hour."

Laser nodded but remained silent. Once the door closed, we pulled out of the parking lot for our journey back to the resort. I wanted to ask Laser what he thought about all of this, but it was as fruitless as wanting to talk to Annie. Instead, I stared out the window and dreamed of an ale in the pub. I was drinking too much.

\* \* \*

Mercy spotted me as I entered the resort and ran over to me, slowing to a gentle stroll. At least she wouldn't bull me over again.

“Harry, I have some news!” she said. “Let’s go to the bar,” she suggested.

“I was just heading there,” I said as she locked her arm in mine and led the way. It was an intimate gesture, but I enjoyed it.

“I spoke with Annie,” she said before we found a seat near the window by the stage.

I sat down, and she took the seat next to mine. She leaned in, looking around before beginning her story.

“I saw her at the grocery store. Apparently, her dad made her get a job bagging groceries. I suppose it is a safer job for a teenager, but how boring,” she said before realizing I was not interested in Annie’s job. “Anyway, I asked her if we could talk during her break, and she agreed. We went to the coffee shop for a latte and spoke for thirty minutes.”

“I see,” I said, wondering what Annie told her. She was about to reveal it when a new server arrived to take our order.

“Hey, Mercy, what’s going on?” the server asked as she placed a cocktail napkin in front of us. “Having a late lunch?”

My eyes lit up. I had eaten nothing since morning and was famished. “You mean I can order lunch in here?” I asked.

“Sure thing! Let me get you menus,” she winked before turning to fetch them.

“That is Mira,” Mercy said. “Her father runs the custodial staff.”

I nodded, but only wanted to hear about Annie. It seemed Mercy would wait until after we ordered. Mira returned with menus.

“Our lunch special is a Rueben Sandwich served open face with fries, chips, or coleslaw,” she said handing out the menus. “I had one earlier, very good.”

I handed my menu right back to her. “Sounds good, I’ll take one of those with chips, please,” I said. “Oh, and a pint of Bass Pale Ale,” I added.

She turned to Mercy. “You, hon? You want anything?”

“Sure, an order of the jalapeno poppers and a Coke,” Mercy said, handing her the menu.

Mira smiled. “You got it. I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

“Thanks, Mira,” Mercy said with a smile.

Mira winked at Mercy and turned towards the bar. My skin crawled with curiosity, but I waited until Mira was out of earshot.

“So, what did she say?” I asked.

Mercy searched for spies again before restarting her story. "Well, I asked her what she thought about Ricki being in jail."

"And?" I pressed.

"She was upset but doesn't know what to do about it," she said.

"How about telling the truth about that night?" I said before realizing Mercy didn't know the actual story. "Sorry, I am very concerned for Ricki. We are both foreigners in America and don't know what to expect in court."

Mercy stared at me with narrowed eyes. "You think she is lying about what happened?"

"Well..." I left it hanging, wondering how to best put it. If I told her what Ricki had said, she'll just chalk it up to him lying to protect himself. Would she buy into his chivalrous statement about protecting Annie? "Well, I ran into her friend, Robby, and she told me Annie told her it was her fault. I mean Annie's fault."

Mercy pursed her lips. "Huh," she said. She showed no emotions as she mulled this information over. I was about to tell her what Ricki had said before Mira interrupted us.

"Here you go. One Bass and one Coke," she put down the drinks and noticed the awkward silence. "Everything okay, Mercy?"

"Yes, we are fine, Mira. Thank you," Mercy said.

"Let me know if you need anything," Mira said before heading back to the bar. Now she would be nosey. We would never finish this conversation.

I took a draw of ale and looked Mercy in the eyes. I needed to know what Annie had said, but regretted what I'd revealed. Mercy eyed me over the rim of her Coke.

"Robby told you that?" she asked.

"Yes," I admitted.

"Huh," she said once more before falling silent again.

"Look," I said, "I am sorry I said that. Please, tell me what Annie told you."

She took a deep breath. "Well, she told me she loved Ricki, too."

"Seriously?" I said. Mira was looking our way. "Seriously?" I whispered. "Do you believe her?"

"I don't know?" she said. "Does anyone love anyone? I've never been in love. But she seemed pretty emotional."

"No love for me either," I admitted. "Love at first sight seems hard to believe."

"Robby told you it was Annie's fault?" Mercy asked again as she leaned forward. "Then, why did Mr. Heart confess? My uncle told me what happened when they arrested him."

"I know, I know," I said, trying to decide whether to tell her everything. I might make things worse if I didn't. Time to fess up. "Ricki said she attacked him, or rather jumped him and ripped her top off. He claims to love her, and that is why he confessed, to save her from humiliation."

"Huh," Mercy said, spinning her Coke with her straw. She took a sip, but I couldn't read her mind. Was she considering the veracity of my story?

"Well?" I pressed. "Did she say anything else?"

"Yeah," she said, pausing. "She said she felt like it was all her fault."

"Really?" Good news. If she felt guilty for her actions, she might recant and clear Ricki.

"Yes, but I rather thought she meant she was blaming herself for putting herself into the situation where he could take advantage of her. Not that she jumped him."

"Okay, but what about what Robby said?" I asked. I was like a detective trying to build a case from circumstantial evidence.

She pursed her lips and bit her lower one in thought. This innocent action caught me off guard and I felt attraction for her. I shook my head, trying to clear the thought, but my action must have startled her. She stared, puzzled.

"What?" she said.

"What?" I said like a simpleton, knowing she saw my obvious interest. I wasn't a good liar, and she saw straight through my innocent remark.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked, sitting back in her chair.

"Was I?" I said, feigning innocence.

"Yeah," she said. "It was like you saw something. Is my hair alright?"

"Oh, yes, it is fine," I said. "I guess I never realized how wonderful it looks on you," I said. Bloody hell, I couldn't stop myself. "I just..."

She smiled in indecision. "Huh," she said, catching me in a lie.

"Sorry, that was rude," I admitted, but she smiled.

Despite my precarious position, she let it pass. "If Robby told you that, then I would bet it is true. Annie and her have been friends a long

time. Robby isn't one to be coy. If she said Annie said it, then Annie said it."

"So you believe me?" I said.

"Maybe," she said before stopping again as our food arrived.

"Here you go," Mira said, sliding a plate in front of me. "And poppers for you," she said, putting a basket down in front of Mercy. "Anything else?"

"I don't think so, Mira," Mercy said. "Thanks again."

Mira nodded, but gave me an evil eye before walking off.

"I don't think she likes me," I said when she was back at the bar.

"Mira?" Mercy asked. "She is just concerned about me."

"Why?" I asked. Then I realized. "Yes, don't want another Annie incident."

"I will talk with her," Mercy said before stuffing a popper in her mouth.

"With Mira? It's okay," I said.

"No, Annie!" she said.

"Oh," I said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure?" she said, stuffing another popper in her mouth.

"What is a popper?" I stared into her basket.

"A jalapeno popper," she said. "Breaded fried jalapeno peppers."

"Really? What do they taste like?"

"You've never had a jalapeno?" She exclaimed. "Where have you been?"

I grinned. "London."

She reached into her basket and pulled one out, depositing the fried morsel onto my plate for a couple of my chips. "There. Try it," she said, smiling. My attraction for her had doubled, but this time I did not stare.

I pulled the popper off my plate and took a bite. The fried breading was delicious, and the pepper flavor unique. Then the heat hit me. I'd had my share of Indian food, but I always avoided the spicy dishes. I had come to terms with my blandness years ago.

I reached for my ale and drank. "Wow!" I said between gulps. "Those are hot."

"Yep," she said, laughing. "Just the way I like 'em. Spicy!"

I put down my ale and stared at the remaining piece on my plate. I didn't want to offend, but without another pint, I would not eat the rest.

“It’s okay,” she said, laughing. “I’ll eat the rest!” she plucked it from my plate and stuck it in her mouth. “Delicious.”

“You don’t even drink soda afterwards?” I said shocked. Then it hit me. Was she flirting with me? Eating a stranger’s partially eaten food was a rather intimate action. Was she attracted to me? I smiled.

“Nope,” she said. “I eat these all the time. They aren’t so hot.”

I lifted my ale into the air. “Cheers,” I said.

She lifted her Coke, and we clinked glasses. “Cheers,” she said with a mock English accent, and we both laughed.

This news from Annie was a good sign, but it may not matter. If she felt guilt, would it be enough to overcome her fear of her father? I felt guilty for enjoying myself for the first time since I arrived in Snowchute. Should I tell Mr. Goldstein about my conversation with Mercy? What could he do with that information? If I could speak with Annie, I knew I could convince her to tell the truth. I stopped, remembering Mr. Goldstein’s warning, realizing the futility.

I cast these thoughts aside in favor of enjoying lunch with Mercy. She was laughing, smiling, and appeared to enjoy my company. Maybe I wasn’t always Admiral Boring. I caught her eyes and stared into them. Was her soul in there? Did she see mine? I smiled and averted my gaze, frustrated. I saw nothing. Still, she’d held my gaze without turning away. That was more than most women had ever done. Even better, she had smiled.



Breakfast had been quiet and introspective as we thought about Ricki's pending courthouse visit. It was his first day to respond to the accusations for his alleged crimes against Annie. No one spoke about it, and we had eaten in awkward silence as thick as London fog.

I had eaten a light meal but regretted my decision as my stomach rumbled when we pulled into the Mesa County Courthouse in Silver Forks, Colorado. Besides the courthouse, there was a petrol station, several shops, a small diner, and what looked like an ancient building no longer in use. It must have had some historical significance for them to keep such a dilapidated building standing.

The courthouse was a tan, granite building that looked more like a schoolhouse. It sat against a large hillside looming over the building, and a grand stairway led up from the parking lot to the main entrance. It was larger than I had expected, considering the size of Snowchute and Silver Forks. Mesa County was larger than I thought.

Laser parked in an empty spot open to the public, and we all stepped out into the cold sunshine. A layer of packed snow covered the parking lot, interspersed with piles cleared from the roadways. Luckily, the footing wasn't slippery. We were about to cross the lot to the front of the courthouse when a black pickup truck with double wheels on the rear axle pulled into a private spot in front of us.

The rugged cowboy driving the vehicle stared us down as though daring us to walk in front of him. As it came to a stop, he didn't turn the motor off, but the passenger door opened and a furred figure got out.

She looked as rugged as her driver, but was attractive in a wild sort of way. She wore cowboy boots, cowboy hat, and a full-length brown fur coat that made her look like a bear. Her long, dark hair completed the illusion. I wondered if the fur was bear.

We all stared at her as she said something to the driver before closing her door. The driver pulled out of the parking spot and drove away, leaving her standing on the sidewalk staring at us. From her perspective, we were the outsiders invading her world.

"Howdy!" she yelled across the parking lot.

I held my tongue, but Mr. Goldstein responded. "Good morning, your honor," he said. "I am Mr. Goldstein, and these are some of my associates."

"Uh-huh," the judge said. "Thought you might need them for a simple arraignment?"

Her voice had a distinct drawl that I had learned to equate with this rural part of America. The scowl on her face didn't fill me with assurance. She looked mean, and being a woman might put Ricki at a disadvantage.

"No, your honor. I just wanted to keep us together during these hard times."

She scowled before waving us over. "Come on then, let's get this going."

We followed behind her up several flights of stairs, and I grabbed the door for her. She thanked me but looked at me quizzically, after I spoke. Probably surprised by my accent.

"Morning, Charlie," she said to the guard as she withdrew a pistol from her coat and placed it in a bucket before walking through the metal detector.

"Morning, your honor," Charlie replied in a thick accent. "Glad to see sunshine again."

The judge took her pistol back and placed it inside her coat. "Sure is! We had to dig out and feed over a hundred head yesterday. I tell you, that was a helluva big storm. Biggest I have seen in a long time," she laughed with Charlie.

"Sure was," he agreed. "These folks with you, your honor?"

"Not with me, but part of my case today," she said, grinning. "Give 'em a good pat down, Charlie. Especially that big one!" she said, pointing at Laser.

Charlie laughed as she walked off. "Okay, folks, empty your pockets into the plastic bin and step on through."

I went first and recovered my belongings from the bin. Charlie didn't pat me down. He wasn't an imposing man but carried a pistol. It seemed like everyone carried a pistol around here. I hadn't asked Mercy if she owned one.

We filed through with Laser bringing up the rear. He collected his things, but Charlie didn't pat him down either. Apparently, the judge was kidding. Considering why we were here, I was taking things far too serious. With all the pistol toting people around here, I didn't want anyone to think I had anything to hide.

We walked up to a counter where a young woman was smiling behind it.

"The Heart case?" Mr. Goldstein asked in a professional tone.

"Yes, sir, courtroom three down this hall to your right. Last door on your left," she said. "Starts in thirty minutes, but seating is available now."

Mr. Goldstein nodded and frowned. "I am his attorney."

"Well, you can't see him until they bring him in, but you are more than welcome to take your seat at the defendant's table on the left-side of the courtroom.

"Thank you," he said before signaling us to head down the hallway.

I knew I was here to observe the proceedings for the book. It was a necessary part of the biography, no matter what the outcome, so I brought my tablet prepared to take notes.

As we entered the courtroom, several people were already seated. Were they here to see Ricki, or were courtrooms always this busy in Silver Forks? Mr. Goldstein pointed to seats as close to the defendant's table as we could find. He kept going and took his seat at the table where Ricki would face the judge.

People watched us with suspicion. They were an odd assortment of people ranging from men in suits, cowboys in boots, and several people in colorful ski attire. I couldn't tell if they were here to see Ricki. The courtroom door opened once more, and a man wearing a suit and a long dress coat entered. Like us, he looked out of place in Silver Forks. He looked our way and walked over, sliding into the row against me.

"Hello, Vivica!" he said, leaning over me.

"Excuse me! Do you mind?" I said.

He eyed me. "No, I don't mind. I would be glad to switch with you," he said before squeezing between me and Vivica.

"Ronald, what the hell are you doing here!" Vivica demanded. "How did you find us?"

Mr. Goldstein turned around when he heard Vivica's voice and spotted Ronald leaning into her. His lips moved, but no sound came from them. The last word was dammit.

Ronald waved at Mr. Goldstein, who was ready to explode. "I see your pop is defending him," he said with a distinct New York accent. "You think that's smart?"

"What the hell do you want, Ronald?" Vivica said with an acidic tone.

Ronald smiled. "Only the scoop of the century! I might retire after this," he laughed and waved at Mr. Goldstein again.

"Do the world a favor and retire now!" Vivica replied.

"Who is this guy?" I asked.

"Who the hell are you?" Ronald snapped. "Blimey, a brit to boot!"

"I am Mr. Holden," I said.

"Oh, so formal. Should I be impressed?" Ronald said, grinning before turning to Vivica. "Who's the stiff?"

Vivica pushed him back. "That is Harry, and he can write circles around someone like you."

Ronald turned back to me. "My apologies, a fellow writer," he said in a mocking tone. "Which tabloid do you work for?"

"Tabloid?" I said. "I am a biographer!"

Ronald grinned. "A stiff. Look, you gave me the slip in Aspen, and I applaud you for that, but did you think I wouldn't find you?"

"God!" she said in disgust. "You're like a disease we can't rid of."

"Thanks," he said. "So, who did Ricki rape this time?"

"What?" she exclaimed. "He didn't rape anyone!"

"Oh, I presume this is nothing, and the judge will let him walk because of the simple misunderstanding?" Ronald said.

Ronald looked thirty-something with a wrinkled coat and two-day beard that made him look like he'd slept in his car.

"Were you in Snowchute?" I asked him if for no other reason than to deflect him from Vivica.

"Me?" he said, turning back. "Look, Harry Potter, I am wherever Ricki and his band of misfits are, but this time I was stranded outside some nowhere town in this God-forsaken place. You know what it is like freezing in your car for two days?"

"Can't say that I do," I admitted.

"Then shut the hell up so I can do my job, zippy!" Ronald said.

I didn't like this guy, but had no witty come back. It was one of my weaknesses. Witty repartee always eluded me, especially if I was nervous and on the spot. I couldn't respond to aggressive people, so naturally, they picked on me more. Georgie was the master of the put down, and I wished he were here right now. He'd have Ronald thrown out of the courtroom, along with himself.

"Don't listen to him, Harry. This dirt bag is Ronald Timmons, writer and paparazzi for the National Voice newspaper, though I would use the term newspaper sparingly. More like the national liar!" Vivica said, frowning.

"That hurts, Vivica. Really," He said, holding his heart. "These walls you erect around yourself are holding our relationship back. We have to avoid name calling if this is to work?"

"Ugh!" Vivica said. "As if!"

Laser leaned forward and eyed Ronald. "Is there a problem, Mr. Timmons?" he said.

"Whoa, easy there, big guy, just talking to the lady," He said with hands raised.

"I think you better find somewhere else to sit, or maybe you need my help?" Laser said, beginning to stand.

"Uh, no, no," Ronald said, standing. "I will find one. We'll talk later, Vivica, and maybe your pops, too."

"You wish, asshole!" Vivica said, and others around us stared.

Ronald laughed and slid past me, taking a seat several rows back. I slid over to Vivica. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, that jerk is part of the hell Ricki has to put up with. See what I mean about the paparazzi?" she said.

"Very disturbing," I agreed.

"He even asked me on a date once," she retorted. "Like I would be interested in a jerk like him. He just wants an inside scoop into Ricki's personal life," she sighed. "If this idiot is here, the others won't be far behind."

"How many more?" I asked.

"I don't know. Ten to twenty on a good day," she said. "In L.A., even more."

I looked around, trying to spot anyone else that might be a reporter. I didn't see anyone. We were the only ones out of place.

"My dad may have Laser kill that guy!" Vivica said, but Laser ignored the comment. I rather suspected he could kill that guy in many gruesome ways, but I knew she was only kidding. At least, I hoped she was.

The thirty minutes felt more like an hour by the time they brought Ricki into the courtroom. He was wearing tight black pants a collarless tan shirt beneath a black blazer that was more appropriate for a nightclub. Vivica told me they couldn't find anywhere to get him a proper suit, so this was the best they could muster. I thought about the judge and worried.

Ricki took his seat next to Mr. Goldstein, and they immediately spoke to each other, though too low for anyone to hear. Mr. Goldstein

looked agitated, and Ricki kept shaking his head. I suspected Ricki would not follow Mr. Goldstein's recommendations.

"This looks bad," Vivica said, watching the two argue.

"I agree," I said as Mr. Goldstein raised his hands in frustration and turned back to shuffling papers on the table. Ricki was sulking and turned away from Mr. Goldstein. "Oh, boy."

"I think Ricki wants to go to prison," Vivica said. "He told me he would be like Johnny Cash."

"He mentioned the same thing to me," I said. "If that is true, there's no hope. Did you see the judge? I don't think he can throw himself on the mercy of the court."

The door behind us opened again, and Sheriff Wilkinson walked in. He forced several people to move from behind the district attorney's table and sat down. He turned our way but did not acknowledge us.

"That sheriff is uptight," Vivica said.

I nodded. "Yes, but it is his only daughter. Wouldn't your father be just as upset of you were the victim here?"

"Yes, but she isn't a victim," Vivica said.

"He doesn't know that," I said.

She lowered her head. "We have repeatedly told Ricki to not get involved with anyone outside the industry. It is far too risky in someplace like sticksville, Colorado."

I thought her comment harsh but understood where she was coming from. This is not an ideal place for a Latino pop star to find his soulmate. Raging storms, unpredictable avalanches, gun-toting ranchers, and Wild West sheriffs made this place dangerous. My city sensibilities struggled to process this unusual environment. I wanted adventure, but this was over the top.

The door on the left-side of the courtroom opened, and a robed figure entered. The guard standing near the door called us to attention in a deep voice.

"All rise for the honorable Judge Jaqueline Remington!"

She took her vaulted seat overlooking the courtroom while we remained standing. She scanned everyone in the courtroom before speaking. "You may sit," she looked over at the guard. "Busy day, Roger. We rarely have more than the defendant's immediate family."

After hearing the judge's name, I connected it to the Remington that had married the Russian model. This did not fill me with hope. She probably did not appreciate Mr. Remington's young bride when she arrived from Russia. Families were strange about such things when

the women were very young and their relative old. Considering this was a small, tight-knit community, I did not think she would be impartial towards an outsider making moves on a local girl.

The judge shuffled through papers and put on reading glasses. "Will the defendant, one Ricki Heart, please rise."

Ricki and Mr. Goldstein stood.

"You, too, District Attorney," she said, looking at the other lawyer. "Mr. Heart, have they advised you of your rights and the charges brought against you today?"

Ricki was deferential. "Yes, your honor."

She turned to the District Attorney. "Mr. Highland, are these all the charges against this defendant?"

"Yes, your honor," Mr. Highland said, glancing at Ricki.

The judge turned to Ricki. "Based on these charges against you, Mr. Heart, how do you plead?"

Mr. Goldstein interrupted. "Your honor, my client pleads not guilty to all charges."

Ricki looked upset. "That is not true, your honor. I plead guilty on all charges!"

Mr. Goldstein lowered his head. I heard Ronald laughing behind us. The judge heard him, too. "You back there, order in my court, or I will charge you with contempt!"

"Sorry, your honor," Ronald said, smiling.

She eyed him for several seconds before turning back to Ricki and Mr. Goldstein. "Mr. Goldstein, have you apprised your client of the serious nature of these charges and the sentencing were he found guilty?"

"Yes, your honor. I have," he said, glaring at Ricki. "He is confused. Please let me speak for him as his counsel."

"Very well, how does your client plead?" the judge said, eyeing Ricki.

This time, Ricki interrupted Mr. Goldstein. "Your honor, I plead guilty, and I am not confused!" he said.

The judge hammered the table with her gavel. "Mr. Heart, I must urge you to listen to your counsel in this matter."

"But, your honor, Annie did nothing wrong. I precipitated these events when I sang with her. I am guilty and should face justice," Ricki insisted.

"Please, Ricki, stop!" Mr. Goldstein was pleading.

The judge hammered again, this time louder. Everyone grew silent, but I noticed Mr. Highland had a sly grin on his face. He saw an easy win for this case.

The judge glared at the entire courtroom. "There will be order in my courtroom. The next person who speaks out when not spoken to, laughs or does anything I am not happy with will be escorted to our holding cell and charged with contempt."

No one moved or made a sound.

"Mr. Goldstein, will you and Mr. Highland please approach the bench," she said glaring at both of them.

Both men came out from behind their respective tables to stand in front of the judge's bench. She leaned in to speak, but I heard what she said.

"Mr. Goldstein, what is wrong with your client?" she asked, narrowing her gaze. "Does he have a death wish?"

"Death?" Mr. Goldstein said, surprised.

"Let's be serious, Mr. Goldstein. A man like him might not fare well in prison. Why isn't he listening to your counsel?" she asked.

Mr. Goldstein lowered his head. "Your honor, my client believes he is in love with the alleged victim and refuses to protect himself at her expense."

The look on the judge's face grew darker. "In love?" she said. "Do you think this is Judge Judy, and I am here for your entertainment, Mr. Goldstein?"

"No, your honor," Mr. Goldstein said. "I am only reporting the problem."

"Mr. Highland, who is this alleged victim?" the judge said, rifling through the papers. "Ah, here it is, a Miss Wilkinson..." she frowned. "Sheriff, I thought it was strange to see you here! Please step forward."

Sheriff Wilkinson stood and moved to the bench.

"Well, Paul, what the hell has your wild child gone and done this time?" the judge said. "I told you last time that girl would come to no good working at that resort."

"Your honor, this is different," the sheriff said. "That man attacked my daughter and ripped her clothes off!"

The judge looked dubious. "Are you serious, Sheriff? You have a high-spirited filly at home, and you haven't broken her. Maybe this guy did. He claims to love her."

The sheriff looked uneasy and remained quiet.

Mr. Goldstein brightened. "This has happened before?"



"None of your business, Mr. Goldstein," the judge said, pointing her gavel at him. "This is between me and the sheriff. Now, Paul, are you sure you want to proceed with this case? Look around you. This is twice the number of people we see in a week. What do you think will happen when the national press finds out? I can only protect Annie so much. The press will not be kind to her, you, or our fine community."

"Are you telling me justice takes a back seat to public opinion?" the sheriff retorted.

"You know I am not, Paul," she said.

"Look, your honor, I realize Annie can sometimes be reckless with a devil-may-care attitude, but this was a blatant attack on her. And she is a minor!" the sheriff said.

The District Attorney was smiling, and the judge eyed him. "Don't think I don't know why you are so happy, Mr. Highland. You'll do anything and take down anyone for your political aspirations!"

He feigned insult. "I do not know what you are talking about, your honor."

"I'll bet," she said. "Well, Paul, is that your definitive answer? You want to take this to trial and drag everyone through the mud, including your daughter? Says here, she was working in the bar the night of the incident, and she is a minor? What will the press say to that?"

The sheriff looked back at Ricki. "I don't care. I want this man tried."

The judge looked angry. "All of you get the hell away from my bench!" she said. "Mr. Heart, listen to what I am telling you before you say another word. You are a fool, and while you may think you're a noble fool, your actions are stupid and reckless. I will take the plea of your attorney on the grounds that you may not be competent to make the right decision. If you wish to dispute this, you may fire your attorney and go with someone else. However, if you do so, I will order a mandatory psychological examination before we proceed any further. I will also remand you to a secure psychiatric facility without bail until such a time as we can determine your fitness for trial. That could take months, and you might find yourself spending more time in Mesa County than you wanted. Do you understand what I have told you?"

Ricki looked concerned and confused. His desire to be the noble suitor was warring against the thought of firing Mr. Goldstein and moving to a psychiatric ward. He agreed. "I understand, your honor."

"Good!" she said. "I set bail at fifty-thousand dollars. The initial hearing is scheduled for next week. Now, all of you get out of my courtroom!" she slammed her gavel down hard before rising.

"All rise," Roger said as Judge Remington exited through the side door.

"At least we can get him out of jail now," Vivica said.

I was mulling over what the judge had said to the sheriff. "Wow, what do you think Annie has done before?" It seemed unusual for a judge to talk the sheriff out of proceeding with a case. I understood her desire to avoid the paparazzi and national attention, but she had indicated Annie had experience with the judicial system before.

We watched Roger lead Ricki away as Mr. Goldstein came back to us. "We will bail him out and go back to the resort to discuss options." He pushed past Ronald who was standing in the corridor holding a recording device and marched off to pay the bail.

Ronald turned his attention to Vivica, but Laser interfered. "Mr. Timmons, the wilds of Colorado are very dangerous. An inexperienced person may lose their way and never be seen again. I suggest you contemplate how you will survive if that happens."

Ronald was about to say something but stayed quiet as we passed. Laser grabbed his recording device and threw it on the floor where it shattered into a thousand pieces.

"Whoops, sorry. Please bill me for the damages!" Laser said.

We left Ronald grinning, but he didn't follow us as we moved towards the exit.

I looked at Vivica. "How long before the others arrive?"

"A day, maybe two," she whispered.

I thought about the madness coming and wished I was back in London. While this would be the most significant event in Ricki's life, I did not look forward to living through it. How long would this trial go on? Would I be here through it all, or would they send me back home?

Ricki Heart's trial was about to begin, and I wasn't up to the challenge. I thought about Mercy and had an urge to tell her what had happened in the courtroom. She might know about Annie's colorful past and could shed some light. However, I had to tread carefully lest Ricki urge her to set up a rendezvous with Annie. Mr. Goldstein, and all of us, had our work cut out to keep Ricki from making matters worse. Love rarely heeded logic.

Despite an uneventful ride back to Snowchute, the divide between Ricki and Mr. Goldstein widened. Vivica and I remained quiet as they argued about the courthouse. Ricki did not back down and swore he would re-confirm his confession when asked in court again. Mr. Goldstein was on the verge of a stroke, and I worried about his health through this crisis. At one point, they stopped arguing and stared out the window. Yet another awkward ride.

My pathetic attempts to convince Ricki to back down had failed, and I continued to harbor an overwhelming guilt for ignoring the obvious chemistry between Ricki and Annie on stage. This guilt would never leave if they sent him to prison after this was over. If only I could talk with Annie.

Laser pulled in front of the main entrance, and we exited the SUV. Ricki and Vivica stormed into the resort to their respective rooms as I lagged behind. I didn't want to be alone in my room, but wasn't certain what else I could do. In his current state, I doubted Ricki would share the intimate details of his past with me.

A small voice in my head was urging me to the pub, but I was self-conscious about my drinking, with the paparazzi arriving soon. I settled on working on the outline for the book, but also decided it might require a glass of wine or cognac to focus my efforts. Guilt be damned. These were unusual times, and I would ignore the lie. I was treating my anxiety with alcohol. If I had to drink, I might as well order lunch.

As I walked behind Mr. Goldstein, his steps seemed tired and old. The weight of this crisis crushed him. Perhaps the immensity of the events affected my judgment concerning his fortitude, but we'd been through a lot since that fateful avalanche. Would he survive it all? Mr. Goldstein was not a fit man, and I feared Ricki would come through this far better than him.

Mr. Goldstein had managed Ricki for some time, so maybe this was more normal than I imagined. This drama might be quite ordinary, though with more serious consequences. If he'd weathered those storms, perhaps he would weather this one. I made a mental note to ask Vivica next time I spoke with her.

I wondered what Ricki's record label thought about this situation? They marketed albums to the very demographic his alleged victim was in. It could put him in jeopardy for future albums. Few companies would want to market a product to children if a convicted pedophile created it. And even if they didn't convict him, people would still believe whatever they read in the press or social media. The truth was constantly degraded since the rise of social media. Better to have an entertaining story than a true one. It pays better.

It occurred to me that no one may have thought about telling Ricki about this precarious situation with his recording company. He imagined himself a modern-day Johnny Cash, but it was more likely others would view his incarceration in a less favorable light. Even his fans might turn on him, and without them, he would have nothing. They would exile him to Columbia, and no telling how he would fare there.

"Harry?" Mr. Goldstein called before I made it out of the lobby.

"Sir?" I said, turning.

"Please stay a few minutes," he said. His demeanor was serious, and I feared new revelations.

"Yes, sir."

I'd confessed my failure to change Ricki's mind, but if I mentioned the fallout effects of this, it might be a new angle. Mr. Goldstein knew all the ramifications of this situation, but had he conveyed everything to Ricki? If not, why not? I didn't want to ruin his plans while I stumbled around for solutions. I joined him at the front desk.

He was professional as he addressed the young woman. "May I please speak with Mr. Cummings?"

The woman was a little surprised. "Mr. Cummings?" she repeated. "It may take a few minutes?"

"I'll wait," he said, though irritation bubbled beneath his professional veneer.

After a quick phone call, they ushered us into Mr. Cumming's office. He stood behind his desk when we entered and his attitude looked unfavorable.

"Mr. Goldstein, what a pleasant surprise," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Spare me the pleasantries, Mr. Cummings. We will not be friends, but that doesn't mean we can't do business together," Mr. Goldstein said as we took seats. "I have a proposition for you that should benefit both of us."

Mr. Cummings bridled at Mr. Goldstein's callous attitude, but sat down to hear him out. "Very well, Mr. Goldstein. What is your proposal?"

"Look, you and I both know I have a pretty excellent case against the resort for allowing an underage worker to work the bar, thus entrapping Mr. Heart in this most unfortunate situation. This will soon be national knowledge, and there is nothing I can do about that. The losses to his musical career could be staggering," he watched Mr. Cummings' reaction.

The man maintained a cool exterior, and Mr. Goldstein pressed forward. "Anyway, while there may not be a criminal trial against the resort for negligence, a lengthy civil trial will cost a lot of money and tarnish the resort's reputation and yours. I feel confident you would prefer to avoid such a civil suit. Am I correct?"

Mr. Cummings squirmed uncomfortably and took his time before responding. "Even if I were inclined to avoid that, I may not have that option. I have advised corporate of this situation."

"So, you are saying you are the wrong person to be talking to?" Mr. Goldstein concluded. "After all, I have nothing against you personally and would hate to see you take the fall for just an accident."

Mr. Cummings was uncomfortable, and I assumed corporate had already advised him on what he could and could not do. He was on thin ice, and that was why Mr. Goldstein spoke with him first. Better to negotiate with the person who had the most to lose than an invisible face in a distant corporate office.

"What do you propose?" Mr. Cummings asked.

Mr. Goldstein smiled. "A reporter of a prominent national tabloid visited us at Mr. Heart's arraignment today, and it is clear this town will soon be overrun by a swell of press you don't see outside of Washington or the Academy Awards. We prefer to stay here during the trial, and it is desirable to avoid the press as much as possible," he stopped and took a breath trying to read Mr. Cummings. The man was a slab of marble.

"I recommend you allow us to reserve all the rooms available for an entire month. I do not want the press staying here. Before you answer, let me tell you why this is good for you. First, I recognize publicity, maybe even adverse publicity, is desirable. However, I will pay for all the open accommodations at a considerable markup from your usual rates. Likewise, I will pay for all the services for those additional rooms and the rooms we already have for the next month. That

includes maid service, maintenance, and whatever we agree is reasonable. This could be a substantial profit for the resort.”

Mr. Cummings put his hand on his chin, thinking. “And the civil suit?”

“What civil suit?” Mr. Goldstein said.

Mr. Cummings nodded and stared out his office window onto the ski slopes. “What you are proposing is difficult and may be impossible. Most of our reservations come and go without our involvement. The internet travel sites are where most of our business comes from, and we have limited control over them.”

“Can’t you take inventory offline so that the travel sites cannot book it?” Mr. Goldstein asked. “They must contact you or your systems before they can book a room.”

“Quite right,” Mr. Cummings said. “However, interjecting ourselves into that process might be difficult and could jeopardize our relationship with our partners. Also, this town has limited accommodations, as I am sure you have noticed, and the citizens might not be excited to lose so many customers to help one who has, in their opinion, done harm to the community. After you leave, I still have to live with these people.”

“Yes, I hadn’t thought of that,” Mr. Goldstein said. “Then, perhaps we should find other accommodations in a different town. However, the press will follow us and that will decrease the number of paying customers in this town, anyway.”

Mr. Cummings ignored the implied threat. “The closest town for your needs would be three hours away. Not impossible, but an inconvenience. I have a counterproposal.”

Mr. Goldstein smiled. “Fine, let’s hear it.”

“While we run the resort here in Snowchute, we also manage rental properties in this area. One such property is owned by corporate and used for corporate retreats in the summer months. It is large, luxurious, and gated. Most people could not find it unless they know about it.”

“I see,” Mr. Goldstein said. “Where is this retreat?”

“About five miles outside of town as you head towards Silver Forks,” Mr. Cummings said. “That would keep you close to both towns, if that is your desire.”

“And what would a monthly rate be for such accommodations?” Mr. Goldstein asked.

“Since it isn’t even operational this time of year, there is no monthly rate. However, to get it up and running will take people, and

that will cost. But we could provide you the same level of service we have here, including a private chef.”

Mr. Goldstein looked interested but remained aloof. “So, you would put us out of the city into the wilds of Colorado with a shoestring staff to serve us?”

“Yes,” Mr. Cummings said.

“How long to get it ready?” Mr. Goldstein asked. “The press will trickle in anytime from today onward.”

“A day and a half at most. I will make sure some of our best employees staff it. We will have a complete kitchen with ample choices to choose from,” Mr. Cummings said.

“What do you think, Harry?” Mr. Goldstein asked me.

His question startled me. This was far beyond my bailiwick, and I had thought I was just along for the ride. “Uh... I don’t know. Okay, I guess.”

Mr. Cummings noticed my hesitation and tried to ease my concerns. “We will bring the indoor pool and hot tub into operation and you will have internet service, better than here, and free use of the phone even for international calls.”

Mr. Goldstein donned a shrewd countenance. “Let me have your rate for these services, please. For one month, to start, and more if needed.”

Mr. Cummings nodded and took out a calculator. “I am sure it will be far less than booking all the open rooms here,” he began punching numbers into the calculator before holding it up for us to see.

I gulped at the number on the screen.

“Fifty thousand per month?” Mr. Goldstein asked.

“Yes, but it is all-inclusive,” Mr. Cummings said.

“Even dry cleaning?” Mr. Goldstein asked.

“Yes,” Mr. Cummings said.

Mr. Goldstein stroked his goatee. “You are certain nobody can get close to this place?”

“Well, I can’t guarantee it, but they would have to trudge through feet of snow at least a half mile. If they have a helicopter, they can fly over, but they can’t land there,” Mr. Cummings said. “It may take a day just to plow the driveway.”

“I accept the offer,” Mr. Goldstein said. “Write it up.”

Mr. Cummings looked relieved. “Yes, I will do that, but I have to run this through corporate first.”

"I am certain they will accept rather than prepare for a civil suit," Mr. Goldstein said, standing. "Let me know when you have their approval and forms ready for me to sign."

I stood to follow him.

"Yes, I will let you know," Mr. Cummings said.

Mr. Goldstein nodded, and we both exited the office. Mr. Goldstein remained quiet until we were out of the lobby and next to the elevator to his suite.

"Harry?" he said after pushing the button. "Would you be willing to stay a month with us?"

I was surprised and nervous. So far, Colorado had been alien to my city sensibilities, but I didn't want to let Ricki down. In the new place, I could finish getting what I needed for the biography. I would also be on the ground floor of the trial and its results, and that would be invaluable.

"Sir, I suppose I could, but I must make arrangements back home for such an extended stay," I said with uncertainty. "I could use additional clothing for such a lengthy stay. Perhaps something less conspicuous."

"Yes, we can order things online and have them delivered," Mr. Goldstein said, waving his hand. "Of course, we will pay you a per diem for your time. Is it a deal?"

What did I have to lose? This could be the adventure of a lifetime. Maybe not pirates, but something unique.

"Yes, sir," I said as the elevator door opened.

Mr. Goldstein gave a rare smile. "Good. Ricki will need a friend throughout this, and I want everything from this trial put into the book. Oh, please join us for dinner so we can discuss the press. We have to prepare you."

"Yes, sir. I will," I said as the elevator door closed.

I headed towards my room, wondering what this new place would be like. Though I had slept well, I often woke when the mechanical noises from the laundry echoed through my room. Something kicked on during the night and shook my bed. I wouldn't miss that.

I was dubious about using a pool and hot tub, but it seemed prudent to order a swimsuit just in case. I would call my aunt when I got to the room and make sure she would watch Finn for another month. What could I tell her about why I was staying longer? And what about Georgie and Pen? Perhaps it was best to make those calls after they briefed me about the press at dinner.



\* \* \*

The food was excellent, and I branched out from my usual bland fare. I sipped wine, enjoying the unique flavor. I was not a wine connoisseur, but a departure from ale was a treat.

Mr. Goldstein was checking his phone, and Vivica stared at her half-eaten plate of vegetables. Dinner was a quiet affair, and I waited for them to brief me on the press. What should I say? What should I do? I needed answers to help me navigate the onslaught.

I was overwhelmed by something usually reserved for royalty. Despite the butterflies tearing me up inside, I was exhilarated by it all. It was a rare peek into how the other side lived, and it would paint richer colors into the dramatic story of Ricki's life.

I spent several hours putting together the outline for his biography, but ended up redoing it when I decided on a different tack. Traditionally writing in chronological order would be stale and inappropriate for someone as unique as Ricki. Instead, I would focus on his current drama, drawing the reader in with mixed emotions. Once caught in that dramatic web, I would intertwine prior experiences as a retrospective to enlighten those who might otherwise condemn him. It was a gamble I would run by Ricki and Mr. Goldstein first. For now, though, it was my rough outline.

I sipped my wine, and Mr. Goldstein looked up from his phone. "Okay! Sorry, trying to coordinate changes in the tour dates. At the moment, we will have to skip a couple shows. The trial will affect the tour long term, if not cancel it altogether, but let's hope not."

"I am sorry to hear that," I said. "I imagine the studio will not be happy about that."

Mr. Goldstein emitted a derisive snort. "Those bloodsuckers? No. Mr. Heart gains all the benefit from tours and merchandising, the studio profits from album sales. Those bastards are trying to figure out how to spin this fiasco into generating more album sales."

"I would think they wouldn't appreciate this fiasco because of the pedophilia aspect to it," I said.

He laughed. "You would think so, but these people are often perverted pedophiles themselves. They see this as a way to market to the very demographic everyone wants to protect. Ricki will be even more attractive to those young women fantasizing about meeting him. His popularity will spike. They are too young to understand the

reasoning behind such laws. They're so new to their own sexuality, that many possess a devil-be-damned attitude."

It stunned me. "You think so?"

"Absolutely," he said. "Creating controversy between children and adults is an instant connection to the younger demographic. Look at Jazzy Pete's incident with his underage party. There wasn't one girl over eighteen, and there were drugs and alcohol."

"I am not familiar with that story," I said.

"Well, they tried him on multiple charges, including contributing to the delinquency of minors and child pornography. He'd plead guilty to the delinquency charges and had one of his men take the fall on the child pornography charge. His album, merchandise, and tour sales were off the chart. The young teenagers crowned him a hero as they saw him as a victim of a prejudiced society. Every single one of the girls said Jazzy was innocent because they had used fake IDs."

"Wow!" I said. "I didn't realize this could be so tantalizing to young people."

Mr. Goldstein grinned. "In America it is. Fame overcomes many laws and moral convictions because sex sells."

"So, you're not worried?" I asked.

"Hell yes, I'm worried!" he said. "This is enough to have Ricki deported. While his tours in Europe and Asia might still proceed, the North American market would be closed off to live performances. Even China would ban him from performing there. They do not look kindly on things like this. He would not be completely ruined, but certainly damaged."

"I understand," I said, though I really didn't. This was far beyond me.

I remembered tales of teachers with students, parents with their children's friends, and the odd politician caught with their trousers down and a young girl or boy with them, but all of those ended horribly for the adults involved. Was being a pop star enough to save you from complete damnation? If what Mr. Goldstein said was true, it was.

I realized Robby wasn't concerned about her friend's situation. Perhaps young people didn't see it for what it was, exploitation. This trial would be interesting.

"Harry," Mr. Goldstein said, "it will be a wild ride throughout this trial. Many tabloids have been after Ricki. Usually, they have

published fake stories about Ricki, but now that an authentic story has emerged, it will be a field day.”

“I understand,” I said. “I don’t read the tabloids myself, but my aunt is a regular consumer and has recounted many of the things reported about the stars over the years. Most were false.”

“Exactly,” Mr. Goldstein continued. “They will spin every aspect of this situation into a sordid tale of gross misconduct, false accusations, and unrealistic conclusions. You will hear false tales of Ricki having illegitimate children by underage girls, fantastical orgies, and bi-sexual fantasies of a repressed pop star lost in a world of fame. Ultimately, that fame drags him down by the very machine that created him. We have heard it all. So will you. They might even implicate you now that you’re part of the inner circle. They may even say you are one of Ricki’s lovers.”

I grinned as I recalled Robby’s comment. “Funny you should say that. Someone has already accused me of that.”

“Really?” Mr. Goldstein said. “By who?”

“By Robby, one of Annie’s friends. The girl who works at the sheriff’s station,” I said.

“Yes, I am familiar with who she is,” Mr. Goldstein said. “What did she say?”

“Well, she asked if I was Ricki’s lover,” I said. “I think she assumes all British men are gay. She even mentioned Sir Elton John.”

“Well, prepare for worse than that,” Mr. Goldstein said. “They are merciless and will do anything for an exclusive scoop or a chance to misinterpret something innocent. We cannot afford to give them anything.”

“You can count on me, sir,” I said with sincerity.

Vivica broke her silence. “We believe you, Harry, but you don’t understand how tenacious and devious these people are. I once caught one in my suite hiding a camera in my bathroom.”

“What? Really?” Such a possibility shocked and disturbed me.

“They even published pictures of Ricki and an old girlfriend in a rather intimate situation while swimming in his pool. We still can’t remove all those pictures from the internet,” Mr. Goldstein said. “Anything you do, anywhere you go, and whoever you talk to could be used inappropriately. It is important we all conduct ourselves in nothing but an upright and respectable manner.”

“I would never...” I began before Vivica cut me off.

"We trust you, Harry," she said, smiling. "But you need to understand how dirty these people are. Even something as harmless as going to Ricki's room to work on the book could be misconstrued if it was nighttime and they had a photo."

"Okay, I think I understand," I said, nervous about leaving my room.

"Look, Harry," Mr. Goldstein said, grabbing my shoulder in a fatherly way. "Once we are out of this place and into the retreat, we won't have to worry as much. But anytime we leave the retreat, we must be vigilant."

I nodded but remained silent, trying to figure out how to contend with this new reality. I was nervous I might screw everything up. What if I said the wrong thing, and it jeopardized his trial? I wanted to be back in London.

"It is alright to be nervous, Harry," Vivica whispered as though reading my mind. "We know it can overwhelm. When in doubt, seek advice."

I nodded again.

Mr. Goldstein slapped me on the back. "Cheer up!" he said, trying to lighten the mood. "Focus on the book and you'll be fine."

"What should I do if one of them corners me with questions?" I asked.

"Say 'no comment' and walk away," Mr. Goldstein replied.

"That's it?" I said.

"That's it," he agreed. "You're in a no-win situation, so the only way to escape unscathed is to decline comment. Don't even answer questions about yourself. They will use everything about us to hurt Ricki. Silence is your only defense."

I thought about the royal family's constant travails with the tabloids. While the free press was glib with their embellishments about various family members, there was an unwritten rule that if they went too far, they might be in hot water. The royal family wielded significant influence in England and often used it to lash out against those who disparaged them.

The press wouldn't hold back for a regular bloke like me. If Ricki wasn't safe, I was not safe. I worried about my aunt and what she might read about me in the tabloids. Oh, God! What if they interviewed her, or Georgie and Pen? I needed to warn them.

"Sir?" I began. "Is it alright if I warn my family and friends?"

Mr. Goldstein looked at his daughter and back at me. "Harry, I would be very careful what you divulge to them about this case. I would keep it simple. Something like, he was falsely charged with such-and-such. That's it."

"I know my friends, they will press me," I said.

"Do you think they would talk with the press?" Vivica asked.

I nodded.

"Then keep it simple, like I said," Mr. Goldstein urged. "We can't control them, but we can withhold any fuel they might add to the fire."

I nodded again. "I will keep it simple, like you said."

"Good, Harry, very good," Mr. Goldstein said. "I realize this is very difficult, Harry, so I am going to increase your royalty percentage to five percent of all book sales and throw in a one percent stake in merchandise sales from the book. Help us through this crisis, Harry, and you could end up a millionaire."

I remembered what Georgie had said about being a writer to the stars. This story would make or break me, and it was both exciting and terrifying all at once. I vowed to make them proud.

**I**t only took two days for Mr. Cummings to get the corporate retreat ready for our arrival. The head office agreed with Mr. Goldstein that this was the lesser of the two evils. A lawsuit was lengthy, expensive, and risky.

I was happy to leave the resort, which was crawling with tabloid reporters. We'd made our escape in the middle of the night, but a reporter had spotted us. We gave a patented 'no comment' and hurried away before they could follow.

The next day, the resort was buzzing as everyone scrambled to discover where we'd gone. Mr. Cummings ran a tight ship, and no one revealed where we had gone, yet. I knew it was only a matter of time before they discovered us, but hopefully, the retreat's remote location and natural barriers would thwart most infiltrators.

I had never stayed in a room this nice. I did not travel often, but it wasn't half as luxurious. I felt like royalty.

It was three times the size of my room at the resort, and came with a mini-kitchen, a fully stocked bar, and a beer tap they assured me would contain Bass Pale Ale within the week. The television was larger than my kitchen at home and boasted over seven hundred channels, including every conceivable sport, both American and European.

It awed me that so many people lived that way. I realized being a clerk in a stuffy old bookstore didn't pay enough. I was being spoiled and wondered how I would return to my shabby flat and tiny world in London.

I was being lured into a generous lifestyle. I could imagine myself living in such luxury. I mean, if the book paid off, others would want me to write their story. Maybe one of Georgie's harebrained ideas might payoff.

I laughed at the ridiculous musings and grabbed my tablet before heading down to meet Ricki for tales of his past. After the awkward car ride from his arraignment, Ricki had settled into a more normal version of himself. Though his attitude and interactions with Mr. Goldstein had improved, they were still businesslike. With me, he was the same old Ricki.

I headed down the long corridor to the grand stairwell that descended into the posh recreation room next to the palatial foyer. I wrapped my jacket around me as the chill of the large interior space seeped into my bones. Though they turned on the furnace and set fires in fireplaces, the lodge was barely warmer than the outside air.

They impressed me with the rustic elegance of this place. Ornate carvings, paintings of rural mountain villages, mounted heads of large animals, and open timber beams spanning the ceilings gave it a unique feel to what was quite alien to me. There was an air of excitement mixed with trepidation.

One look out of the expansive windows verified we were deep in the Colorado wilderness. They had assured me I would see large animals on the property if I paid attention, but I was uncertain I wanted to. I imagined many were quite dangerous to someone like me. I was the invader of their habitat. Considering the cold, it was easy for me to skip trips outside alone.

As I entered the recreation room, the enormous river stone fireplace roared with flames that heated the room like a volcano. In front of this blaze, a U-shaped sectional couch equipped for twenty people looked desolate with only Ricki. He was sitting back with his legs pulled up onto the cushions with one arm draped over the back.

"Hello, Harry, how is your room?" Ricki asked, turning towards me.

"Very comfortable," I said. "I've never had such luxurious accommodations. I have a jetted tub in my bathroom big enough for three or four people."

"Yes, it is nice in a rustic way," Ricki said without enthusiasm. "Too bad we don't have anyone to share it with."

He was so forlorn, and I wondered if he was thinking about Annie. If his feelings for her were true, being without her must be unbearable. I refused to broach the subject with him.

"I have my tablet if you want to share more of your life," I said, ignoring his pain. Work might get his mind off of her. "I think we should fill in details of your life after they abandoned you in New York City."

"Sure," Ricki said. "Whatever you think is best."

His mood was hard to ignore, and I feared whatever he gave me might taint the overall feel of the book. He had lost his zest for the project, and that made my job more difficult.

"I can talk with you another time if you would like to skip it today," I said. "Based on everything going on, I understand completely."

"What?" he said, pulling his gaze from the flames. "No, Harry, I am fine."

I couldn't let this continue. "Okay. Well, you don't sound fine, Ricki. What you are going through is a big deal. Maybe you should talk about it."

"With you?" Ricki said, ignoring my gaze.

"Yes," I said. "I realize I am not very knowledgeable about these things, but I am a friendly ear who can help make sense of it."

"Sorry, Harry. I know you are a good friend," he said before turning back to the flames.

"Well, I am here," I insisted. "Tell me what is on your mind."

He shook his head and grinned without turning back to me. I felt he was about to send me away when he started speaking.

"When we are little, the world is such a fantastical place," he said. "Everything is black and white. You knew what was bad and what was good. Then you grow up and realize the world is nothing but gray."

"Uh-huh," I said, trying to not speak but letting him know I was listening. This was a rare opportunity to see the real Ricki, and I didn't want to spoil it.

"I thought love was something wonderful. Something celebrated in song. All my music speaks of love whether it is the lack or wonder of it. Now that I have found it, it is bad?" he said, turning to me.

The question seemed rhetorical, but his eyes demanded an answer. "I think laws are intended to protect us and guide us down the proper paths. That may make them inflexible. Yes, there are gray areas, but the law tries to define them in terms of black and white so there is less confusion."

He smiled. "Laws. Made by men to control those who are powerless to stop them. Where is the justice in that? Where is the love? I thought love was an immutable law of God."

The philosophical nature of the conversation disturbed me, yet it was amazing to hear it from a Latino pop-star. I knew Ricki was smart, but this kind of conversation sent up red flags. The depression so prevalent in his commentary hinted he might do something rash.

"Ricki, we aren't entirely powerless," I said. "We can vote and speak out against those who don't understand. You can't lose hope because of one setback. You are stronger than that."



He turned to the flames with a derisive laugh. He could not see past his current suffering. "I have only loved two women in my life. The first was much older than me, and the second younger. I am caught in a flux of age limits and arbitrary lines of acceptable love. It isn't right. If it is love, then it is love."

I didn't want to argue with him since I still had reservations about Annie. "Some might argue Annie isn't old enough to know what love is."

"But I did!" he insisted. "I was only thirteen, and I knew love!"

I remained silent, concerned about the emotional outburst. I wanted to be his sounding board, but I feared it might taint our relationship. I didn't want to lose this book deal because I alienated him by playing devil's advocate.

"I know, Ricki. I know you did," I said. "But not everyone is like you."

He took a deep breath. "I know, Harry," he whispered. "Sorry for snapping at you, you are only trying to help."

"I have never known love, but when you speak about it, it gives me hope that I might," I said. "Your songs inspire those who yearn for love. You are spokesperson for both lovers and the lonely."

"Thank you, Harry," he said. "I suppose my troubles seem odd to someone who hasn't found love."

"It's fine," I said. "Before I met you, I wasn't sure love was real. But now, you inspire me with hope."

A brief flash of Mercy shot through my mind. Was I thinking about her because of my feelings, or was I just caught up in the high-charged emotions of Ricki's tribulations? If I was honest, she had crept into my dreams. But the dreams often involved one or the other of us causing pain in some odd mishap. Was that love?

"Harry, I hope you find that special person," he said with a genuine smile. "You deserve it."

"I am sure I will, Ricki. Thanks to you, I might even recognize it when it slaps me in the face or knocks me down," I said.

Ricki's face looked puzzled. "Really?"

I realized my slip and backpedaled. "You know, up till now the slap was to chase me away, but I realize it can be something more."

Ricki grinned. "There is something about you, Harry. Have you found someone?"

"What?" I said, shrugging. "No!"

He stared at me trying to work through the possibilities and finally smiled. "It is that girl who knocked you down! What was her name?"

"Her?" I scoffed. "She nearly killed me."

His sly grin told me he didn't believe me. "Sometimes the ones we love are not good for us, Harry. I would know."

"Look, I am fine and you are not, so let's focus on you," I said, trying to push the conversation away from my confused feelings for Mercy.

"Mercy!" he said. "That was her name! She is very cute, though clumsy."

"Mercy?" I said. "Yes, that is her name, I believe."

"You are such a terrible liar, Harry. I see it in your eyes," Ricki said, and his mood brightened, though now it was mischievous. "Good for you, Harry!"

"Look, I don't love her," I said, trying to deflect him from this course. I didn't know what I felt for her, but love didn't sound right.

Ricki laughed. "It is okay, Harry. Love doesn't always feel like love at first. Sometimes it is nothing more than a curiosity to start, but then it changes. You will know when it does."

"Please, this is ridiculous. I am not even from America. Even if I had feelings for her, it couldn't work. I live in London," I said once again, trying to defend my innocence. But it occurred to me that I shouldn't be so defensive. Bloody hell, what was I waiting for?

"That you answered like that means you have been thinking about it," Ricki concluded, and it infuriated me. I couldn't stand someone reading me like a book. Was I that transparent?

"Look, this is not what we should discuss," I urged. "I am here to write your story, not find my special someone."

"But you have," Ricki accused. "Don't make regrets, Harry. Seize life by the cajones. Yolo!"

"Ouch!" I said. "Not a comforting metaphor."

Ricki laughed, and I was pleased to see his sorrow abate, even at my expense.

"You know what I mean," he said before jumping up from his seat. "We need a drink to celebrate!"

"At eleven in the morning?" I said. My drinking was already a problem.

He looked confused, but his eyes narrowed. "You're right, we need lunch to go with it. I will talk with the chef and find a bottle of wine."

"You needn't do that," I said.

"Oh, Harry," he said as though I was an orphan from the streets. "It will make me happy to see you happy. Please, let's celebrate something good for a change."

His mood was so elevated, I didn't dare turn him down. "Okay, Ricki. We'll celebrate something good," I said. "Silver linings and all that."

"That's the spirit!" Ricki said as he headed to the kitchen with a bounce in his step.

I was nervous Ricki might tell Mr. Goldstein about Mercy, and I doubted he would have the same reaction as Ricki. He might sack me and send me back to London, and I didn't want to leave. Maybe it was the pending trial, or maybe it was Mercy, but I wanted to stay despite the insanity. Something good might materialize, and I wanted to be here when it did.

\* \* \*

Lunch was pasta and shrimp in a cream sauce paired with a white wine. It was not something I would have ordered, but it was delicious. The wine, however, made me want ale. I opened my tablet and prepared to take notes before Ricki pushed his chair back from the table. He had been staring into his phone.

"I almost forgot. I have to make a quick call before we begin!" he exclaimed.

"What?" I said. "To whom?"

"Another friend," he said, smiling. "It won't take long, I promise."

"Sure," I agreed.

He raced up the stairs, leaving me alone. Considering his good mood, I had to forgive him. Perhaps our talk had eased his mind. Mercy drifted through my mind and I wondered. What did I feel for her? It had started as pity, but transformed into something more.

I decided the wine was acceptable and poured the last of the bottle into my glass. I sipped gently, trying to enjoy the lemony flavor, but it tasted more like melon rind. I pursed my lips every time I swallowed. I reviewed our previous session and was pleased with the results. The ideas flowed, and I felt more confident than when I had first started this project. Ricki's life was a movie. Whatever happened at the trial, they would make a movie about this. As the writer of the biography, I might receive royalties from that.

The phone vibrated in my pocket, and the text was simple: What is happening?

Pen had heard the news about Ricki. It was only a matter of time, but I hadn't discussed it with them. It was one o'clock here, which meant eight o'clock in London. I could call them and warn them about the impending surge of press. It would turn their world upside down.

I knew Ricki might return soon, but I called them anyway. I dialed her number and placed the phone to my ear.

"Oh my God, Harry!" Pen screamed. "What is happening? It's everywhere on the tele!"

Televised news already? Oh, boy.

"I am fine, Pen. Thank you for asking," I teased. "What is it you have seen?"

She paused. "Sorry, Harry, I guess I am overwhelmed. I am glad you are fine," she stopped and yelled something to Georgie, but I couldn't hear it since she covered the phone. "Sorry. Well, they say they arrested Ricki for assaulting an underage girl at the ski resort. Is that true?"

I thought about what Mr. Goldstein said and answered truthfully. "Yes, he was falsely charged with that crime, but he is completely innocent. We are staying to fight it in court."

"Social media is running with it and mentioned you, though most don't know your name," she said. "Some claim you're involved."

"I am not involved," I said, though I felt guilty. "However, Mr. Goldstein wants me to stay with them until after the trial."

"Oh, dear," she said. "How long will that be?"

"Another month, maybe more," I said. "I haven't called Aunt Lucy, but she should be able to watch Finn until I return."

Pen sounded distressed. "Don't worry, Harry. We can help."

There was a brief silence before Georgie came on the line. "What's this I hear? You staying longer?" He demanded. "Bloody right, you should! This is it, Harry. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. You write that story, and you make it the best damned book anyone has ever read!"

I laughed. "Okay, mate, I'll do my best."

"Damn right!" Georgie replied. "I am so proud of you, mate!"

I didn't want to temper Georgie's enthusiasm, but I had to warn them about the press. "Look, Georgie, can you let Pen listen in? I have to tell you something important."

"I'm here, Harry," Pen said.

"We are about to discover what royals and celebrities deal with daily. The press will eventually connect you to me, and when they do, they will swarm," I said.

"Don't worry, Harry," Georgie said with typical bravado. "We'll tell them to go to bloody hell!"

"Okay, but maybe not like that. Mr. Goldstein instructed me to say nothing except 'no comment' and then walk away. Anything you say, no matter how well intentioned or innocent, will be bent and twisted to support the exaggerated stories they concoct. I beg you to say nothing," I said.

There was a pause while they considered my words. Finally, Pen responded. "Sure, Harry. We can do that."

"You got it, mate!" Georgie agreed. "You know we would do nothing to hurt you, right?"

"I know, Georgie, I know," I said. "It's just the press can be so devious. They have more practice interviewing than we do being interviewed. They have the upper hand."

"Bloody fucking right, mate," Georgie said. "Remember Professor Talney?"

I remembered the incident in university when Professor Talney was charged with raping a young female student after a binge at a local pub. Though he'd been convicted, mostly because of the press, it was later revealed the young student had lied because of a vendetta against him for a grade he'd given her on a final paper. Though he escaped a long jail sentence, his reputation and career were ruined after the tabloids dragged him through the mud.

"I remember all too well," I said.

Georgie scoffed. "We won't let that happen to you, Harry. I promise."

"No, we won't," Pen agreed. "You need anything, Harry?"

"I could go for a pint at the pub with my friends. You could join us," I joked.

Georgie scoffed. "We'd have to check our calendar, mate. Busy and all that!"

"Good one!" I said. Just talking to them made me feel better.

"Don't you worry, Harry. I'll drink a few extras for you," Georgie said, laughing before I heard Pen slap him playfully.

"You will not!" she said, laughing. "You are incorrigible."

"That's why you like me!" Georgie exclaimed.

I laughed, realizing how much I missed them. "I miss you two. I have to go, but I will update you as often as I can."

"Stay safe, Harry," Pen said.

"I will. Bye," I said before hanging up. Suddenly that extra month sounded like a lifetime. I thought about a break to go back home, but realized the futility of that. A trip home would be expensive and time-consuming. Best if I just bellied up to the table and carried on.

I wondered why Ricki was taking so long. I got up to use the loo when I heard a familiar sound. It was one of those snowmobiles Robby had taken me on. I moved to the recreation room and looked out the window. I feared the press had found us, but then thought about the lady in white and felt a pang of hope.

I stared into the white and spotted the machine making its way towards the lodge. The lone rider wore a multi-colored ski suit with hat and goggles. I didn't recognize them, but decided I'd better get Mr. Goldstein. I was about to turn away when someone moved out of the shadows of the lodge. I almost fainted as Ricki ran across the snow to greet the rider!

I quickly rushed to the door to stop him, certain it was Annie on the snowmobile. My feet were like lead as I tried to reach the main entrance. I pulled on the door, but it wouldn't budge. Then I realized I had to push to open it. It was like a dream where you can't move. My mind reeled from the implications of his behavior, and I couldn't think straight. I needed to stop him before he made his situation worse.

I finally wrestled the door open and sprinted around the corner of the lodge. There was an explosion of white as they sped across the field towards the distant forest. I was too late and my heart sank. I had let Mr. Goldstein down again. I stopped to catch my breath as they disappeared into the pine trees. I didn't know what to do.

"That son of a bitch!" Mr. Goldstein screamed from behind me. "That son of a bitch!"

I had to agree. *That son of a bitch.*

I sat on the vast sectional and stared into the fire. I had failed and couldn't even bring myself to make eye contact with Mr. Goldstein. He was pacing back and forth and had called Laser and Vivica to join us. His mumbling was not coherent, and I feared he might have a stroke from this latest incident.

Vivica entered the room. "What is it, Daddy? What has happened?" she asked as I turned to face them both.

Mr. Goldstein continued mumbling and didn't respond while he paced. He interspersed a sprinkling of swear words with his unintelligible sounds.

"It is my fault," I said. "I should have been more aware so I could stop him."

"Your fault, Harry?" she said. "What did he do?"

"The one thing I forbade him to do!" Mr. Goldstein blurted. "He ran off with that damned girl!"

"What?" Vivica said. "How?"

"A snowmobile through the forest," I said. "I tried to stop him but couldn't reach him in time."

"And it was Annie driving it?" Vivica asked.

"Well, I couldn't tell who it was because of their snow gear, but who else could it be? Who else would he run away with?" I said.

She frowned. "Either way, I am sure it was a rendezvous with Annie even if it she wasn't driving."

"This will sink us," Mr. Goldstein said. "If they catch him with her, we will have little left to argue that she entrapped him that night."

He sat at one of the card tables and cradled his head in his hands, pulling his hair. Even Vivica could not console him.

I got up from my seat by the fire and headed towards the stairs just as Laser came in through the front door. Mr. Goldstein's voice stopped me.

"Where are you going, Harry?" he asked.

"To pack," I replied. "I have let you down twice and should go home. I am so sorry, sir."

"Harry!" Mr. Goldstein said with authority. "Neither you nor I nor any of us can control Ricki. It wasn't your fault before, and it isn't your fault now," he stood and faced me with determination. "You have

proven to me you are a good friend to Ricki, who at the moment doesn't deserve that, and I can think of no one else I would rather have write Ricki's story than you," he paused and his demeanor was less authoritative. "He confided in you far more than in me, so please sit down and let's figure out what we can do to save him from himself."

An accented voice interjected. "Even we could not stop Ricardo from being loco. We told him Antonia was dangerous, but he would not stop seeing her. You cannot blame yourself, Harry," Laser said.

It stunned me he knew my name. "Thank you, Laser," I said in a shocked tone.

"I assume he has left to see his amore?" Laser asked, looking at Mr. Goldstein.

Mr. Goldstein nodded.

"You want me to track him down?" Laser asked.

Mr. Goldstein paused in thought. "No, they could be anywhere in this God forsaken country. They sped off on a snowmobile into the woods."

Laser nodded. "We have such things in the garage. I could follow their trail if you wish."

Mr. Goldstein perked up. "Really? You know how to ride one?"

"I can drive anything," Laser said with a grin.

"Do it," Mr. Goldstein said with conviction. "If we can track him down and bring him back before anyone sees them together, we might yet escape this incident without harm."

Laser nodded and headed back out the door.

"You think he will find them?" Vivica asked in a dubious tone. "It's a frigging wilderness out there."

"If anyone can, it would be Laser," Mr. Goldstein said. "Remember, they were raised in a jungle."

I agreed it made sense, but what large animals lurked out there that might stop him. Bears? Tigers? Hell, I did not understand what lurked in this frozen landscape, but I didn't want to join him.

"I need a drink," I said, though I wished I hadn't. "Sorry," I added.

"Don't be, I need a double or triple of something," Mr. Goldstein said as he looked over at the bar. "Vivica?"

Vivica looked frightened but replied. "Me, too."



Two hours had passed, and I felt the delirious effects of my drinks more than I wanted. Mr. Goldstein looked drunk as he sipped another double scotch. Vivica was asleep on the large couch in front of the fireplace. We hadn't spoken with each other in an hour.

I couldn't stop replaying what happened in my mind, wondering why I was so inept and clueless. Georgie's voice kept screaming through my mind about how I should trust no one famous. I was out of my league, and it made me feel small. I yearned for my flat in London. I could crawl back into it like a cocoon and leave the troubles of the world behind.

I picked up my glass and put it back down without drinking. The last thing I needed was more alcohol to dredge up inadequacies to pile onto my guilt. I wondered if I could even pull off this biography after everything that had happened.

I had never known love, let alone love at first sight, so these were uncharted waters. How could I write about that in the book when I didn't even understand it?

The loud sound of a snowmobile pulled me alert, and I got up from my seat at the bar. Mr. Goldstein heard it and looked at me with questioning eyes.

Without a word, I ran to the front door and pulled it open. I saw two headlights tearing across the snowy landscape from the direction Ricki had fled. I held my breath in the chilly air as Mr. Goldstein came out next to me.

"Do you think he found them?" he asked.

I shook my head, not sure what to think, but tempered my hopes.

Both machines pulled into the driveway and stopped in front of the large porch. I noticed the second rider was a girl, and then I realized it was the white rider I had seen when we arrived in Snowchute. The Russian Model.

Laser shut off his snowmobile, but she left hers running as he dismounted and walked over to her. The machine was too loud to hear what they were saying, but he stepped back as she revved her engine and tore off down the driveway, disappearing around the bend. The night was eerily quiet as Laser walked towards us, taking off his gloves.

"Who was that?" Mr. Goldstein asked as Laser mounted the steps up onto the porch.

"I met her while looking for Ricardo. She thinks he left the snowmobile and took a car somewhere, but she doesn't know where.

We couldn't find the snowmobile driver. They must have taken roads back to town," he said without emotion.

"She lives here?" Mr. Goldstein asked, not happy with what he has heard.

"Si," Laser said without offering more.

Mr. Goldstein wanted more but let it go. "I knew it. He went to meet with that girl! We're doomed!"

"We don't know that, sir," I offered, though I agreed with his assessment.

"Thank you, Harry, but we both know it is true. Love is a powerful force, and I now believe him when he says he loves her. Why else would someone jeopardize everything they have worked so hard for? We are all ruined," he said with finality before turning back to the lodge. "Why?"

Laser started to leave before I stopped him. "So, who is that woman? Kind of unusual for a woman to be riding out alone in the frozen wilderness at night."

"She is Russian," Laser said, as though that explained everything. "She was hunting coyote."

"Ah..." I said as if that made sense, but I didn't know what a coyote was. Perhaps it was Spanish for bear. "Russian? How do you know that?"

Laser smiled, something unusual for him. "I speak Russian," he said before walking down the steps towards the snowmobile.

Of course you do. I said to myself, certain Laser was more dangerous than I had believed. I felt sorry for anyone who had ill intentions towards Ricki or any of us.

At least he had confirmed what Mercy had told me. She was Russian. I had another irrational desire to meet her. I mean, what Russian model would want anything to do with an English bookworm from London? Especially a poor one. Still, her beauty was hard to ignore.

I thought about Mercy, and it felt like I had cheated on her. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I stay focused on what was happening instead of my failed love life? My inadequacies crept back into my mind. What was I doing here?

\* \* \*

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway jolted me awake. I was half asleep in a chair, despite Mr. Goldstein's insistence that I go to bed. Vivica had listened to him and retired after hearing Laser's report. I wondered if I should wake her.

Mr. Goldstein sat at the table with a half-finished scotch and cell phone next to him. He cradled his head in his crossed arms. The car hadn't awoken him. I got up and headed to the door to see who it was. Could Ricki have returned, or was someone bringing us bad news? I opened the door and scanned the driveway. It was a guest services vehicle from the resort, and I wiped my eyes, wondering why they were here so late. Did they come this early to start breakfast?

The parked car idled with headlights shining towards me, and I shielded my eyes to see who was inside. I walked down a few steps to the driveway just as the car turned off. Unfortunately, the lights still blinded me. I stopped and waited, waving a greeting.

The driver's door opened, and the headlights turned off, blinding me in darkness. My eyes adjusted, and I saw Mercy coming around the front of the vehicle. Just then, the passenger door opened, and Ricki stepped out into the cold. He didn't look happy.

"Uh... hello," I said, at a loss for words.

Mercy said nothing and held up her hands with the key fob to lock the car. It beeped once with blinding lights before it launched into a crescendo of horn, alarms, and lights. Blinded again, the sound disoriented me as the noise ripped through my groggy brain.

Mercy struggled to disable the alarm as Ricki stepped back from the terrifying car. Finally, she pushed the right button, and the car stopped with a lone beep.

"Sorry!" she said, shoving the keys into her pocket as though they were something evil. "I hate this car."

I was about to respond when something hit me on my head, knocking me to the ground and burying me in snow. My breathing became labored as the heavy snow pressed down on me. My head felt like I was on a merry-go-round that wouldn't stop, and I couldn't scream from the pain. Through my delirium, I envisioned an avalanche burying me with no one around to save me. My thoughts grew incoherent as my body struggled without oxygen. My imagination worked overtime through panic. Did we ever make it out of the avalanche? Is that where I was?

I couldn't sort it out but felt hands grabbing me, pulling me free of the snow. I gasped into the cold dark air, gasping for oxygen before I

blackened out. The hands dragged me across the ground as muffled voices yelled in the distance, but my mind fled from them towards the peaceful darkness that beckoned like a security blanket. I cringed from the harsh voices, seeking solace under that dark blanket. I drifted further away from the sounds until a harsh slap brought me back to a cold reality.

My eyes opened, and I stared at Laser. "Can you hear me?" he screamed, though it sounded far away and muffled from the buzzing consuming me. "Speak if you can hear me!" he insisted, and I tried to nod, but pain stabbed me like a hot knife in the back of my neck.

As the oxygen brought my senses back to life, the buzzing receded so I could hear again. I was at the lodge in the middle of the wilderness and Ricki had just returned with Mercy. The memory reassured me I wasn't lost or severely damaged.

"I... uh... I am fine," I said, trying to sit up, but Laser held me down.

"Easy, amigo, that was a sever knock you took," he said. "You may have a concussion."

"Concussion?" I asked as spots swam across my vision. I remembered Georgie suffering from a concussion after a nasty collision in rugby. He kept babbling nonsense about scoring, even though he had never had the ball. It seemed silly, but later, the doctor mentioned how dangerous it could be.

A fit of anxiety washed over me, and I rolled over, throwing up in the snow. Only after a fit of dry heaves did I fall back in a numbing stupor. My head throbbed as if someone with a hammer was trying to break out.

Laser sat me up. "You are lucky to be alive, amigo," he said matter of fact. "Many people have died from a snowfall off a roof."

"What?" I asked. "People can die from that?"

"Oh, si," he whispered. "I have seen it before in Switzerland. Do you think you can walk?"

I nodded as he helped me up from the cold ground. The snow had soaked into my clothes, and I began shaking from the cold.

"You look pale, Harry," Ricki's voice said to my left. "You should sit by the fire and warm-up."

I was up, but shaky. Laser supported me under my right arm, and Ricki took my left as we headed towards the entrance. Mr. Goldstein stood at the top, frowning. "Will he be alright?" he asked. "Should I call a doctor?"

Laser shook his head. "There is nothing they can do, but we should keep him awake tonight just in case."

"Great," I moaned as we mounted the last step and moved into the foyer. Sleep was what I wanted, but doctors had urged Georgie to avoid sleep. It would be a challenge.

They lowered me to the couch in front of the fire, and the warmth of the flames eased my pain. At least, I no longer shook from the cold.

"Oh, my God!" Vivica's voice called from the foyer. "What the hell happened to Harry?"

"Snowfall," Mercy said.

"Snowfall?" Vivica said. "What the hell is that?"

Mr. Goldstein answered. "From the roof! The car alarm went off by accident, and it caused snow to fall on Harry from the roof."

"I am so sorry," Mercy said, and the telltale quivering of fear sounded in her voice. "I'll just leave."

"Stay right where you are, young lady," Mr. Goldstein said. "I have questions for you."

"Please don't sue my uncle. It was all my fault!" Mercy exclaimed near tears. "I always set off that alarm by accident."

"What?" Mr. Goldstein said. "No, not about that, about him!"

I couldn't see him, but I knew he was pointing at Ricki.

"It is not her fault," Ricki said. "I am at fault."

Mr. Goldstein's voice rose an octave. "I know it is your damn fault!" he said, and my head rang.

"Please don't scream," I urged.

"Sorry, Harry," he said. "Please everyone, have a seat so we can talk."

I rubbed my hands and feared frostbite from the incident. Mr. Goldstein sat at one of the love seats perpendicular to the couch I was on, and Ricki sat down a couple cushions away from me, placing me between him and Mr. Goldstein. Vivica sat down next to me and wrapped her blanket around me. "Here you go, Harry, this should help."

"Thank you, Vivica," I said with relief.

I turned my head, but my vision went dark when I did, so I turned back to fire. I would have to listen and not look. Laser and Mercy sat further away near the table.

Mr. Goldstein took several deep breaths, and struggled to shrug off the multiple scotches he'd drank earlier.

“Look, it is late, we are tired, and Harry has been hurt, so I want to clear the air now before sleep muddles us,” he said with finality. “Did you see Annie,” he asked Ricki.

There was an awkward pause, and I thought he would refuse to talk. But he answered. “Yes, I did.”

Mr. Goldstein nodded. “And you, Ms. Mercy. Did you take him to see her?”

She spoke before Ricki interrupted her. “No, she did not. She had nothing to do with any of this.”

“Then, who took you on that damned machine?” Mr. Goldstein said, maintaining a miraculous control.

Ricki answered but did not elaborate. “That was Robby.”

“And who is he?” Mr. Goldstein asked through tight lips.

“She,” Ricki replied, “is a friend of Annie’s.”

“A girl named Robby?” Mr. Goldstein asked. “Oh, yes, now I remember Harry mentioned her. The girl from the sheriff’s office. Why doesn’t that surprise me in this damned place? What other craziness awaits us?”

“Killer roofs!” Vivica said, patting my knee.

“Ah, yes. Killer freaking roofs!” Mr. Goldstein said.

I didn’t want to add to the eruption building within him, but I had to warn him. “Robby must have borrowed the snowmobile from the sheriff’s office.”

Mr. Goldstein absorbed the news rather well before turning to Ricki. “Is that true?”

Ricki nodded. “Yes, but she said the sheriff was out when she took it.”

“We are doomed,” Mr. Goldstein concluded. “Doomed, my boy.”

“Daddy, maybe the sheriff doesn’t know,” Vivica pleaded. “Even if he knew she took it, why would he assume it was to take Ricki to see Annie?”

“Because it is Snowchute, honey, and I would assume that if I was him!” Mr. Goldstein said. “He is probably on his way here right now.”

“Sir?” Mercy said. “I need to get back to the resort. I am on night duty and I left Consuela in charge, and she may or may not have understood what I said before I left. She doesn’t understand a lot of English.”

Mr. Goldstein shot her a heated look but softened. “Yes, fine. Thank you for bringing him home. Was he with Annie when you found him?”

"I didn't find him, sir. He just walked in through the front door while I was on the desk," she said, trying to deflect the questions.

"I walked back to the resort to get a ride," Ricki explained. "Thank you, Mercy. You may leave."

She hesitated, staring at Mr. Goldstein for confirmation. Then she stood and left. The car alarm rang out through the night, and I cringed in response, half expecting another snowfall. It fell silent, and we heard the car drive away.

Everyone remained quiet, and only the sound of the flames in the hearth broke the stillness. My head felt better in the silence and my eyes started closing. I felt a deep need for sleep, but Vivica shook me.

She put her arms around me and stroked my shoulders. "Are you warm, Harry?" she asked. "You mustn't sleep. Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you," I said, wishing I was in my bed. I needed to stay up, and I hoped Vivica would stay up with me to keep me awake. I knew I couldn't do it on my own.

Mr. Goldstein leaned forward like he was leaving, but he put his hands in his lap instead and looked down at his shoes. "Why, Ricki?" He pleaded. "Why would you jeopardize your one chance to stay out of jail?"

"She was going to confess," Ricki said. "I couldn't let her do that."

"What?" Mr. Goldstein exclaimed. "That is exactly what she needs to do. That is what we have needed all along. It can make this go away! Why would you stop her?"

"Because I love her," he said. "And she loves me, too."

"She said that?" Mr. Goldstein asked. "She actually said she loved you?"

"Yes," Ricki insisted. "Look, I know you all think I am crazy, but we are meant to be together. We are like soulmates who have found each other."

"And how are you going to be together when you are in prison?" Mr. Goldstein was yelling, and my head pounded with every word. He noticed my discomfort. "Sorry, Harry."

I nodded.

"Look, Ricki, I know you think you love her, but you only met this girl a few days ago. How can you be sure?" Mr. Goldstein said.

"I know, Lenny," Ricki said without flinching.

I was with Mr. Goldstein. I still couldn't figure out how someone would know they love someone after only a few days. It seemed too improbable.

"Well, great," Mr. Goldstein said defeated. "You'll go to prison, your career will go down in flames, and the rest of us will do what? Go on without you?"

"I hope not, but I can't make you go through this," Ricki said.

"Oh, please!" Mr. Goldstein mocked. "It was rhetorical! Like we would leave you to fight this alone. You are family, Ricki. Like my own son!"

Ricki smiled. "I know, Lenny. You are the father I never had."

"Well, son, you are in deep shit, and I don't know what to do about it!" Mr. Goldstein said before dropping his head. "Anyone have suggestions?"

We all remained silent. Ricki was in deep, and there didn't seem to be any way out of it if he wouldn't let Annie tell the truth. I began thinking my purpose here was over as they fought the massive legal battles. When this went to trial, the press would eat Ricki alive.

A siren sounded out front, and blue lights flashed through the window. The sheriff had arrived.

"Well, crap," Mr. Goldstein said, lifting his head.



Mr. Goldstein stood at the reception desk, waiting for the sheriff to return. Ricki was being processed, and this time on charges of attempting to have sex with a minor. Considering the previous charge, he might never get out of prison.

They cuffed Ricki before they put him in the car, and the sheriff had looked like he had wanted Ricki to resist. Thankfully, the deputy was there to keep him in check. The anger shone through the sheriff's eyes like fire, and I feared for Ricki.

We watched as the sheriff's car drove off while we piled into the SUV to follow them to town. Even Vivica came along despite being in her sleeping clothes. She had thrown on a heavy coat and hat, refusing to stay behind despite being in slippers.

I was still cold, and my head pounded with hammers like earlier. Now, however, I assumed it was the aftereffects of the drinks. I should be sleeping while this drama played out, but I wanted to be there for Ricki. But it all looked so hopeless.

Sounds leaked from behind the locked door, and we heard voices yelling. It was impossible to hear what they were saying. There was a loud bang as some inner door closed and everything fell silent.

The sheriff walked out to the main desk and stared into Mr. Goldstein's eyes. "Your boy is being booked again, and this time you won't be able to post bail. Arrested twice for this offense will keep him locked up till the trial."

"And you think the judge will agree with you?" Mr. Goldstein said.

The sheriff didn't pause. "I am certain of it."

Though I didn't know why, I opened my mouth and interjected myself into the conversation. "Who were you arguing with in the back?" I regretted this ill-advised decision.

"You want your visa revoked for interfering in police affairs, Prince Harry?" the sheriff said with malice. "Maybe I'll hold you on suspicion of terrorism. Then you won't even get a lawyer."

"Whoa!" Mr. Goldstein blurted. "Let's not act rash. We are only trying to understand what is going on. I don't think Mr. Holden was trying to interfere, were you Harry?"

"No, not at all," I said. "I was just concerned by what we heard."

“None of your business, that is what you heard!” the sheriff replied. “You guys come here from out of town, and you all think we are a bunch of country bumpkins who have no clue. Your money and expensive lawyers will not save your boy this time. We don’t take kindly to people coming into our town and messing with our kids!”

Once more I spoke up when I should shut up. “That was your daughter back there, wasn’t it? I mean, Annie.”

“Boy, you don’t know when to shut your damn mouth. Don’t even say her name, you understand?” the sheriff said. He was on the edge, and I saw Laser tensing as if ready to act should the need arise.

“I am so sorry, sir, I am just trying to understand what you were arguing about. Ricki told us she wanted to confess this was all her fault,” At this point, I was all in and would land in a jail cell with Ricki. Either the alcohol or the bump to my head had shaken common sense out of me.

The sheriff’s dark eyes pierced me with a pointed look of hatred. Even Laser might not be able to stop him. The painful silence was awkward, and Mr. Goldstein looked confused. If my odds of keeping this job were thin before, I might have just killed them. But I wanted to reason with this man.

The sound of the front door opening forestalled the show down. What looked like small and large bears wearing cowboy hats walked in with a gust of cold air.

“Howdy,” the judge said in the awkward silence. “What have we here?”

Her husband was taller than everyone in the room, and it made her look small. Their heavy fur coats made them look like bears, and this time I felt certain they were bear fur.

The sheriff answered. “It appears their prima donna snuck off with my daughter again. I have arrested him on additional charges.”

The judge’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and her eyes fell on Mr. Goldstein. “My, my, Mr. Goldstein. I would think you would have had a short leash on your charge after last time.”

Mr. Goldstein was not amused but maintained his composure. “You would think.”

“I was just reminding him we don’t have to allow bail this time,” the sheriff added.

“Well, that would be correct, at least not unless I say so,” the judge said as she took off her hat. “Seems you boys have gotten yourselves into quite the pickle.”

"Ricki was lured away, and taken by Annie's friend Robby," Mr. Goldstein said. "They baited him."

The judge grinned. "That Robby is a willful girl, I'll give you that, but your pretty boy is an adult and could have chosen not to go," she said. "And do not tell me anymore about this until we are in court."

"Why are you here, Judge?" the sheriff asked. "Coincidence?"

"Yes, a coincidence," the judge agreed. "I wanted to have a quick word with you about the well situation at the Hallendale Ranch, but it seems you are too busy right now. Perhaps tomorrow?"

The front door banged open as Annie stormed in. "Damn you, Daddy, I can't do it. I won't do it!" she said.

"Annie, I told you to go home!" the sheriff said. "I will get the deputy to take you there by force?"

"I will not lie for you anymore!" She screamed. "I love him and won't let him go to prison for something I did!"

"Damn it, Annie. You shut your mouth!" the sheriff screamed. He turned to the judge. "She doesn't know what she is saying and certainly doesn't love him. She'll say anything to save her superstar."

The judge grinned. "Indeed," she paused, staring at Annie. "I am not supposed to do this, but you have dragged me into this sordid affair. Tell me, girl. How is this all your fault?"

"Judge!" the sheriff began.

"Don't you 'Judge' me, Paul, I have known you and your filly too long. I want to hear what she has to say. Go on girl, start explaining," the judge urged.

Annie started the tale all the way to the first night she and Ricki sang together and the first incident in the snow cat. She explained how she wanted Ricki to make love to her, but since he was a gentlemen, he had refused. He had told her he wanted to do it properly because he loved her.

That was when she ripped open her blouse and lunged for him, but then her father had opened the door and caught them together. She was so scared of what her father would do, she had panicked and told the story of Ricki attacking her. Later, she had recanted, but her father would not believe her and forced her to maintain her initial story. But the guilt had eaten away at her, especially after falling in love with Ricki.

Her friend Robby had convinced her to come clean and urged her to meet with Ricki to convince him to let her do it. She had texted Ricki,

and then Robby had picked him up at the lodge on a snowmobile. He and Annie had met and drove off to a secluded spot where they talked.

She finished by saying Ricki refused to recant his admission of guilt to save her reputation. They were both torn apart by his refusal. She'd only wanted to free him so they could be together.

She stopped when her sobbing brought her to her knees. The judge walked over and helped her up from the floor, wrapping her arms around her. "Love's a bitch, dear, but I wouldn't live without it,"

She turned to the sheriff. "Well, Paul, you are also in quite a pickle now. You have arrested a man trying to save your daughter's honor out of love, and you have a young filly who wants her man freed so they can be together. It is a regular Romeo and Juliet story come to life. Do you want the same ending?"

The sheriff simmered and avoided the judge's eyes. "I have tried my best with Annie, you know that. When we lost her mother, I didn't know what to do. She's as headstrong and stubborn as her mother was! God bless her soul."

"She sure is," the judge said, laughing. "What would Caroline want, Paul?"

The sheriff struggled to hold back tears from the memories of his wife. "I don't know, Jacki, but I wish she were here."

The judge let go of Annie. "Darling, you almost eighteen?"

"In three months," Annie replied.

The judge smiled and removed Annie's tear-stained hair from her face, placing it behind her ears. "You know, I knew your mom real well. She and I were friends since the second grade. You remind me so much of her. She was a strong woman and true friend. Now look me in the eye and tell me what you have said is true."

Annie looked into her eyes. "It is all true. Can you please save him?"

"I believe you," the judge said, smiling. "And yes, darling, I can save your man."

Mr. Goldstein smiled at the sudden turn in events. He opened his mouth to speak, but the judge stopped him.

"Mr. Goldstein, it ain't over yet," she said. "We have already walked down the path and need to take all the required steps backward before he is free," she turned to the sheriff. "Paul, I want you to take a deposition from your lovely young daughter so you can submit it to the district attorney. If he refuses to drop the charges, I can be persuasive."

"But I can't just let him go!" the sheriff pleaded. "He hurt my daughter."

"Stop it, Paul. You know as well as I do he did nothing of the sort. Caroline would not have wanted this for Annie. Stop the charade, and let's end this as soon as possible," she said.

The sheriff looked uncertain, but his shoulders dropped in acceptance.

"Look, Paul, you might think this will damage your daughter's reputation, but it won't," the judge said. "She is as strong and resilient as Caroline was and will move past this. It is love, Paul, and it will always be messy."

He nodded and waved to Annie. "Come on, honey. I'll take your deposition."

Fresh tears spilled from her eyes as she ran to her father, hugging him around the waist. "Thank you, Daddy. I love you!"

"What about Ricki?" Mr. Goldstein asked. "Can you release him?"

The judge walked over to him. "Mr. Goldstein, I may be a sucker for love, but I am a stickler for protocol. Your boy will spend the night until I dismiss the case tomorrow afternoon," she smiled. "Look on the bright side, the food here is fabulous, thanks to Charlotte."

"Can we at least see him?" Mr. Goldstein pressed.

"Paul, let them in to see Mr. Heart so they can tell him the good news. That way he can sleep tonight."

The sheriff nodded.

"Luke, I think our work is done. Let's go home," the judge said as she put her hat back on and grabbed her bear of a man by the arm.

Luke nodded but didn't say a word as he opened the door for her. They both left, and we were back in that awkward silence that had become the normal with this group.

Finally, the sheriff spoke. "I'll send out Deputy Smith to let take you in to see him." He and Annie left, heading to his office.

Vivica was sitting on pins and needles and looked ready to explode. "Oh, my God!" she screamed. "Ricki is going free!"

The pain from her shrill voice nearly dropped me to my knees, but I agreed it was nothing short of a miracle. "I can't believe what I have just witnessed."

"Well, remember it and put it in the book!" Mr. Goldstein said, grinning. "It will sell millions!"

**M**y mood was relaxed as I sipped a Bass Pale Ale, admiring the view from Ricki's pool overlooking the lights of Los Angeles. His home was a beautiful creation perched on a hillside overlooking the pulsing city. The highways glowed red and white as traffic crawled through the vibrant city. It felt good to be in civilization, but it was as surreal as the experiences in Snowchute. I was in awe of this unattainable lifestyle.

The pool felt like bath water, and though I rarely swam, Ricki's insistence was hard to resist. It was a *à propos* way to end my difficult journey. Though I dreaded the long flight home, I missed Finn and my own bed, so I was ready to return. I would miss the fine dining and hospitality, but I was ready to slip into my cozy world and get on with the book.

"What are you thinking about?" Ricki asked from the other end. I stood in the deeper water by the infinity edge while Ricki sat on the steps. "You miss your home?"

I sipped my ale before answering. "Yes."

"There are many places I call home, but this one feels like my true home, if such a thing exists for me," Ricki said. "I think of this when I am on tour."

"It is truly magnificent," I said.

"More than that," Ricki said. "It's a culmination of a little boy's dream in the jungles of South America. I dreamed big and made them come true."

I mulled over my dreams as a young boy. Had I achieved them? Writing was my destiny and desire, and now I believed this chapter of my life might be the pinnacle of that destiny. How could I top this?

The voice of Georgie echoed through my mind. Writer to the stars. I didn't think that was my dream, but I had to admit the possibility intrigued me. If I delivered this first book, who knew where it could lead? Still, many doubts lingered. They were an after-effect of my life up to that point, but this was an opportunity to change that.

"Are you sure I was your best choice, Ricki," I asked one last time. "I mean, there are so many talented writers in Los Angeles, why bring me over to do it?"

Ricki waded over to me. "Harry, even if I had doubts, which I didn't, after everything we've been through, I am certain you will tell my story like no other."

"I sure hope you are right," I said. "I have to admit, it is a great deal of pressure."

"All great endeavors are. I understand people, if nothing else," Ricki said, "and you are an incredible romantic. You just haven't found love to satisfy your desire for romance. Once you do, you will understand what I am talking about."

His words made me think of Mercy. I had never said goodbye after we fled Snowchute once Ricki was released. Maybe it was just as well. What relationship could we have? Thousands of kilometers do not afford much opportunity for romance. I wondered about her and hoped she would find her niche in life. It seemed hospitality might not suit her, but who knew?

"I don't think I will ever find love like you, Ricki," I said. "I still can't believe you and Annie fell in love so quickly."

Ricki smiled as stared into the clear sky. "When we sang together, it was like one voice. Not two, Harry. We harmonized in a way I have never experienced before. It was like we were both parts of a separate whole we were unaware of," he paused. "It was like we shared a soul."

"That is incredible," I said. "So, it was different than singing with Ms. McCawlie?"

"Ah, I see what you are thinking, Harry," Ricki said. "Allison is a marvelous singer, and we harmonize wonderfully. But with her it is music. With Annie, it is like a chorus of angels. I felt it in my core, and so did she."

I nodded as if I understood, but I didn't. Still, his comments would make great fodder for the book. "You believe she loves you, Ricki? I mean, she is so young. Aren't you afraid it is just a young woman's infatuation?"

"It isn't. I know," Ricki disagreed. "Within her eyes was the same magic spark I felt. It is love."

"I am happy for you, though I don't see what you can do about it," I said. "I do not think her father will let you see her again."

"No, not now, but I will win him over," Ricki said. "I will do the honorable thing and ask him for her hand in marriage."

I choked on my ale. "Really?" I said. "Sorry. You think he will agree?"

Ricki raised his glass and stared out over the city. "Harry, like I said before, I know people," Ricki said. "He is a single father protecting the only child he has. She is not only a part of him, but a part of his lost wife. He will protect that connection to his past from anyone he thinks threatens it. I will convince him I see her the same, and that I will protect and love her as he would. You know what I mean."

I laughed. "I know what you mean. And you think it will work?"

This time Ricki laughed. "Of course, Harry. We are destined to be together, so we will."

"Your trust in destiny is amazing. I don't even believe such a thing," I said before finishing my ale.

"Really, Harry? Then why are you here if not for destiny?" Ricki said, spreading his arms.

"I suppose," I said without enthusiasm.

"You will see, Harry. All of this was for a reason, you just haven't found that reason yet. Your journey is not yet over," Ricki concluded.

I thought about that last comment. My journey wasn't over, yet I felt like Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit* after returning from his adventure. Once he returned home, he began writing his book, and it was the end of his adventure. Now I would have to write mine. Or rather, Ricki's. The lack of confidence sapped my resolve. Perhaps another ale.

"Well, no matter what happens, Ricki, I want you to know I am grateful and honored to learn your life story," I said. "Thank you."

"It is you I need to thank, Harry," Ricki said. "You will be a trusted friend for life. You know that, don't you, Harry? You are part of my family now."

I didn't have much family. Other than my aunt, Georgie, and Pen, there weren't any others, so it meant a great deal to have Ricki say this. His world and life were so different from mine that I didn't actually believe I could be a part of his family. But hearing him say it was sufficient.

"Thank you, Ricki," I said.

Without warning, Ricki waded over and grabbed me in a big hug. I felt awkward standing half naked chest to chest with another man in a hot pool. I put my arms around him and hugged him back. After what seemed an eternity, Ricki released me, and I smiled. He truly had a passion for life and for friendship. I needed to honor that in the book.

Ricki grinned as he stared at me. "You are a shy person, Harry. Something I like about you. That will soon change!"



“Maybe,” I said before moving to the steps. I was pruned from the water and felt naked in the cool night air. “I could use another ale.”

\* \* \*

Ricki’s black SUV pulled into the departure lane at LAX and rolled to a stop. Laser had driven me, and the silence afforded me quiet moments to reflect on the trip. My three weeks in America felt more like three months. Because of that, leaving was bittersweet. I was homesick and looked forward to seeing friends and family again.

Finn would give me a cold shoulder for having left him for so long, my aunt would hug me tight and act like it didn’t matter, and Georgie and Pen would lavish me with questions about every detail of my trip. It would be nice to be back with them in our pub.

I stepped out and closed the door as Laser pulled my bags from the boot. He placed them on the curb and eyed me. For a moment, I felt awkward, as though he would hurt me. His penetrating gaze was threatening.

“Thank you, Laser,” I said with little fanfare. I was uncertain what to say to a driver, especially a trained killer.

Laser remained quiet, staring at me like I was a terrorist, and it forced me to avert my eyes to my bags. As I picked up my first bag, he finally spoke.

“When I heard Ricardo had selected you to write his story, I was certain he was making a huge mistake. You are a nobody with no experience, and come from a cold and dreary world. I thought, how can this pasty white man-boy ever capture the true essence of Ricardo? He hasn’t even been to Columbia or South America. I was certain it would be a failure.”

He paused, and his candid disdain stunned me. I had suspected he didn’t like me, but the reality was even worse. I was certain he had stereotyped me, but my own doubts didn’t help. I remained silent and grabbed my other bags to leave. Then he spoke again.

“However, Harry, I have underestimated you. You are a truer friend to Ricki than anyone he has ever met. Most people just want things from him, and you want nothing. You are humble, honest, and without secondary motives. This is something I know about being from Columbia. You are a decent man, and I am so pleased Ricki found you. Thank you, Harry. I hope you have a great flight home, and I look forward to reading the book,” Without warning he walked over to me,

and I cringed as he enveloped me in an enormous hug. I was both terrified and awed.

He released me and walked back to the driver's side of the SUV, taking off before I could react. If I hadn't heard it in person, I would not have believed it. He liked me, or at least respected me. Maybe I would never know which. It didn't matter, it had made my day, and I felt a sudden urge to write. I didn't want to let them down.

I made my way to the ticketing counter to begin the long journey home. This adventure was something I could not have imagined, but it was something I would never forget. Maybe I didn't find love, but I found family. I pictured Pen and Georgie in my mind and murmured. "Almost home."

**D**espite the lashing rain when I arrived, I was excited to be back in London. Travelers from all over the world visited London during the holidays, so Heathrow was a very crowded airport. I had purchased gifts for Pen, Georgie and my aunt in L.A., but hadn't wrapped a single one of them. My suitcases bulged from the extra baggage, and I had to pay more to bring them on the flight. It was worth it for family.

After retrieving my bags, I made my way to find a cab, and the noises and smells of home hit me with a toxic slap that brought back fond memories. I breathed in the rain-soaked air and coughed as exhaust from the myriad cars hit my lungs. I moved towards the cab station to wait, but a familiar voice stopped me.

"Hey, Admiral!"

*Georgie!* He and Pen stood by his car waving. I hurried over to them and almost knocked down an older woman pulling her suitcase. Georgie wore his patented grin and grabbed one of my bags to put in the boot.

"You didn't think we would let you take a hack, did ya?" Georgie said, throwing my other bag in with the first.

Pen grabbed me in a soft hug. "Hello, Harry. So glad to have you back."

I hugged her back and whispered. "I am so glad to be home. And surprised to see you here."

"Come here, mate!" Georgie said as Pen released me. Georgie was not a gentle hugger and lifted me off the ground, spinning me around once. "You bleeding bugger, it is so great to have you home! I've no one to practice darts with."

"Don't you mean, drink with?" I said.

He hugged me around the shoulder and laughed. "That's my boy! His mind focused on what's important. A pint?" he asked.

"I would love one," I said. It felt wonderful to have my friends surprise me at the airport.

"Fair enough," Georgie said. "However, it may take a bit to get out of this damned airport. But don't worry, the Jag'll handle it."

Georgie's Jaguar was a beautiful dark blue creation with a tan leather interior and all the bells and whistles. It was a marvel to ride in, but scary with Georgie at the helm. I buckled in.

"Tell us everything, Harry," Pen said as she turned to speak to me. "Especially Colorado. Social media have written many stories about it, but we'll get it right from the source. Imagine that!"

"Is that Ricki Heart a cradle robber?" Georgie asked as I viewed him through the rear-view mirror.

"I wouldn't say that," I replied. "Ricki is a wonderful friend, and his feelings for Annie are genuine."

"Ah, those bleeding stars get everything they want. I wouldn't mind a little young tail," Georgie said as Pen slapped his arm in response.

"You better not!" she said.

"Don't worry, luv. You are all a man needs!" he said in reproach as he winked at me through the mirror.

"I saw that," Pen blurted.

The familiar sound of their banter eased me, and I laughed. Georgie joked about finding other women all the time, and Pen always gave him a playful earful in response. But they were a pair of swans that would be together forever. They had genuine love.

"I sure missed you guys," I said with a serious tone.

Pen turned around and reached her hand back to mine. "We love you, Harry. We missed you, too."

"That's right, mate. We love ya," Georgie said in a mocking tone. "Just kidding. You know I love you and missed you. Your aunt said Finn is fine and swearing at the postman."

I laughed. Finn rarely swore unless mad. When he did, it was always at someone you'd never suspect. My aunt told me about the postman, and I figured she had a thing for him. It was no surprise Finn took offense if the man delivered the mail to her rather than placing it in her box. He had a jealous streak in him.

"Thanks, Georgie. Can't wait for my chastising bites," I said.

We drove for about forty minutes before parking a half block from the pub. It was a spot Georgie called his, though it was often not available.

We walked through the light rain before entering the warm interior. I wiped my feet on the rug before looking up at a large poster announcing 'Welcome home, Harry!'. The pub erupted with a chorus of voices.

"Welcome home, Harry!"

I choked up from the overwhelming reception. "Oh my, I don't know what to say."

Georgie spoke for me. "I do. Three pints and three fish and chips!"

Everyone laughed as we made our way to the bar. I turned around to address the crowd. "I may not know all of you, but thank you for the warm welcome!"

Someone yelled out. "Tell us about Ricki Heart!"

Another voice joined him. "Are they having the baby?"

"Are they getting married?" a female voice asked.

Another man added his own comment. "I thought he was a dandy!"

I frowned. "He is not gay," I said in reply.

But it would not silence the man. "How do you know? You had a go at him?" There was laughter interspersed with groans.

Georgie handed me a pint before interjecting. "I'll have a go at you, ya tosser! Now shut up and drink."

I took a long drink, happy Georgie interceded on my behalf. Not everyone was a Ricki Heart fan. I put my drink down and addressed the crowd. "If I told you what I know, you wouldn't buy the book."

Another voice yelled in response. "Who wants to read a bloody book?"

Many people laughed at his comment. It saddened me so many no longer read, but it did not surprise me. Still, I felt compelled to fight back. "It will be a tale of money, murder, corruption and sordid love stories we only dream about."

The same voice responded. "Nah, I'll wait for it to come out in the papers!" People laughed again.

"Or the movies!" Another yelled.

A woman jumped to my defense. "Don't worry 'bout him, Harry. He can barely read a traffic sign!" This received more applause, and the man waved it off with a frown.

Another woman near us spoke. "I'll make sure my book club reads it, Harry. It sounds fantastic."

"Thank you," I couldn't remember the woman's name, but she was a regular like us. "Let me know when and I will sign the books," I changed my mind. "Better yet, I will get Ricki to sign them."

"Now we're talking," another person chimed in. "You think you can get him to come to our pub?"

"I am not sure, but I will ask," I said with authority. If Ricki were in town, he would come to the pub. Not sure I wanted that.

"Let's find a seat," Georgie said, saving me from the crowd. It was my tiny world, but a small glimpse into Ricki's daily life with paparazzi.

We sat down, and I drank half of my remaining bitters. It tasted so good to be back.

"Didn't they have anything to drink in America, Harry?" Pen asked.

"Not this," I said.

"Damned straight," Georgie said. "Everyone knows the best bitters come from England. What did you drink?"

"A lot of Bass Pale Ale," I said.

"Hmm, not horrible," Georgie said. "Don't think I have drank any of those since university. Didn't you try any of their 'micro-brews'?"

"Micro-what?" I asked.

"Micro-brews," Georgie said. "It is all the rage over there. A small brewery in somebody's garage or something. They like to call them Craft Beers."

"Never heard of it," I said.

"Ah, Harry. So much to learn, my lad," Georgie said as our food arrived with a round of bitters.

"Here you go, luv. Welcome home," Janice said as she put down my basket and bitters. "You're all Georgie talked about while you were gone."

"Thank you, Janice," I said with a smile.

Georgie frowned. "Don't be getting mushy, or nothing, I was talking about you hobnobbing with those stars."

"Oh, was that what you were talking about, were ya?" she said smiling.

Georgie frowned. "Alright, I may have mentioned I missed ya."

Janice laughed. "He tied it on one night and sobbed like a babe babbling about his long-lost soul mate."

I smiled. "Georgie, you are my soul mate!" I teased.

"I thought I was your soulmate!" Pen said, frowning before laughing.

Georgie was at a loss for words as he stared at all of us. "Ah, bother!" he said as he took a bunch of chips and shoved them into his mouth.

We laughed, and I grabbed my glass. "A toast."

"To what, Harry?" Pen asked.

"To friends, family and pub mates," I said as we clinked our glasses together before taking long draws.

Georgie stood, holding his glass high. "Everyone! To friends, family and pub mates!"

A chorus rang out. "Here, here!" and everyone drank.

“Thank you, Georgie. You are the best soulmate a bloke could have,” I said, teasing.

Georgie grabbed me around the shoulder. “Don’t you forget it, mate!”

\* \* \*

Finn rocked on his perch side to side in rhythm to the tapping of my pencil on the teacup. Now and then, he threw in a head bob to make sure I was paying attention to his fantastic dancing. I smiled and dropped my pencil to retrieve a small cracker for his valiant efforts.

“Well done, mate,” I said as I gave him his treat. “I wish my efforts were just as fantastic.”

The first five months back home were the most productive in my career. The chronicling of Ricki’s life in the jungles of Columbia and New York City were easy and exciting, and I felt good about the work. I treated his first lover with the kid gloves as necessary, only referring to her as a wealthy benefactor. I omitted the fact that she was a woman, a lover and part of the Columbian cartel.

Instead, I focused on the travails plaguing him until his solo success. That brought me to the present day and his love affair with Annie. I had my notes, and for Pete’s sake, I was there when it all went down, but I struggled to put it into words.

When writer’s block struck In the past, I would spend a few days playing darts and drinking pints with Georgie. That always got me past it. Now, however, I didn’t want to drink, and words were missing. It was an impasse I couldn’t move beyond. It would take more than drinks and darts.

My editor added to the stress by insisting I have the book to her in two months, so it would make it to press in time for the holidays. It was a bloody mess of my own making!

What held me back? My early attempts read like a news story recording events without emotion or subjectivity. It was all boring rubbish, so I deleted it. I went back through my earlier books for inspiration and concluded I had put a great deal of emotion into those. A navy admiral would be emotional before, during, and after a battle, and I always put myself in their shoes to inject their emotion into my writing.

But that was the problem. The emotions in *Snowchute* were raw, and I had nothing to pull from. My lack of love prevented me from

conveying the deep emotions of Ricki and Annie's relationship. Georgie, despite his bravado, wore his emotions on his sleeve, and made him the better person to write this part of the story. Unfortunately, his emotions often came out as anger rather than love, but he had passion. All I had was Admiral Boring.

Pen was a hopeless romantic who dreamed of this stuff. And while I dreamed of it too, I didn't understand it. I'd never felt it before. Perhaps I didn't even believe in love. The logical side of me insisted it was nothing more than a chemical reaction in the brain triggered by our innate desire to propagate the species.

And there was the root of my clinical analysis. I sounded like a reporter, or worse, a scientist. Cold, calculating logic without emotion or subjective feelings. I had often thought about Mercy since returning home, and there were stirrings, but they were mixed at best and false at worst. Our literal run-ins may have brought some attraction, but it unleashed a deep sense of dread that the Universe didn't want us together. I didn't believe in love born out of pain and misery, but maybe I was wrong.

That was the crux of it all. I was probably wrong about all of it. I didn't know love and struggled to put into words love at first sight. I couldn't capture the intense feelings of their impractical romance. Some romantic I was.

"You know, Finn, be glad you don't have a lady friend. It is far too complicated," I said as he cocked his head from side to side, trying to understand. I gave him another treat and leaned back, exasperated as I closed my laptop. It would not happen today.

My phone buzzed and was a welcome respite from my feelings of inadequacies. I picked it up, and the name Vivica stared back at me. My mood elevated as I knew only one Vivica.

"Hello," I said, trying to suppress excitement.

"Oh, my God, I can't believe I got you!" Vivica said. "I was certain you would be in bed or out or something."

"Great to hear your voice, Vivica. I am sitting in front of my laptop with a cup of tea," I said. "Getting straight to work in the early morning."

"Well, I am glad I got you," she said. "I won't keep you from your writing long."

I was happy she thought I was writing. Perhaps that would be an incentive to start. "Don't worry. What is it you wanted?"



"Well, knowing my dad as I do, I figured he wouldn't even call, and you'd just receive a letter with tickets and a travel itinerary. That is so cold. I wanted to be the one to let you know personally," she said.

"Thank you. I appreciate that, but why am I traveling? I am trying to finish the book," I said, feeling more pressure from this interruption. At least it wouldn't be back to the Wild West of Colorado. That was one adventure I didn't wish to repeat.

"You're welcome," she said. "You are going to attend Ricki and Annie's wedding," she said.

I swallowed hard. "You mean her father is allowing this?" I said in disbelief.

"Well, let's just say he is not fighting it, but isn't onboard with the idea either," she said. "I suspect he is throwing in the towel and letting her make her own mistakes now that she is an adult."

"You think it is a mistake?" I asked.

"Well, yes and no," Vivica admitted. "I am all for love, but she is so young, and he is on tour. It seems a little ridiculous."

"And Mr. Goldstein?" I asked.

"He is beside himself since it is during the tour. However, he is honoring Ricki's wishes and has hired a wedding planner for the whole affair. Invites have been sent to everyone, and yours should arrive this week with your itinerary," she said.

"Los Angeles is a long way. I hope I can still write while I am traveling," I said, resigning myself to the trip.

"Oh, it is not in L.A. It will be in her hometown," Vivica corrected.

"Snowchute?" I shouted.

"I know, I feel the same way," Vivica admitted. "I still have horrible nightmares about that place. In my nightmares, an avalanche buries me."

I shivered as I recalled the incident. Did I want to return to the place where we almost died? Why not? It was Annie's home, and she would want everyone in her life to be a part of their big day. Perhaps this would break me through my writer's block. Despite leaving civilization once more, this could be a good thing.

"When is the wedding?" I asked.

"In two weeks," she said.

"What? I don't even have proper clothes," I said. "I can't be ready that soon. When do I have to leave?"

"That is why I called. You must leave at the end of the week. It is all detailed in your itinerary," she said. "I know it is last minute and I

apologize. Like I said, my dad would have just sent an invitation. That is why I called. There is one more thing," she said, sensing my distress.

"What is that?" I said.

"Ricki wants you to be his best man," she said.

I sensed her tensing before my response, but I resigned myself to this new adventure. "Why me? Isn't that for someone close to him? What about Laser?"

"He says you are his best friend, Harry," Vivica said.

How could that be? I only spent a few weeks with him. True, I knew his life better than everyone other than his brother, Vivica, and her father, but did that qualify me as a best friend?

"I am flattered but confused," I said. "Why wouldn't he ask your father?"

Vivica was silent for a few moments, but answered. "My father said no," she said with regret hanging in her words. "He said he thought of Ricki as a son and that a father should not be the best man. Look, I spoke with Ricki for a long time, and he was adamant it be you."

"You tried talking him out of it," I said.

"I am sorry, Harry, but I did," she admitted. "However, now I am happy it's you. He was the one who insisted I tell you."

"Shouldn't he have told me himself?" I said. "I could have talked him out of the idea."

"I think that is why he wanted me to tell you," she said. "Please, Harry, I have never seen him so happy before. Regardless of what everyone thinks about this wedding, he is happy."

I stroked Finn, who gave me a little love nip. Maybe this would be what I needed. Did I have a choice? I couldn't hurt Ricki and felt sorry he thought of me as his best friend. We hadn't even talked since I returned home. Still, he was always kind to me and honest when telling me his story. I thought of him as a friend rather than an employer.

"How is the tour going?" I said, delaying my answer.

"The tour is great, everyone loves his new album," she said. "Well, Harry, what should I tell him?" she insisted.

"Can I tell him?" I asked.

"Only if it is a yes," she warned. "I want nothing to upset him right now."

"Yes," I said.

"Whew! That is a load off my shoulders," she said with relief.

"I don't have a tuxedo, or anything nice enough to be a best man," I said. "It may be hard to line something up on such short notice."

"Don't worry, Harry. We will take care of everything, you just show up," she said.

"One more thing," I blurted. "I would like you to pay for my two friends, Georgie and Penelope to attend. Everything, travel, accommodations, food..."

"My father will fight it, but I agree with you, Harry," she said. "I will send their itineraries and tickets. Just send me their information. I will send you Ricki's number so you can tell him yourself. Thank you, Harry."

"Thank you for telling me and being honest," I replied. "It will be great to see all of you again."

"I agree, can't wait to meet your friends," she said. "I will be in touch. Call Ricki tonight. He will not be performing tonight but traveling."

"I will," I said, happy for this turn in events. Having Georgie and Pen with me would make it far more bearable.

We hung up, and I stared at Finn, who ignored me as he sharpened his beak against his perch.

"Well, Finn, I am leaving once more, and you will have to put up with my aunt," I said.

Finn lifted his head as I mentioned my aunt. He spread his wings wide and flapped them. "Bugger!" he squawked.

\* \* \*

Georgie ordered a round of drinks before taking his seat. Pen was abstaining and had requested an orange soda. After I revealed the details of the trip, I suspected she might change her mind. I hoped for excitement but wasn't certain after I told them we were going to Snowchute.

"Alright, mate, what news do you have this time? You writing another book for another star?" Georgie said.

"No, not another book," I said. "A continuation of the current one."

Pen raised her eyebrows. "A continuation?"

"Bloody hell, how long this book going to take?" Georgie said. "It's been a year!"

"Six months, but yes, they take about a year to do them right," I said. "I only have a couple more chapters, and then it is off to the editor."

"So, what is the news?" Pen pressed.

"I am going back to America," I said with a faint smile.

"Oh, my!" Pen looked concerned, and who could blame her after my last visit. "Whatever for?"

"Hang on now," Georgie said, raising his hand. "I think this is a good thing. Maybe he will drum up more business, although I don't think they'll want to wait a year for their bloody book."

I ignored the jab and smiled. "Perhaps, but that is not why I am returning. I am going to watch a fitting end to Ricki's story."

"You lost me, mate," Georgie said.

"He is going to watch something that needs to be in the book," Pen said. "What is it, Harry?"

"Before I say, promise you'll keep this secret. This is not public information," I said.

"Ricki is getting married!" Pen said. "Oh, sorry, Harry."

I scanned the pub, but no one had heard her outburst. "Look, it is important we don't leak this just yet, but yes, Ricki is getting married."

Georgie grinned from ear to ear. "He's marrying that little girl."

I sighed. "Yes, but she is an adult now."

Georgie nodded and winked at me. "Sure."

"Harry, you going to the wedding?" Pen asked. "That is fantastic."

"Ricki wants it in the book," I said. "When I talked to him, he said this was the high point of his life, and the book would not be complete without it."

"You talked with him again?" Georgie said. "Fantastic, did you ask about any of his famous friends? I mean, you need more work after this one."

"No, I did not talk to him about more work," I said exasperated. "Georgie, you are not my agent, and no one would even hire me until they see how his book turns out," I stopped as Janice brought over our drinks.

"You going to America again, luv," Janice said as she set down the drinks. "I would love to go back to America."

"You've been to America?" I said, overlooking she had somehow heard us. She was uncanny.

"You don't know a lot about me, luv," she said, grinning. "Me and some friends traveled round America following The Cure back in the

eighties. We were proper young trollops back then,” she said, laughing.

“You are my dream woman, Janice,” Georgie said, holding his heart. “Tell us some of your sordid tales.”

She slapped Georgie’s shoulder. “Use your imagination. We saw over ten shows. It was like we were on bloody tour with them. Those were crazy times.”

I hoped this time would not be crazy for me. “Well, yes, I am going back to America for additional research,” I said, bringing us back on topic. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone.”

“Don’t worry, Harry, I won’t tell anyone you are going to the wedding,” she said, winking as she moved back to the bar.

I lowered my head, disgusted with myself. I should have invited Georgie and Pen over to my house, but then I would have had to tidy up. When writing a book, housekeeping took a back seat.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Pen said, putting her hand on my arm. “Janice won’t let it get out.”

“I know. I am more worried about Mike,” I said.

“Mike is a good man, Harry. He wouldn’t do that to one of his best customers,” Georgie said. “Raise your glass, it is time for a toast.”

Georgie loved giving toasts to almost anything. He was the true antithesis of me, and that was why I loved him so much. He brought laughter into a world that was often devoid of it.

“What to this time?” Pen asked.

“To my good friend..., I mean our good friend, Harry, may he find success as a writer!”

“Here, here!” Pen said, smiling before she took a drink.

We all drank, and it choked me up. I hadn’t even told them the best part. Well, it would be the best part for me.

“Thank you, mate. You are the best,” I said.

Georgie laughed and leaned over to give me a big wet kiss on my cheek. “Sorry, mate, I am already spoken for!” he said laughing.

I laughed at his wry sense of humor. “Damn, back to the drawing board,” I joked. We all laughed, and it felt so much like home, I was homesick before I even left. “Look, there is something more I wanted to tell you about this trip.”

Georgie interrupted. “Let me guess, you want us to look after that fucking bird of yours.”

“No,” I said. “In fact, he swears plenty well without your help.”

“Bloody right, he swears!” Georgie said. “I taught him proper.”

"No, my aunt can watch Finn. That isn't it," I said. "You two are coming to America with me."

They were both silent and stared before turning towards each other. I was expecting more reaction.

Pen turned back to me. "To America?" she asked. "To the wedding?"

I nodded.

Her eyes started tearing up, and she excused herself from the table and headed to the loo.

"Doesn't she want to go?" I asked in disbelief.

"That's not it, mate," Georgie said in a serious tone. "Look, I might as well tell you since you're my best mate and all. Last weekend, she asked me if we were ever going to get married."

"And what did you say?" I said surprised.

"Nothing. I froze up and didn't know what to say," he admitted before taking an enormous drink.

"Georgie, she loves you," I said. "Don't you love her? I see how you look at her."

"Yes, I bloody love her!" he said. "Sorry, I am just not good at this kind of thing."

"How could you be, you've never done this before," I said.

He eyed me with a blank expression.

"What?" I said, realizing what the silence meant. "You have?"

He nodded. "In university," he said. "You remember, Bethany?"

"How could I forget?" I said. "You two were like rabbits."

They were inseparable for two years until they broke it off. I never realized it involved feelings. I just assumed it was young lust.

"You never told me why you two broke it off," I said.

"I asked her to marry me, Harry," he said with a frown. "And she rejected me."

"Did she say why?" I asked.

He turned away, thinking, but admitted the truth. "Her father said no."

"Why does he get to have a say?" I said. "That shouldn't be a showstopper."

"You would bloody think!" Georgie said. "But he threatened to cut her off from the family."

"Cut her off?" I asked. "How can he do that?"

"Harry! She came from money, and he would cut her off from it forever."

"Oh," I said. "I am so sorry, mate."

"Nah, it wouldn't have worked anyway, and I suppose her father saw that better than the two of us. She's part of the upper crust, and I am not," he said.

"Well, if it helps, you are crusty to me," I said with a straight face.

"You bugger!" Georgie said, laughing.

"Look, Pen loves you, and you love Pen," I said. "No pain this time, only love. I don't think you realize how much I admire the two of you."

"Us?" he said surprised. "Why?"

"You have genuine love, Georgie, and I have never felt that," I said.

"Sorry, mate, I know she was yours first," Georgie said.

"No, that is not it," I insisted. "She and I didn't have what you two have. I want that."

"Shush, she is coming back," Georgie said, grabbing his bitters.

"Ask her," I whispered. "You alright, Pen?"

She sat down with Georgie's help. "Sorry, I was just surprised. It's like going to a Royal Wedding, isn't it? But, Harry, we can't afford to go to America."

"Course we can, luv," Georgie said. "I have plenty of money for a trip."

"Well, I don't have a dress, or anything to wear," she insisted. "I don't know if I can take off work."

"Pen," I said, trying to calm her. "It is all worked out and paid for."

"What?" she asked, confused. "How?"

"I told Vivica and Ricki that I wanted you two to be there with me. It is all paid for. Even a new dress for you and a tuxedo for Georgie," I said. "Airfare, accommodations, and food are all paid for."

"Really, mate?" Georgie asked. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you will come!" I urged. Their indecision was killing me. I needed their support while I bumbled my way through being a best man, and they just stared. "Come on, it will be fantastic," I insisted.

Pen turned to Georgie with questioning eyes. "I have always wanted to see Los Angeles," she whispered.

"Damn right!" Georgie said smiling. "We'll go with you, Harry!"

Pen turned giddy as Georgie gave them the thumbs up.

"When is it?" Pen asked.

"Well, we have to leave this weekend," I admitted. "You will need to dress for hot days and cool nights. Apparently, it gets cool at night in the mountains."

“Wait, what?” Georgie said confused. “I thought Los Angeles was on the ocean?”

“It is,” Pen said. “They are just going into the surrounding mountains for the wedding, right Harry?”

“Yes, and no,” I said. “Since Ricki is marrying Annie, they wanted the wedding in her hometown.”

“I thought Annie was from Colorado?” Pen asked.

“She is,” I said. “We are going to Snowchute.”

“Bring my bloody skis more like it!” Georgie exclaimed. “I don’t want a fucking avalanche to bury me on my first trip to America!”

“It is summer, mate. They don’t have avalanches in the summer,” I said, trying to allay their fears. “It is safe.”

“And how do you know this?” Georgie demanded.

“Vivica told me,” I said lying. I didn’t want them to know she was just as afraid as we were. I had searched online for pictures of Colorado in the summer, and they showed people hiking, biking, and rafting down rivers. Didn’t sound like avalanches were a thing. “It is warm, like thirty degrees in the summer,” I said.

“Warmer than here,” Georgie said.

“Yes, but cooler in the night,” I said. “Bring a light coat for the evenings.”

“Bloody hell,” Georgie said. “First time in America and I am going to the bleeding wilderness. A fucking bear will probably eat me.”

“Bears?” Pen asked, uncertain.

“Yes, there are bears, but you will never see one,” I said, lying again. I had read the bears ate out of city trash bins and broke into houses or stores occasionally, but that was too much information for them to process. “Look, we are staying at the ski resort, and it is a beautiful place with luxurious suites. You and Georgie will share a suite with its own hot tub.”

Georgie perked up. “Our own hot tub?” he said, smiling at Pen.

“Yes, with your own bar,” I said to sweeten the pot.

“Come on, Pen, it will be a romantic vacation,” Georgie said. “I won’t let a bear eat you.”

She looked concerned but was warming to the idea. She turned back to the bar and yelled for Janice.

“You need something, luv?” Janice asked as she strolled up to our table.

“I need a proper drink,” she said, handing the orange soda back to Janice.



“Pint of bitters, then?” Janice asked.

“Stronger,” Pen said. “Bring me a dirty gin martini straight up.”

“You alright, luv?” Janice said, surprised. “Never seen ya order nothing that strong.”

Pen nodded and smiled. “I used to drink them all the time.”

Janice cocked her head before walking back to the bar with a grin.

“Used to drink them all the time?” Georgie said mocking. “Since when?”

“You two weren’t the only ones who went to university,” she said.

Georgie and I looked at each other in shock.

I was stunned by the size of my room. After the small room last winter, this felt palatial. I recalled Mercy walking into the small room while I was naked, and it caused something to stir within me. I wondered where she was. This room was a fourth-floor suite with a small kitchen, separate bedroom, en suite bath, and a posh living area with a large screen tele, leather couch, and dining room table for ten guests. Complete overkill for me.

The travel to Snowchute was uneventful, and seeing green mountains was a vast change from the snowy tundra six months earlier. It felt like I'd been transported to the Swiss Alps in a recreation of *The Sound of Music*. Even the temperature was a mild twenty-six degrees Celsius, and I realized I was overdressed. I didn't even own shorts, just a swimsuit which I hadn't worn in many years. Now I wish I had brought it.

The resort was quiet this time of year, though a few families were enjoying the summer activities. I didn't fish, hike or bike, but the outdoor pool looked inviting from my small patio. The pool had been open last winter, but the thought of swimming in a blizzard had never occurred to me.

My bags were all laid out on my bed, but I deferred unpacking until later. I had promised Georgie and Pen a tour before lunch, and I looked forward to it myself. I removed the ridiculous sweater I was wearing and went with only trousers and a short-sleeved shirt. I might still be warm, but far better than when we arrived.

I was quite disappointed when I did not see Mercy out front to greet us. I thought at least in the summer she wouldn't slip and fall into me. However, I supposed some part of me wished she would. I hadn't asked, but I sensed she was no longer at the resort after the winter ski season had ended. Did anyone know where she had gone? I put it on my list to ask a server in the pub.

Ricki hadn't arrived, but Vivica was here coordinating plans for the wedding. Rick and Mr. Goldstein would arrive in two days, and that gave me time to prepare as best man. I'd never been best man and wasn't certain what to do.

I had combed the internet for suggestions, but a stag party seemed out of character for Ricki. Despite what I knew about Ricki's life, I

didn't really know him, at least not like I knew Georgie. I had asked Georgie for advice, but when he mentioned strippers, I stopped listening. Georgie wasn't always crass, but he often navigated the path that promised physical pleasures.

I was more of a prude, or a boring admiral, as Georgie liked to call me. I wasn't a slave to tradition or other rubbish, but I believed I had a moral sense of decorum despite humble roots. Ricki loved Annie, and I wanted this to be a special event.

Talking with Vivica might help me, and I made a mental note to invite her for a drink later that evening. I hadn't yet met with Annie, and I looked forward to seeing her. I only knew the simple facts of her life, and I wanted to understand her personality so I could bring her to life on the pages.

My writer's block still plagued me, and I was praying their wedding would pry me loose from its grip. I eyed my laptop sitting on the table and shook my head. I wouldn't write anything while here, but I had brought it along with a small glimmer of hope.

I grabbed the keycard to my suite and headed down the hallway to Georgie and Pen's suite. I didn't have to knock on the door as their voices carried into the hallway. I pushed their door open and caught them kissing in a tight embrace. Their suite was larger than mine, with the promised hot tub in the master bathroom.

I cleared my throat. "Sorry to interrupt, but I thought I might give you that tour."

They separated and Georgie looked happier than winning the darting championships.

"Bloody, flipping hell!" Georgie said. "This is living like a king. Just the way I always pictured it."

"That would make me a queen," Pen said, laughing. "I always wanted to be royal."

"And so you are, my dear," Georgie said, bowing graciously.

Pen curtsied in response. "My lord."

"Alright, let us not forget we are in the land of the rebels. No royals here," I grinned.

"Of course there are, we have arrived to bring them back into the royal fold," Georgie said, flourishing his hand magnanimously.

"Not likely," I said, laughing. "Come on then, my lord."

We made our way to the foyer where I secured a shuttle into town. The shuttle driver was a far cry from Laser. He was young, with long hair and a boyish face. I guessed no more than twenty-one.

The mountain views and flowering fields were picturesque on the ride into town, and I began to appreciate why people loved this land so much. Still, I missed the sounds of London despite the less than pristine air. Here, the air smelled of pine trees and earth, but lacked a crucial ingredient, oxygen.

"You feel the thin air, Pen?" I asked.

"A bit," she said, smiling. "But it is so beautiful, I can't believe we are so far from civilization. The wildflowers are simply lovely."

"Don't forget the bears, my love," Georgie said, all serious.

She slapped him lightly. "Don't be so cruel."

"Sorry, but I miss the city," Georgie admitted. "It is too quiet here."

The driver interrupted us. "You aren't from around here, huh?"

Georgie grinned. "No, we are from Denver, lad," he said containing a laugh.

"Really?" The driver said. "I thought somewhere farther, like Australia or something."

"Honey, did you pack me didgeridoo?" Georgie said laughing.

The young man looked unhappy.

"Sorry," I said. "My friend's never been out of England. I think he is nervous," I said, to ease the tension.

"I guess you don't sound Australian," the driver admitted. "Sorry for my confusion. It is my first time working at the resort. I'm a local."

Georgie rolled his eyes. "Sorry, lad. I was just having a bit of fun. You live in a lovely place," he leaned forward. "Tell me, if one wanted to see a bear, how might one do that?"

Pen slapped him again. "Georgie!"

The driver didn't skip a beat. "Just go to the dumpsters on the left side of the resort at night. They raid our trash despite the 'bear-proof' trash cans."

"So, you have seen a bear?" Georgie asked.

"Shot one last year," the driver said. "My first one."

"Shot it?" Georgie said surprised. "You mean you hunt them?"

"Oh, sure," the driver said. "Among other things."

"And what do you do with them after you shoot them?" He pressed.

The driver smiled in the rearview mirror. "Skin them. I have a bear skin rug in my room, and the meat is quite tasty."

"Good, God! You eat them?" Pen said in disbelief.

"Oh, sure," the young man said. "Along with deer, elk, and moose."

It was obvious Georgie had a growing respect for the young man. Hunting and killing quarry was probably his dream. It was the ultimate expression of manhood.

"Well, you are an impressive young man, my friend," Georgie said, sitting back. "I would love to see what they taste like. My name is Georgie, by the way. This is my luv, Pen, and my best mate, Harry."

"Oh, everybody knows Harry," the young man said. "My name is Justin, glad to meet you all."

"Everyone knows Harry?" Pen asked.

"Oh, sure," Justin agreed. "He is going to be Ricki Heart's best man."

"So much for a secret," Georgie said, frowning.

Justin went on. "Everyone at the resort knows. They briefed us before anyone arrived. I was so excited to hear you were holding the wedding here. Have you finished the book?"

How did this young man know so much? Then I realized we had created a stir the last time we were here. I imagined the local papers were filled with stories for months. It had been a big deal for a small town in Colorado. No wonder everyone knew who I was. It was daunting, but in a good way.

"I am glad to be back, Justin, but the book is not yet finished. The wedding will be the last chapter," I said, realizing it no longer mattered if anyone knew.

"How exciting," Justin said. "I'll be there, you know."

"Will you?" Georgie said.

"Sure," Justin said. "They're paying extra to work the wedding. They're holding it at the resort's corporate retreat."

"I am familiar with that place," I said. "I didn't realize that was the venue."

"Only place big enough with security," Justin said. "Deep in the forest, away from prying eyes."

I doubted that would stop the press. I pictured helicopters and camouflaged reporters creeping through the trees to snatch whatever glimpses they could.

"I am so excited to see it," Pen said, grinning.

"Me, too!" Justin said, grinning back. "It is the talk of the entire valley. After the last time Ricki Heart was here, we didn't think we would see anything that exciting again. We were wrong!"

I agreed with his assessment. It would be exciting. I just hoped for different reasons than last time.

"Do you know Annie?" I asked, probing a bit before meeting her again.

"Everyone knows Annie," Justin said. "Her father is the sheriff here."

"Yes, I have met him," I said.

"Oh, of course you have, after Ricki was locked up last time. That sure was exciting!" he said.

"Yes, very exciting," I said. "Did you attend school with Annie? If so, what can you tell me about her?"

"Oh, I see, you want to know more about her for the book," Justin said. "Well, yes, I attended school with her, though I graduated two years ago. I don't know, she wasn't any different from other local girls dreaming about leaving here."

"And how did you know that?" Georgie asked. "You read her diary?"

"Oh, no, sir, I would never," he stopped. "Ah, I see what you are doing. You are having fun with me again."

"Yes, he is, but how did you know she wanted to leave?" I asked. With Justin being two years older, Annie's aspirations didn't seem like something he would be privy to.

"Well, we had sophomore English together," he said. "We had to do a presentation on what we wanted to do after high school. She said she wanted to move away and sing. I guess she is going to do that now. Totally sic!"

"Yes, very sic," Georgie agreed. "How is it you had sophomore English with her when you are two years older, mate?"

"I wasn't very good at English, so I had to take it over again my senior year," he admitted.

"Don't worry, lad, you speak English very well and I should know," Georgie said winking at him.

Justin smiled. "You poking fun at me again?"

"Yes, I am," Georgie said. "But I like you, Justin. Is there anywhere we can get some of that bear you like?"

Justin slowed the shuttle and came to a stop at the end of the main street. "Well, I have heard there is a place about forty miles away that serves wild game, but I haven't been there. The resort concierge should know about it."

"Very good, lad," Georgie said with a smile. "Thank you for the excellent ride."

Georgie held out his hand to Pen as she stood. "My lady," he said. "Be a good a mate, Harry, and tip this young squire."

Pen giggled as Georgie continued his royal charade.

I handed Justin five dollars as I walked past. "Thank you, Justin, don't mind my friend, he is very excited to be here."

"I don't blame him, the wedding will be awesome!" Justin said, ignoring Georgie's theatrics.

The door shut behind me, and Justin drove back to the resort. I looked over at Georgie and Pen as they eyed a store front specializing in Native American art. I supposed it was something new and unusual to them. It was for me.

\* \* \*

My day with Georgie and Pen was wonderful but tiring. The thin air exacerbated the situation. Despite that, I was ready for a 'micro-brew' before dinner. Georgie and Pen were having dinner in their room, so I called Vivica to see if she was interested in joining me. She was not in her room and didn't answer her cell phone.

Probably just as well. I wouldn't be great company and wanted to retire early. Between the jet lag, thin air and time change, I was physically exhausted. I wanted to ensure I was at my best for the wedding.

I walked into the pub, and only the bartender watched tennis on the tele. He was a handsome, yet rugged man with a thick beard and athletic build, sipping tonic water while watching the match. It was Wimbledon, and I felt a familiar pang of homesickness.

I grabbed a barstool, and he turned around to serve me. "Good afternoon, sir. I am Sunset, what can I get you?"

"Sunset?" I asked. "That is an unusual name."

"My parents were hippies in New Mexico," he said without offense. "My mom said I was as warm and beautiful as a sunset."

"Yes, quite touching," I said. "My name is Harry."

"Named after the Prince?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes," I said, surprised. "Most Americans think I am named after Harry Potter."

"Never read it," Sunset said. "What'll you have?"

"Well, my friend has been telling me about craft beers here in America, called 'micro-brews'. Do you have any of those?"

"Yes, we do," Sunset said. "You came to the right place. Colorado is one of the best places for micro-brews. I used to work at one in Durango."

"Excellent," I said. "What do you recommend?"

"Well, we have hoppy bitter IPAs, roasted malt ales, and some fruity concoctions. What is your preference?" he asked.

"Well, let me try one of your IPAs," I said. "What does IPA stand for?"

"India Pale Ale," he said. "Contains a great deal of hops to make it bitter, but good hops also impart unique flavor profiles. Some say it is almost like scotches, I mean with the variety of hops."

"Sounds great," I said.

Sunset smiled and grabbed a glass to fill from the tap. I eyed the tele as the camera zoomed in on Prince William and Princess Kate enjoying the match.

Sunset saw my interest. "Making you homesick?"

"A bit," I said. "Colorado is a tad different from London," I took a sip of the beer and rather enjoyed the bitter flavor. It was different and delicious. "Very good," I said, indicating the beer.

"Like I said, you came to the right place," Sunset said, smiling. "You play tennis?"

"Oh, God no," I said a bit too quickly. "Sorry, I have nothing against it, but I am more of a book and darts sort of guy."

"I know," he said. "You're that writer, Harry Holden."

"Yes," I said.

"What do you think about Ricki and Annie?" he asked. "You think she is gold digging?"

"Gold digging?" I asked. "No, I most certainly do not."

"Sorry," Sunset said, raising his hands. "It isn't uncommon in a town like Snowchute. Young girls enamored with stardom and fame. You ever watched America's Got Talent?"

"I have never heard of it," I said.

"Well, if you watch it, you see all these Americans from around the country vying for a chance at stardom. Surely you must have something similar in England."

"I suppose so, though I don't watch tele much," I said.

"Well, Annie's got a fine voice, but so do a million others," Sunset said. "That is all I am thinking. Maybe she wants to take an easier route than going on television."

"Do you know her?" I asked, hoping she wasn't a gold digger.



"Annie?" he said. "No, just heard the story about last winter."

"Well, she is very talented, and they are very much in love," I said, trying to defend her although I didn't know her. Maybe she was a gold digger. Is that what bothered Mr. Goldstein? I supposed it was a legitimate concern, though I never got that sense from Annie. Then again, I didn't understand their love, so who knew?

"Not trying to offend, just wondering," Sunset said. "You want to order something to eat?"

"Well, sure," I said, deciding an early dinner in the pub was a fine idea.

He handed me a menu and turned back to watch tennis.

\* \* \*

Vivica's call woke me, and it was far too late for me to still be in bed. The jet lag was taking its toll, and I was certain the micro-brews hadn't helped. They were stronger than I had imagined, and after five of them, I had stumbled up the stairs.

"You up, Harry?" she said with excitement. "Annie and I would like to take you to breakfast. A small place downtown."

"Good morning," I said while my eyes adjusted to the bright sunshine pouring around the blinds. "I will need to shower first."

"No problem," she said. "I'll meet you in the lobby in fifteen minutes."

"Alright," I said.

I put the phone down and walked into the bathroom. A shower and shave did wonders to perk me up, but I needed a cup of tea. I dressed in the lightest clothing I had and looked awake and presentable.

I was excited to meet with Annie. The conversation with Sunset had planted a seed of suspicion I didn't appreciate. I hoped that when I met Annie, she would dispel these suspicions.

Despite being late when I entered the lobby, Vivica wasn't there. I looked around confused until the woman at the front desk told me she was waiting outside.

I went through the doors and spotted a bright blue convertible idling with Vivica behind the wheel. She waved to me. "Get in. Annie will meet us there."

I got in and buckled the seatbelt. I didn't know what to expect with Vivica driving, but I suspected it would be better than driving with Georgie.

“Good morning,” I said as she pulled away. I had never ridden in a convertible before, it was windy, but pleasant.

“I wanted you and Annie to spend some time together so you can get to know her,” Vivica said. “I realized you really know nothing about her. I imagine you need that to capture their relationship in the book.”

“Quite right,” I said. “I wanted to spend some time with her for that very reason.”

“Well, I will join you for breakfast, but then I am off to continue wedding preparations while you two spend the day together. I hope you don’t mind meeting her dad again.”

“Well, it is necessary,” I said, feeling anxious. He was a large and imposing figure, and his lack of active support for this wedding set me on edge.

“I know what you mean,” Vivica said, laughing. “He is a scary guy.”

When we walked into the diner, Annie stood and waved us over. “Vivica, over here!” she yelled.

“Well, she isn’t a shy one,” Vivica said, waving back at her.

I smiled and followed Vivica. Vivica hugged Annie as we met her at a corner booth. “I brought him as requested,” she said.

“That you did,” Annie said. “Hello, Harry. Great to see you again.”

“Hello,” I said, shaking her hand. “Glad we will get some time together today.”

“Damn straight!” she said as we sat down. “I want you to see everything about me and my life in Snowchute.”

“That will be fantastic,” I agreed.

“Order the Lumberjack breakfast. It is their best deal and fantastic,” Annie said, pointing at the menu.

“Y’all ready to order, or do you need a few minutes,” a young woman with red hair tied in a bun asked.

“Give us a minute, Trudy,” Annie said. “You want any coffee, Harry?”

I was still eyeing the large menu and looked up, not sure what she had asked. “What?”

“Coffee?” Annie said.

“No, thank you, I’ll take some hot tea please,” I said. “Earl Grey, if you have any.”

“Coffee for me,” Vivica said.

"I'll take a cranberry juice," Annie said, smiling. "Thanks, Trudy."

Our server smiled and headed off to get our drinks.

"Well, how does it feel to be back in Snowchute, Harry?" Annie asked with her girlish smile. "I'll bet you thought you would never come here again, huh?"

I smiled. "Yes, it was a surprise when Vivica called me."

"I know, right?" Annie said. "Vivica is such a wonderful person," she grabbed Vivica's hand. "She is a blessing with this wedding."

"My pleasure," Vivica said, sounding genuine. "Ricki is so lucky to be marrying someone as nice as you."

"Stop," she said, frowning. "I am the lucky one. Who knew?"

"No one," Vivica agreed.

"I remember that first time I served you, Harry. And you too, Vivica," Annie said. "You were right, Vivica. He was looking for someone unknown and out of the spotlight. I am so fortunate he came to my town."

I smiled without comment and wondered what Vivica was thinking about Annie throwing her words back at her. It was probably a hard pill to swallow considering her own feelings for Ricki. Still, she kept smiling, and I felt like she did like Annie.

"So, tell me, Annie, how has it been since he proposed to you?" I asked. "Surely, after everything that has happened, it surprised you."

"Not really, but I was surprised it happened so fast," she said. "Of course, he had to wait until I was eighteen, or get my father's permission. My father has not warmed up to Ricki yet."

"Is that difficult for you?" I asked.

"Not really," she said matter of fact. "Now that I am eighteen and out of school, I can do whatever I like."

"Yes, that is a big stage in your life," I said. "Have you thought about what marriage will be like?"

"Shoot, my parents married after my mom graduated," Annie said. "My father was three years older than her, but says he loved her when he was in high school. That meant she was only in junior high school. I don't think he has much to complain about."

"It is likely different when it is your own child," I suggested.

"I suppose," she said, "but I don't think the age is the problem. I think he is worried about all the fame and media."

"Are you worried?" I asked. "It can be quite overwhelming."

"Now, don't go scaring her, Harry," Vivica said. "It can be a little crazy sometimes, but not that bad."

"I think I am ready," Annie said. "I suppose it is like anything new in life, you don't really know until you try it."

Trudy returned with our drinks and took our orders. I decided against the Lumberjack breakfast in favor of something lighter. I felt good but didn't want to feel weighed down all day.

"So where will we be going today?" I asked.

"Everywhere," Annie said. "You ever been four-wheeling?"

"Like a car?" I asked.

"No, like off roading," Annie said. "I am taking you into the mountains to some of the most beautiful places in America."

I was nervous but held my initial comments. "I see."

"Don't worry," Annie said, sensing my distress. "My new Jeep can take us anywhere."

"Great," I said, trying to sound excited.

"New Jeep?" Vivica asked.

"Heck yeah!" Annie said. "Ricki got it for me for my high school graduation present. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Very cool," Vivica said, though I sensed this surprised her.

"It just showed up at our front door one day with a very wonderful note from Ricki," Annie said. "At first, my father refused to allow me to accept it, but I won him over."

"Wonderful," I said. "Can't wait to ride in it, or is it ride on it?"

"In it, unless the top is off," Annie said. "You want to take the top off?"

"No, no, that is alright," I said with an irrational fear of mountain animals ripping us from the vehicle and mauling us. "I would rather not see my death coming."

"Death?" Annie said, alarmed before laughing. "Good one, Harry."

Trudy returned with our food, and I was quite happy I had not chosen the bigger meal. I suspected I might lose my breakfast on this exciting four-wheeling adventure. I braced myself for an unusual but productive day. If nothing else, I would know Annie better, and maybe myself.

The Jeep hit another rock protruding from the earth as Annie navigated through the rough terrain on an interminable climb to the clouds. The road to the mountains was rough but acceptable. But this bloody four-wheeling nonsense was more than I bargained for.

An Allison McCawlie song blared through the radio, and Annie sang along as though it were her own. I grimaced again as the Jeep bounced over another boulder that dared to impede our progress.

“You like Allison?” Annie yelled over the sound of the roaring Jeep engine and groaning wheels fighting to touch the ground.

I couldn’t even hold my head straight to look her in the eyes, though I hoped she kept hers on the trail.

“I am more of a classical music lover,” I said before biting my tongue as the Jeep threw me against the double restraints holding me inside.

“Classical, huh?” Annie said, mulling it over. “I guess you are British.”

I ignored the mischaracterization of my lineage and withheld the obvious news of British rock exported around the world over many decades. I once listened to such music and occasionally liked a tune or two from my past, but reading and writing made me more introspective, and I now preferred Bach or Beethoven over the melodies of Sound Garden or Coldplay.

“Yes, very British,” I agreed with a wry grin. “How much further?”

“Almost there,” she said. “How do you like the ride?”

“Is that what we are doing, going for a ride?” I said with sarcasm.

She missed my sarcasm and laughed. “I know, right? This is awesome!”

The road smoothed out as we neared the top of the mountain. She wound her way through pines until we stopped in front of an incredible vista overlooking the entire valley and mountain range in the distance. It was later in the afternoon and the sun was behind us, lighting the distant mountains in a brilliant glow as the valley slowly succumbed to darkness.

“Isn’t this incredible?” Annie said, turning off the engine before getting out of the Jeep.

“Truly,” I said.

“This is God’s country,” Annie said. “That is what my grandmother always said. She was third generation Colorado, so that makes me fifth generation. We have been here a long time.”

I wrangled with my double seat belt but couldn’t get it unlatched. Annie saw my struggles and came to my aid. Within seconds she had me free.

“Like a racing car,” I said with relief. Despite being stopped on solid earth, my body kept reeling with the awful lurching that brought us to this heavenly spot.

Annie walked over to the edge of the mountain ridge and sat down on a large boulder placed there as if by some giant. It was a dusty gray granite covered in a light green lichen, but provided a perfect seat for admiring the view.

“My parents would bring us here when I was little. I barely remember it since I was so young, but I still remember mama placing the blanket on the ground for our picnic,” she said. There was an underlying melancholy in the way she spoke about her mother.

“You miss your mother?” I asked. This was something I understood. I missed my parents every day.

“Truth is, I hardly remember her. She died when I was only seven, but I remember enough to miss her,” she said with a weak smile.

“I miss my parents,” I said. “You probably didn’t know, but I lost my parents in an accident when I was eleven.”

“I am so sorry, Harry,” Annie said with genuine concern. “Who raised you?”

“My aunt,” I said. “She did her best, despite never wanting children, so I suppose it was hard for her.”

“It was hard for my dad,” she said. “He works hard in our community, and he didn’t really know how to raise a girl. I’ve been a little wild.”

“A little wild?” I asked.

“Well, setting aside last winter, and I am so sorry for that, I have a somewhat checkered past,” she admitted.

“Care to share any of those checkers?” I prodded.

She smiled. “You are so easy to talk to, Harry. I keep forgetting you’re here to write about me,” she said.

“And Ricki,” I added.

“Of course,” she nodded. “Well, let’s see, I’ve been suspended from school more times than I can count for skipping school, fighting,

smoking, drinking, inappropriate behavior with a boy, you know, that kind of stuff.”

Growing up with Georgie, I knew about some of that. “Sure, you were a young rebel,” I said.

“Well, I suppose you could call it that,” she agreed. “However, I was just having fun. I don’t always take things serious. My dad says it will catch up with me some day. I suppose it did.”

“You mean, meeting Ricki?” I said.

“Yeah, but more than that. I fell in love with someone I hardly know. Maybe it was God’s way of taming me,” she said.

“Really? Are you very religious?” I asked.

“Not as much as most around here,” she said. “I believe in God and heaven, but I don’t go to church all that much. Too boring.”

“Ricki believes like you,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, “he grew up Catholic. It just about broke my father when he found out.”

“Your father doesn’t like Catholics?” I asked.

“He calls them idolaters,” she said. “You know, statues of the Virgin Mary and crosses. I suppose it makes sense. He was raised in a pretty strict Baptist family.”

“What do you think about Catholics?” I pressed.

“I don’t care what religion you are, only that you are nice and care for others. That is my religion. I think that’s what Jesus was telling everyone,” she said. “Anyway, my mama broke him of many of his more conservative views about the world. She was a free spirit like me.”

“Well, I am glad to hear it. Sounds like you have a very sound perspective on the world,” I said. “I remember you singing with Ricki at the resort, and I have since wondered if you have written any of your own music? Was that your plan, to go into the music business?”

“Well, I suppose I always thought about it like most teenagers, but living in Snowchute made it a hard dream. Other than the resort and Lucky’s Bar, there aren’t a lot of places to sing.”

“Do you write your own music?” I asked.

“Sure do,” she said. “I have a guitar like everyone else, and I play pretty good. Good enough for my simple songs.”

“Is Allison McCawlie one of your favorite artists?” I said.

She smiled. “How did you figure that out?”

“Can you sing me one of her songs?” I said. “Being up here must inspire you.”

“It does,” she said. “I’ll sing you a song.”

She cleared her throat and inhaled before beginning.

*There isn’t a time I don’t see your face, a time I can’t feel your love.*

*You are always beside me and always will guide me as I step through this life of mine.*

*I see beauty through your eyes, and compassion through your words.*

*But I have never seen heaven until I imagined you walking with me on this earth.*

*You created me, made me, but I am my very own,*

*But without your love and sweet embrace, nowhere will ever be home.*

She stopped and stared down at the ground. “That’s just a little something I wrote.”

“Oh, not one of Allison’s songs,” I said. “It was very good. Is it about God?”

She laughed. “I guess I never thought about it like that, but I can see it that way. It was about my mama. It sounds better with guitar.”

“I thought it was wonderful,” I said. “You are a very talented singer. What does Ricki say about it?”

She laughed. “He wants me to go on tour with him,” she turned red as she mentioned it.

“I think that is a brilliant idea,” I said. “You two are incredible together.”

She chuckled. “Me, on stage? I don’t think I can sing in front of thousands of fans.”

“Well, I never thought I could write a pop star’s biography,” I said. “You never know until you try.”

“Thank you, Harry, you are very sweet,” she said. “I can see why Ricki likes you so much.”

“Well, I am glad someone sees why,” I admitted. “I am the antithesis of him.”

“I don’t know about that, but you are his opposite,” she said smiling. “But sometimes opposites attract.”

“Yes, I have heard that,” I said. “Tell me, are you two opposites or the same?”



"I am a small-town girl from the mountains of Colorado, and he is a small-town boy from the mountains of Columbia. I think we are more alike than not," she said. "We both love singing, the mountains, our family and our friends."

"I suppose so," I said. "When did you know you loved him?"

"After we finished singing," she said. "It was like we were one and yet not. Like we were parts of a different whole. I knew it then."

I thought about how eerie it was she sounded like Ricki. Had they talked about it and came up with this narrative, or did she feel the same way?

"What does Ricki say about it?" I asked, trying to unravel this love at first sight mystery. "I mean, did he feel the same way?"

She looked puzzled. "I don't know, we've never talked about it. What did he tell you?"

"Same as you," I said. "He knew after you sang together. I've never experienced love, so I struggle with love at first sight."

"I am so sorry, Harry. Have you found no one?" she said.

I grinned. "I have found lots of them, but I can't say I loved any of them. Sometimes I think love is not for me."

"And yet you are a hopeless romantic," Annie said.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, wondering where she would have gotten that notion. She barely knew me, yet she believed as Pen and Georgie did. Ricki must have mentioned it.

"That is what Ricki calls you," she said. "I believe him. Deep down, you want to experience love, but you haven't, so now you doubt it exists. It does, Harry, and you will find it someday."

"Well, thank you for your optimism. Pen and Georgie hold similar hope."

"Didn't you date Penelope before she dated Georgie?" Annie asked.

"Yes," I said, realizing Ricki had told her about me. "But it didn't work out. She is more like my sister than a love interest. An excellent friend."

"I get that," Annie said. "I have a friend, Mark, who is like a brother. He would protect me from anything."

"Yes, exactly. Anyway, she and Georgie have what you and Ricki have, and I am happy for them."

"Are they married?" Annie asked.

"Not yet, but I hope," I said, smiling.

“Good,” she said, standing. “Let’s have dinner with them tonight, so I can get to know them and you even better. If we are to be good friends, we must get to know each other.”

I smiled. “Well, I know you like beating up British guys with your Jeep.”

She laughed and her smile was contagious. She was a beautiful young lady, and I was appreciating what Ricki saw in her.

“Don’t worry, it is worse going down,” she winked and laughed.

I would feel this day for a while, but spending time with her was worth it. I truly wanted her as a friend. We loaded in the Jeep, and I managed to buckle my restraints before bracing for the roller coaster ride down the mountain. I hoped I wouldn’t lose teeth.

“Hey, what about Mercy?” Annie asked before starting the Jeep.

“What about Mercy?” I asked.

“I don’t know. There’s something about you and her,” Annie said. “Like you’re meant to be together.”

“Really?” I said surprised, feeling that familiar tingle at the mention of her name. I had never found out where she went or what she was doing.

“Oh, yes! I see it clearly,” Annie said with a mischievous grin. “You should ask her out.”

“She is in town?” I said. “I thought she left.”

“Oh, she did,” Annie agreed. “She went home to Delaware.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed.

“But she is coming to the wedding?” Annie said, winking.

She started the Jeep as I sat there pondering the news I would see Mercy again. And I was the best man at this wedding. Why did I feel awkward? What if we ended up killing each other by accident? We didn’t go away without bruises.

Damn it, why couldn’t I just admit I wanted to see her?

\* \* \*

Georgie and Pen agreed to join Annie and me for dinner, and Annie invited Vivica and one of her friends. It was a party of uniquely diverse people: three Londoners, a New Yorker, and two Snowchute locals. Pen was delighted to spend time with other women, and I was curious to see one of Annie’s friends. Annie said it was her Maid of Honor. I hoped it wasn’t Robby.

The day had exhausted me, so I sipped tea before meeting Vivica out front. It would be impolite to yawn during dinner, despite feeling ready for bed. At least I was hungry. That and tea would have to work their magic to keep me going.

I had documented a great deal of notes on Annie, and my feelings towards her were genuine friendship. She did not strike me as a gold digger, and I believed she was as surprised by this turn in her fortunes as everyone else.

Her father, however, still seemed shocked by the whole affair. Meeting him was less than pleasant, and he gave off a general feeling of distrust and misgivings. However, he seemed to hold that inside, letting his daughter move forward with her mistakes. What else could a parent do with an adult child?

We'd met him at his office, and that only added to the less than bright outlook he had on the whole affair. When he and I were alone, he had warned me I better be gentle with his daughter in the book considering their less than ideal meeting. I took his warning seriously, but it wasn't necessary. I loved Annie and felt it would be impossible to write anything negative about her. About her father, however?

I smiled and set my teacup in the sink before grabbing my jacket. It was time to meet Vivica out front, and the caffeine had brought me back to life.

Georgie and Pen were dressed nicely, and Pen brought a sweater for the cool evening. Vivica looked her typical fantastic in designer clothing that cost more than my annual salary. She was a beautiful woman in her own right, and I realized I knew nothing about her mother. She didn't share many physical traits with her father and must get her beauty from her mother. I made a mental note to ask more about her family.

The cool evening air had prompted Vivica to put up the convertible roof, and I was pleased for the reprieve from the wind. Georgie complained, but Pen put a stop to his pleading.

The restaurant was a log cabin a few miles outside of town, and despite its rustic appearance, it boasted some of the finest dining in Snowchute. Vivica had made the appointment, claiming they were only open during the summer months. Apparently, the owners spent winters in Florida.

When we had pulled into the drive leading up to the restaurant, a wolf-like dog had eyed us from a pen off to the left of the main entrance.

"That is their pet wolf," Vivica said. "Well, wolf-dog hybrid. I can't imagine anyone wanting one of those."

"Bloody hell, I want one!" Georgie exclaimed. "Isn't he beautiful, Pen?"

"No," she said without argument. "I don't want any pet that can eat me."

"Well, said, sister," Vivica said before pulling into a space.

"You think they have bear on the menu?" Georgie said, changing the topic. "I want to try bear."

"Georgie, stop," Pen pleaded. "You are from London, love, we don't eat bear."

"Well, they have wild game here," Vivica said. "Along with less gamey things."

"Give me chicken, and I will be happy," Pen said, smiling.

I was a tad curious about the wild game. I mean, if in Rome?

As we walked up the path to the main entrance, another car pulled in. I recognized Annie's Jeep, and she honked when she spotted us.

"Annie is here," I said, stopping to watch her park.

I recognized the face of her passenger, though she looked different without heavy winter clothes. They got out, and I noticed Robby wore a lovely short skirt and breezy top. Despite my attitude about her this winter, I had to admit she was as beautiful as Annie. She eyed me but didn't smile.

"Vivica, so glad you made it!" Annie said as she ran up to us. Robby lagged behind. "You remember my friend, Robby."

"Oh, yes," Vivica said. "The one that works at the police station."

"Yes," Annie said. "She is my Maid of Honor."

By now, Robby caught up. "Hello," she said with no expression.

She shook hands with Vivica and turned to Georgie and Pen.

"You must be Georgie and Penelope," she said, extending her hand. "Welcome to America."

"Thank you," Penelope said. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Indeed!" Georgie said. "They sure make beautiful women here," he said as he shook Robby's hand.

That prompted a light slap on the arm from Pen. "Honey, please," she urged.

"Sorry, luv. Just making small talk," Georgie said, winking at Robby.

Robby remained quiet, and Annie filled in the awkward silence. "Thank you, Georgie. You and Harry are lucky to have four beautiful women to dine with tonight."

"That we are!" Georgie agreed. "Let's get some of that bear."

"Bear?" Robby asked.

"He wants to eat bear," Annie said, laughing.

"I can get you bear jerky," Robby said. "But I think it tastes like crap."

"Jerky?" Georgie said as we filed inside. "You hunt it yourself?"

"My dad and brothers," Robby said. "We have enough jerky to last three winters. I can't stand most of it, except the elk jerky."

"Elk?" Georgie asked. "Do they have elk here, too?"

They seated us at a large table with Vivica and me at the ends and Annie and Robby opposite Georgie and Pen. It was a low-light environment with a large stone hearth dominating the room with a warm fire. It was a very intimate setting, and I felt uncomfortable sitting next to Robby. We would walk down the aisle together during the wedding.

"It is good to see you again, Robby," I said, trying to break the ice between us. "You look very nice."

She smiled. "You don't have to hide it from me, Harry."

"Hide what?" I asked, confused.

"Please," Robby said as she leaned close and whispered. "How does it feel to have Annie marrying your boyfriend?"

"What?" I said too loudly.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Annie said, alarmed.

"What? Oh nothing," I said as Robby ignored me, turning away from the rest of the group. "Just surprised by the menu."

Annie looked at Robby, who stared into the fire before back at me. "Yes, it is an amazing menu. I have only been here once with my dad. The pheasant is quite good, if you like that kind of thing."

Annie turned to Vivica, and Robby shot me a wink. Pen caught it and looked at me. She was likely trying to figure out what was going on between me and this young woman. I wished I knew.

"Did you decide what you want?" I asked Pen.

"Not yet," she said. "You?"

"Pheasant," I said, not thinking about dinner. Did Robby really believe I was gay, or was she putting me on? She was an odd girl, and I felt uncomfortable having her next to me during the wedding.

"Elk for me!" Georgie announced. "No bear," he added with a frown.

"You ever had elk before?" Robby asked.

"No, but they smother it in a wild mushroom sauce, so I bet it will be delicious," he said defiantly.

"I don't much care for the flavor, but you might like it," Robby said. "We eat it all the time."

"All the time?" Vivica asked.

"Yeah. My dad and brothers brought home two bucks last year. Our freezers are full of the stuff. We have three large chest freezers filled with nothing but wild game. I'm tired of it by now," Robby said, "and hunting season is only months away."

"Did you ever hunt?" Georgie asked.

"Sure," Robby said. "I have shot deer and quail."

"Wow," Georgie said. "That is bloody remarkable. Beauty and rugged."

"Have you ever hunted?" Robby asked.

"Me? Well, I was known for my hunting in university, but I found it a bit gamey!" Georgie said laughing.

I grinned. This was Georgie at his finest, and we hadn't even had drinks.

Robby laughed and pointed her finger at Georgie. "I like this one."

Pen shot her a look and squeezed Georgie's leg under the table.

"Ow," Georgie said, looking at Pen. "Sorry, luv. Just having a laugh."

"Behave yourself," she said before whispering in his ear.

"Right, luv," he said, pulling up his menu.

Our server, Jerry, took each of our orders as he revolved around the table, and I ordered a glass of white wine to go along with my pheasant. Annie and Robby declined drinks, and it occurred to me they were too young to purchase alcohol.

They seemed out of place at this restaurant, but then so did Georgie, Pen, and I. Despite the casual attire, the clientele were wealthy, and only Vivica blended in with them. However, her attire bespoke an upper class experience rather than a rustic cabin nestled in the forest.

"So, Vivica. Your dad and Ricki arrive tomorrow?" I asked.

“Yes, and then the real wedding planning begins,” she said. “Annie and the girls will be fitted for their dresses tomorrow while you, dad, and Ricki are fitted for tuxedos.”

“And Penelope and Georgie,” I asked.

“Already sized up, mate,” Georgie said. “While you were off four wheeling.”

“Good,” I said, wanting them to fit into this wedding as much as possible. They were friends, and I wanted only the best for them.

“And the rehearsal?” I asked.

“That is on Friday,” Vivica said. “At the lodge, followed by a catered dinner.”

“Ah,” I said. “What about a bachelor party?”

“Now were talking,” Georgie said.

“Or a bachelorette party?” I pressed, looking at Annie.

“That is Thursday night,” Robby said. “Already planned. You haven’t planned the bachelor party yet?”

“Well, no,” I admitted. “I don’t know what to do or where to do it.”

“Don’t you have the internet?” Robby asked with sarcasm.

“Yes, but I don’t think Ricki wants a traditional one,” I said.

“Nonsense!” Georgie disagreed. “Leave it to me, mate. I will set us up proper.”

“There you go,” Vivica said. “Leave it to Georgie and make it Thursday night.”

“Who’ll be coming?” Georgie asked. “Your father?”

Vivica laughed. “Hardly. Mr. Stick in the Mud wouldn’t be caught dead at a bachelor party.”

“Ricki, me, Harry, and what is Ricki’s brother’s name? Laser?” Georgie said. “He sounds like a man who can party!”

“Well, don’t get in any fights,” Annie said half serious. “Otherwise, Laser might kill someone. Besides, I want Ricki to look good for our wedding.”

“No worries, luv,” Georgie assured. “We’ll take proper care of him. What about you, Vivica? You have a love interest we might take along?”

“Maybe,” Vivica said. “But he won’t be joining you.”

“Why not?” Georgie said.

“Long story, but he won’t be here until late Friday,” she said.

“Alright then, just the four of us,” Georgie said as he turned to Robby. “And where might you ladies be heading?”

“Top secret,” Robby said. “But your lady and Vivica will join us.”

“Well, thank you, Robby,” Pen said, smiling. “It would be an honor.”

Vivica smiled. “Put me down for a maybe.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Annie said. “You will be like a sister after I am married. I want you there!”

Vivica looked indecisive but conceded. “What kind of sister would I be if I wasn’t there?” she said smiling, and there was genuine caring in her eyes. I didn’t think she had a sister, or many friends. This might be something new for her.

“It’s a done deal,” Georgie said, smiling. “Now, where is that elk?”



Mr. Goldstein and Ricki finally arrived after severe thunderstorm delays in Denver. Despite the delays, they fit us for tuxedos that afternoon. One advantage of wealth was never having to wait like mere mortals. Perhaps such extravagances should rile me, but I enjoyed living this way for a while. I missed Finn and my humble flat in London, but after working so hard on the book the last six months, this temporary exile to the wealthier side of life did not upset me. Fortunately, Georgie and Pen would keep me grounded.

When I had first seen Ricki, he had hugged me for an awkward amount of time, but I chalked it up to exhaustion from the tour. Social media buzzed about his success. I had watched several interviews with prominent news outlets, and everything was coming up roses. His new album had climbed to the top of the charts, and word on the street was Grammy's for several of his songs.

I couldn't help but be swept up in the hype. Ricki's arrival was followed by a swarm of paparazzi, and the resort quickly resembled a circus. I even caught a photographer hanging off the railing above mine to snap photos of me in my bathrobe. I had security escort him from the premises. Laser had followed to ensure it happened, and to intimidate the offending person.

I had asked Mr. Goldstein about staying in the corporate retreat, but the rooms were being used for the considerable crew of workers brought in for the wedding. I had never occurred to me that this little hamlet could not ordinarily support such an affair. The regular resort staff could barely handle the current influx, so it would have been impossible for them to staff the wedding. We would have to suffer through the constant buzz of cameras.

Annie was waiting at the resort when Ricki showed up, and I watched a very intimate and real affection between them. After welcomes and brief interviews with the press, Ricki and Annie had retired to the presidential suite for time alone. It would be a rare moment of privacy before the big day. Considering their time apart while Ricki toured, I understood their need to be alone.

There would be little of that until the honeymoon. Vivica informed me they had rented an island in the Bahamas with a staff of twelve and

every conceivable luxury. They would spend ten days at this island retreat far from spying eyes. I envied them but was not invited.

While being fitted with Mr. Goldstein and Ricki, Georgie conspired with Laser to plan the bachelor party for the following night. It was best if they planned it, especially since Laser would be there for security and sanity. I knew Georgie. Once he got started, he was a dynamo you couldn't stop. Fortunately, I believed Laser might keep the dynamo in check.

Georgie admitted he was both enamored and in awe of Laser. Someone with that much machismo would easily attract someone like Georgie, who gravitated to all things manly. I wasn't privy to their plans, but it would be better than anything I could have come up with. Admiral Boring was not who you wanted to plan your bachelor party.

Robby, Vivica, and Annie would join several of Annie's friends for the bachelorette party that same night. I tried to imagine what debauchery women might engage in during such an affair, but I was not familiar enough with the inner workings of the female mind. However, based on several women I had dated over the years, I imagined it could get distasteful. Internet dating had ruined me. With Vivica and Annie, however, I thought it wouldn't be too extreme. I knew Vivica. She would protect Annie like a big sister. Robby, however, who knew?

I looked in the mirror and put on a dab of cologne as the finishing touch. I was adequately presentable for the formal dinner with Mr. Goldstein, Vivica, Ricki, and Laser. It was a reunion of sorts from our journey last winter. But this time was a joyous occasion, and not the disaster like before.

When I made it to the lobby, they were waiting for me in the black SUV. I took a seat opposite Mr. Goldstein and next to Ricki while Vivica rode up front. It was déjà vu, and I felt a slight chill. There were clearly no avalanches in the summer, but that didn't quiet my inner fears.

"Good evening, everyone. Sorry I am late," I said, buckling up.

"Nonsense, Harry. We've only been waiting a couple minutes," Ricki said. "You are worth waiting for."

"Thank you, Ricki," I said. He was one of the nicest men I had ever met, and maybe it was a naïveté. But I liked to think he was a genuine person who cared. Regardless, I loved him and hoped he didn't change as his fame grew.

Vivica leaned over the back of her seat with a smile. "Harry, I heard from Annie that Mercy will arrive tomorrow morning instead of Friday. She wanted me to let you know in case you wanted to see her. She is staying at the resort."

"You have a girlfriend?" Ricki asked, smiling. "That is wonderful."

"A girlfriend? No!" I said. "I was only curious what had happened to her."

"Isn't that the girl who nearly killed you when we first arrived last year?" Mr. Goldstein asked. "Why in God's name would you want to see her? She was incompetent."

"Daddy!" Vivica said. "Don't be mean. She was a very wonderful young lady who helped us out even though she didn't have to. Do you like her, Harry?"

"I like her, yes," I said. This was turning into a conversation I didn't want to have. "She was very pleasant to talk with."

"Talk with?" Ricki said. "I need to work with you, Harry. Tell this woman how you feel."

"How I feel?" I said.

"Yes, you want her," Ricki insisted. "I hear it in your voice."

"Leave the boy alone, Ricki," Mr. Goldstein said. "He has enough on his mind with your wedding. Don't muddy the waters."

Ricki leaned towards me and winked. "You can have any date you want at my wedding, Harry."

"Thank you, Ricki," I said.

We rode in silence the rest of the way to the restaurant. Our destination was the quiet little cabin we'd eaten at the night before, and I looked forward to sampling some new treat. I had enjoyed the pheasant and was now considering the wild boar in a white truffle sauce.

The host doted on us far more than the previous night, and they sat us in a remote corner of the main dining room to afford privacy in the intimate setting. Vivica and Ricki were as beautiful as ever. They didn't have to try. Mr. Goldstein and I were our normal drab. I would never fit into the designer world of Ricki and Vivica, but at least I would eat like them.

When our drinks arrived, Mr. Goldstein turned to me with a serious expression. "Harry, I have some news for you. Ricki's tour and album are an incredible success, and I feel confident he will win one or more Grammy's this year. I want you to be there when he wins to put it in the book."

“Grammy’s?” I asked, confused. How would I put that into a nearly finished book? “When are the Grammy’s?”

“In January,” Mr. Goldstein said. “Don’t worry, I have worked it out with your agent, the publisher, and the editor. I hate that woman.”

“Yes, she can be intolerant,” I said. “January. When are we looking to publish?”

“June next year,” he said. “It will release during the last leg of his tour. Between the Grammy’s and the tour, it will be the best time to market the book. Sales will reach the millions.”

“Millions?” I said in disbelief.

“You are going to be rich, Harry?” Ricki said. “Oh, and I spoke with Allison. She wants you to write her biography after you finish mine.”

“What?” I said. This was overwhelming me. “Her book?”

“Yes, Harry. You are going to be a famous writer,” Ricki said.

“But I write about dead admirals,” I said. “Surely Allison doesn’t want me to write her story?”

“Don’t be silly, Harry. You are a fabulous writer, and everyone will want you to write their story after they read mine,” Ricki said, smiling.

“But, June next year?” I said again.

“Don’t worry, Harry. You will receive another advance, and we will pay everything on your trip to Los Angeles in January.”

“Uh, thank you, I am...” I left it hanging as my head spun with the news bombarding me. I could not process it.

“Daddy, you are overwhelming him,” Vivica said. “He is a writer, not a producer. He can’t handle this kind of stress.”

“Nonsense! He is a fabulous young man, and I have nothing but the utmost confidence in him. The book will be wonderful, next June,” Mr. Goldstein insisted.

I grabbed my wine and drank, wishing for a craft beer instead. This was a lot to process. At least the current deadline no longer loomed over my head, but they had only moved it to winter. My editor was probably livid.

I would call her immediately after I returned and work something out. She was a hard-nosed slave driver, but she liked me, so we would work something out to finish most of the editing before I went to the Grammy’s. I knew she was fuming after talking with Mr. Goldstein. Both of them always got their way. Though she was an impatient and exacting woman, she was one of the best in the business. I would need to smooth her feathers.

"Thank you, Mr. Goldstein and Ricki. You have given me so much, I hope I can give you the book you always dreamed of," I said with sincerity.

"You will," Ricki insisted before sipping his sparkling water. "And besides, I will get payback when you are my best man."

"Thank you for that, Ricki," I said. "I am still surprised by it."

"Don't be ridiculous," Mr. Goldstein said with a wave of his hand. "You are the best man at this table. What are you planning for the bachelor party?"

"Well, I must confess, I am ill equipped to handle that sort of thing, so Georgie and Laser are planning it," I said.

"It is done," Laser said.

"Where are you going?" Mr. Goldstein asked.

Laser smiled. "A town bar with live music in Durango."

"Excellent," Ricki said. "Will they let me sing?"

"Absolutely, brother," Laser replied. "I already spoke with the band."

"What kind of music?" Ricki asked.

"Country," Laser said.

Ricki's eyes lit up. "Oh, this will be fun! I always wanted to do country covers."

"Security?" Mr. Goldstein asked.

"Me," Laser said.

Mr. Goldstein nodded and drank his scotch. "And where are you going, Vivica? I hear you will play big sister to our Annie."

Vivica grinned. "I don't know. They told me it was a secret. However, with Annie's young friends, I might be more like a mother. Thank God Pen and Mercy are coming along. I will have someone to talk with."

I remained silent when she mentioned Mercy. I didn't want that conversation starting again.

"You hear that, Harry? Mercy is going with them," Ricki said. "You should ask her for a nightcap when they return."

"Ricki!" Vivica said. "You don't put a girl in that position after a bachelorette party."

"I wouldn't ask her," Harry said. "I'll only want to go to bed, anyway."

I realized my awkward play on words as everyone stared at me. My face blushed, and I grabbed my wine to cover. Ricki and Vivica broke the silence with laughter. Even Mr. Goldstein and Laser wore grins.

"I am so sorry," I said, embarrassed.

"That is why we love you, Harry!" Ricki said.

\* \* \*

I felt rather creepy lurking around the foyer for no reason other than to 'accidentally' run into Mercy. My palms were sweating, and I realized I was far more interested in her than I had first imagined. Perhaps all the talk of weddings and love were making me feel more amorous so far from home, but I wanted to see her.

I had texted Annie, who reported she would be in this morning, but it was already past eleven and I thought she would not make it. Maybe more delays in Denver? Why hadn't I been more amicable to her and kept in contact? At the time, it seemed so ridiculous after all that had happened.

I was pacing when Vivica walked into the foyer. "What are you doing, Harry? Looking for Mercy?"

"What? No," I said louder than I had intended. "I am trying to decide whether to eat lunch in the pub or in my room."

"Eat in the pub, and I will join you," she said, smiling.

She knew what I was doing and saw through my charade. It was one of the many things I liked about her. She had a great sense of decorum. I believed she was immune to the odd behaviors of men after spending so much time with a pop star.

"Yes, that would be lovely," I said, ushering her into the pub. I snuck one last look out the front door, but no one had arrived.

We seated ourselves next to the window overlooking the pool, but there weren't many tourists enjoying the bright sunshine so common here. Later in the day, clouds and thunderstorms often sprang up, quickly followed by cool, clear nights filled with stars. I appreciated the rugged beauty here, despite being homesick.

"Don't worry, Harry. You will see her before tonight," Vivica said.

"I know," I said. "Honestly, I didn't think I cared so much, but I am nervous."

"She is a wonderful person, but so are you," Vivica said. "And I bet you look handsome in your tuxedo."

"Thank you," I said. "But she probably has a boyfriend."

"She doesn't," Vivica said in a terse voice before pulling her menu down to smile at me.

"How do you know that?" I said. "Have you talked with her?"

"No," she said, pulling her menu back up. "Annie asked her. It's a girl thing."

I didn't know how to respond, so I feigned looking at my menu. Despite being early, I had a sudden desire for a craft beer to calm my pounding heart. Why was I so eager to see a woman I hardly knew? Was it something similar to Ricki and Annie? It was confusing and made me ill. I needed food.

Sunset took our orders and gave me a knowing grin as he eyed Vivica sitting across from me. I ignored his insinuation and focused on enjoying my lunch with her. Spending time with her was always a pleasant experience.

"So, enough of me. Who is this man you have coming to the wedding?" I asked. It was nice to see her move on from the fantasies she'd entertained about Ricki. She was a lovely woman, and I wanted to see her happy like Ricki.

"Well, truth is, no one knows about him yet. We've been on a few dates and text each other," she admitted.

This intrigued me. "I see. What does he do for a living? Is he in music?"

"Well, sort of," she said. "He is in communications."

"Communications?" I said. "That seems broad."

"Media might be a more apt description," she corrected.

"I see," I said. "That sounds fantastic. What is his name?"

"Ronald," she said.

The name had a familiar ring to it, but I couldn't place where I had heard it before. I wondered if he went by Ron or Ronny.

"That is great," I said, hoping it worked out. "I can't wait to meet him."

"Yes, well, you might be the only one," she said, and I noted concern in her voice.

"Why wouldn't anyone want to meet him?" I asked before I realized. "Oh, my God! It's that annoying reporter I met in court last winter!"

She nodded, looking around to make sure no one had overheard us. We were the only people in the pub, and Sunset was watching his tennis and ignoring us.

"Yes, but please don't tell anyone," she urged. "Look, I know he can be annoying. Believe me, I was very annoyed when he kept hitting on me."

"Then for God's sake, why would you go out with him?" I asked.

“Well, he ran into me back in March at a local deli dad and I eat at, and he was his usual annoying self. He paid for my lunch and insisted we go to a museum together. I was against it, at first. But then I thought, why not see what he was about? The way I figured it, if I knew him better, maybe I could control what he wrote about Ricki in his tabloid,” she said sounding more like Vivica. “You know, lead him on to get what I wanted. I have done it with other men.”

“I see,” I said, curious about this new side of her.

“Anyway, we finished lunch and went to the museum,” she said.

“And?” I pressed. “It went well?”

She smiled. “It did. Truth is, I liked him. I didn’t want to like him, but I did. I had wanted to confirm he was as big a dirt bag as I always thought, but he wasn’t. He was a proper gentleman.”

“Wow!” I said. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be incredulous, but I am incredulous.”

“It is okay, Harry. I understand,” she said. “You will never know him like I do. Did you know he volunteers at soup kitchens on the weekends? He also donates half his money to various charities. He didn’t come from money, so he is heavily invested in helping others overcome poverty.”

“I would never have guessed,” I said.

“I asked him why he worked for an unscrupulous tabloid, and he told me he couldn’t get work at prestigious papers. Too many of them are going out of business, so it was a tabloid or nothing.”

“Why does he always focus on Ricki?” I said, realizing the answer after I asked the question. “It wasn’t Ricki, it was you.”

She nodded. “Yeah, he’s had a thing for me since the first time he saw me with Ricki a few years back.”

“I am still incredulous,” I said. “Is this a love sort of thing?”

“For him maybe, but not me,” she said. “However, he keeps growing on me.”

We stopped talking when Sunset brought our lunch. “Here you go, let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thank you, it looks wonderful,” I said.

“Yes, thank you,” Vivica said, ignoring the looks Sunset gave her.

He was interested, but backed away to return to his tennis match.

“I think he is interested in you,” I said, smiling.

“Ugh. I am used to that,” she said, refusing to look his way. “It is a curse.”



"I have often wondered about that," I said. "It's not a problem for me, of course, but I imagine you and Ricki deal with it all the time."

"You wouldn't believe," she said before taking a bite of her salad.

"I have wondered what your mother looks like after I first met you," I said, hoping to get some information.

"She is quite stunning, but a total bitch," she said with unbridled contempt.

"Oh, I am sorry. I didn't mean to bring up uncomfortable topics," I said.

"Not your fault, Harry. She was born that way," she said. "Came from money and is completely spoiled. She tried to make me her carbon copy, but I wouldn't have it."

"Is that why you work for your father?" I said.

"Partly," she admitted. "But mostly because I want to be in the music business. I aspire to be a producer."

"A producer?" I said. "That's wonderful."

"And difficult," she admitted. "Especially in an industry dominated by men."

"I hadn't thought about that, but I see it," I said, thinking about the publishing industry. There were more women working in publishing, but it was cutthroat. "What would you produce?"

"New bands," she said. "I don't want to be their agents, just their producer. Give them a start, find them an agent, you know."

"Your father as the agent?" I said.

"God, no!" she said. "He is only Ricki's agent and manager. He'll never work with anyone else."

"I see," I said. "That makes sense."

"Ricki is like a son to him, and my dad will do whatever it takes to help Ricki be successful."

"He is successful," I said. "Your father must be proud."

She grinned. "I think he is only proud of Ricki and not his own efforts. He doesn't want money. I mean, you should see his apartment. He's had the same one since before he met Ricki."

"He cares for you and Ricki," I said. "What will he think about Ronald? I assume he doesn't know."

"No, he doesn't," she said with a frown. "I don't know, but now I can control what he writes about Ricki. We made a deal that I would give him exclusive insider information in return for only writing the truth."

"Wow, he agreed to that?" I said.

"Of course," she said, "an inside scoop is the dream of all reporters. At least the National Voice will print good press about Ricki."

"And Annie," I said.

"Yes, and Annie, too," she agreed. "I have grown quite fond of that young woman."

"After our day together, I have too," I said. "She is a wonderful young spirit with a bit of spit in her."

"Spit?" she said.

"You know, like a spitfire," I said. "She is like a wild horse that has finally been broken."

"Okay, I get the metaphors," she said. "You're not wrong."

We finished the rest of our meal discussing the wedding and Ricki's and Annie's relationship. We both felt the same mystery about love at first sight, and I found a kindred spirit in Vivica. She was becoming a genuine friend, and I appreciated that.

As I made my way back to my suite, I couldn't stop thinking about Mercy and wondering where she was. I knew I could check at the front desk, but doing it in person seemed like stalking. I decided I would call them instead when I got back to my room. I climbed the last flight of stairs and entered the hallway just as Mercy entered the stairwell. We collided, and I spun around into the wall. Thankfully, she caught herself in the doorway.

When I recognized her, I started laughing uncontrollably. The Universe had forced us together yet again, just harder than either of us wanted. I rubbed my forehead and eyed her for any signs of damage.

"Are you alright?" I asked. "I am so sorry I ran into you."

She laughed but looked nervous. "Are you sure you ran into me or the other way around?"

"I'll take the blame for this one," I said. "I was preoccupied with my thoughts."

She seemed more beautiful than I remembered, but she wasn't wearing the resort uniform as before. Instead, she was wearing a summer dress with a floral pattern and a pair of sandals that made her look ready for the beach.

"What were you thinking?" she asked.

I almost said her but thought better of it. I didn't want to freak her out. "Wedding stuff," I lied. "When did you get in? I mean, I heard you were coming. You know, from Annie."

"Yes, Harry, I know," she said. "I got in early and took a nap in my room. I took the red eye last night."

"Ah, that explains it," I said.

"Explains what?" she asked.

I back peddled. "That explains why we collided," I lied. "You were tired, and I was preoccupied. Have you had lunch?"

"Not yet," she said.

"I would love to buy you some, if that is alright?" I said, acting far more brave than I felt.

"Well, I am actually on my way to catch the shuttle to meet Annie for lunch. Should I ask her if you can come?" she said.

"Well, truth is, I just had lunch with Vivica, so no, you have fun," I said disappointed.

She looked confused. "Okay. Well, it was nice seeing you again."

"Yes," I said. "Hope to run into you later."

"Hopefully not," she said, grinning.

"I meant see you again," I corrected.

She nodded and hurried down the stairs, leaving me feeling like a fool. It appeared like she wanted nothing to do with me. Who could blame her? I'd made no attempt to keep in contact, and our relationship last winter had been cordial at best. I rubbed my forehead as I headed down the hallway, stopping in front of my room before deciding to see Georgie instead. I wanted to know when we were leaving for Durango.

**I**t was an hour's ride to Durango, and we arrived in time for dinner at a large restaurant featuring the 'Best Barbecue this side of Waco'. I didn't know what that meant, but I had never eaten barbecue. Georgie seemed enamored by the all you can eat ribs special.

I hadn't eaten barbecue ribs either, so I was interested in trying them out. Laser also ordered the rib special, but Ricki went for a plain chicken breast and salad. He always ate and drank healthy, unlike the rest of us. I wondered what he would do when Georgie started buying rounds of shots at the pub later.

"Well, lads. This is the night we celebrate the graduation of another bachelor into the ranks of marrieddom," Georgie said, lifting his beer. "To Ricki, may the old ball and chain never weigh you down!"

We all drank, and I wondered what effect Georgie had on Ricki. This was an unfamiliar experience for him, and I hoped it turned out well. Georgie was an acquired taste.

"Tell me, Georgie," Ricki said, putting his sparkling water down. "When are you going to abandon your bachelorhood? That beautiful lady of yours is quite the catch. You wouldn't want anyone to steal her away from you."

"You been eyeing my girlfriend?" Georgie said in a menacing voice, and Ricki was stunned. I was instantly on alert. It wasn't like Georgie to be jealous, and I wondered if Ricki's fame threatened him.

Georgie laughed so hard I thought he would fall over. "Sorry, Ricki, just having a laugh," he said, and Ricki laughed along with him. "Funny you should ask that very question, because I plan on asking her to marry me while we are here in Colorado."

"What?" I said. "Really?"

"That's right, mate. I am finally going to do it," he said with a grin.

"Congratulations!" Ricki said. "We have much to celebrate."

Laser reached behind Georgie and gave him a slap on the back. "Felicidades, mi amigo!"

"Easy, mate! You don't want to damage the merchandise," Georgie said, laughing. "I might ask her tonight, and you know what that means?" He winked, and we all laughed.

"I think marriage is a wonderful thing," Ricki said. "My brother says he will never marry."

Georgie turned to Laser. "Is that right?"

Laser's penetrating gaze eyed each of us before smiling. "Why have rice and beans every night when I can eat out whenever I want?"

Georgie slapped him on the back. "Well said, mate! A toast! To those who marry and those who don't!"

We drank again, and I wondered which one I would be. At the moment, I figured I wouldn't.

"What about you, Harry?" Ricki said. "Did you see Mercy?"

"I ran into her at the resort," I said. "I mean literally, ran into her. Our propensity to hurt each other continues."

"Well, how did she look?" Georgie asked.

"She was beautiful," I admitted. "However, I got the impression she wants nothing to do with me."

"Did you ask her out?" Ricki pressed.

"To lunch, but she was meeting Annie," I said.

"Ah, that is where she was going," Ricki said. "She told me it was a secret because of the bachelorette party."

"So, any idea what they're doing?" Georgie asked. "Pen wouldn't say a word."

"No. Annie would not tell," he said. "But I am not worried. Vivica is with them, and she will keep order."

"Yeah, Pen isn't much of a drinker either," Georgie said. "Unless she starts on gin martinis!"

Only I caught the reference, and I wondered if she would let her hair down. Pen rarely walked on the wild side unless it was with Georgie, but amid young girls feeling their newfound adulthood, who knew? Hopefully, the older women would keep the younger ones from getting into trouble.

"They will be fine," Ricki said.

\* \* \*

After eating more than my fill of ribs, I did not look forward to live music in a large crowd. However, Georgie assured us this was the hopping place in Durango. There would be a lot of tourists and locals singing and dancing together, but I doubted I would dance.

The parking lot was full for a Thursday night, but the neon sign advertised The Ranch Hands would play that evening.

Georgie paid our cover and led us into a western themed bar complete with a mechanical bull and large dance floor where people were line dancing. This was new to me. Even on those rare occasions I went out to a club, I was the proverbial fish out of water. Admiral Boring strikes again. It didn't help I couldn't dance. My ballroom dance lessons early in life had only underscored my lack of ability.

I looked at Ricki, and he was smiling while eyeing the empty stage where the band would play. For now, country music blared across the landscape of cowboy boots and cowboy hats milling about with drinks in hand. No one paid us any mind, and I was happy for the anonymity.

"Bloody hell!" Georgie yelled through the music. "This is like a bleeding western movie. Hot damn!" he said, affecting an American cowboy accent.

He signaled all of us to the bar where Laser was talking with a bartender. They ordered some shot concoction and handed one to each of us. The bartender handed one to Ricki, who took it with a smile.

Georgie held up his shot. "May the gods smile upon us tonight, lads. Everyone must dance with at least one woman tonight, especially you, Ricki!"

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it for the world," Ricki said, raising his glass. "And I will serenade them with sweet songs."

He could break the hearts of most of the women in this place without trying. I just hoped the men wouldn't take offense. Some were as big as Judge Remington's husband.

"That's the spirit, mate!" Georgie said before we all drank.

Georgie ordered another round, and we drank again. The flavor was sweet with a distinct whiskey taste. Whatever it was, it went straight to my head. At least I was relaxing. We were here to celebrate Ricki's nuptials, so I needed to enjoy myself. I couldn't get Mercy out of my mind, and that made me anxious. Was she really not interested?

We moved from the bar to a table close to the stage with a reserved sign on it. I assumed this was part of the plan Georgie and Laser had concocted. The stage sat at one end of the bar with the dance floor at the other end.

I took a seat facing away from the stage and eyed the crowd. There was country attire everywhere. Cowboy boots and hats dominated, but there was the occasional college student or tourist interspersed throughout. It was a collage of Colorado in the summer.

I looked over at Georgie, and he wore a grin the size of the Cheshire Cat's from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. This was

something he'd never experience back home, and he embraced it with gusto.

Even Ricki wore a grin, and I imagined it reminded him of happy times with Ms. McCawlie. He would enjoy it to the fullest. I snuck a quick glance at Laser, who was staring at me. I held back a shudder and faced him straight on.

"Did you or Georgie find this place?" I asked him.

"Me," he said with little emotion.

"It is unique," I said, realizing how banal my words were. I was out of my depth trying to make small talk with a killer. "Thank you for doing this," I finished, staring back into the crowd.

"You are welcome, Harry," Laser said with what could pass as sincerity.

I turned back to him and smiled.

"Harry, did you hear that?" Ricki said with excitement. "The next song is for those of us who do not know how to line dance. They are going to teach us."

The music stopped, and the DJ called out over the crowd. "Alright beginners! Come on up here and let's teach you how to line dance!"

Ricki grabbed my arm and pulled me to the stage. I walked up the two steps and took my place in one line. I assumed the large man in front of us was the instructor.

We waited as the DJ urged others to follow. Seasoned line dancing veterans took their place in the lines to assist, and a young woman squeezed in between me and Ricki.

"I know you," she said to Ricki. "Welcome to Durango."

"Thank you," Ricki said.

"Here for your bachelor party?" she asked. "My sister lives in Snowchute," she explained with a shrug.

"Yes, we are," Ricki said, looking past her to me.

She turned to me and smiled. "You must be Harry," she said.

"That I am," I said.

"Well, gentleman, I am Becky and I am going to help you learn how to line dance."

The man in the front began explaining the steps we would take, showing them first before having us repeat them. Only Ricki was getting it right. I looked back at Georgie being helped by a young woman dressed in cowboy attire. He looked as ridiculous as I did. We were both out of our depth, but I didn't think Georgie cared.

"Ok! Y'all ready to try it?" Our instructor, Roy, asked.

“Yes,” We agreed, but I had less enthusiasm.

I kept my eye on Becky and tried to follow along as the music started. We moved in broken unison, and I missed most of the steps. At one point, I went the wrong direction and bumped into the woman behind me. She only smiled at my faux pas.

The disaster that was Admiral Boring made dancing look like some mating ritual for a jungle bird. I silently urged the song to end so I could return to my seat. Ricki, on the other hand, was tripping the light fantastic. Considering his on-stage performance, this was just another in a long line of dance routines. He was a natural.

My proverbial two left feet couldn’t string together the steps in the right order or at the same speed as everyone else. I desperately wanted to stop, but I persevered for Ricki’s benefit. This was his night, and I wanted him to enjoy it.

The song finally ended, and we stopped, me several seconds behind everyone. I was dizzy from the antics and wanted to sit the rest of the night out. Laser was sitting alone, I could keep him company. I had done my duty and danced. Becky, however, wouldn’t have it.

“Harry, dear, you are... how should I put this? Terrible,” she declared. “But you won’t be by the end of the night!” she waved to someone in the crowd and a pretty young girl in blue jeans, a blue plaid top, and cowboy boots came up on the dance floor.

Becky introduced us. “Ricki and Harry, this here is my niece, Tina. Tina, this here is Ricki Heart and Harry...” she stopped. “Sorry, Harry, I don’t know your last name.”

“Holden.” I said, feeling self-conscious about being introduced with Ricki Heart.

“Harry Holden,” Becky finished.

“Howdy, boys,” Tina said. “Y’all learning to line dance?”

Becky answered for us. “Well, Ricki is learning, but Harry is struggling. Thought maybe you might help him out.”

“Damn straight!” Tina said with a broad smile.

She was pretty and looked near twenty. I couldn’t imagine what she thought about a pathetic British bloke trying to learn line dancing to country music. I knew it was impossible to teach me, but that would not stop her.

“Alright, Harry. Let’s get you some basics,” she said, grabbing my right hand with her left. “Follow me slowly.”



She walked me through several basic steps, and we finished with her twirling me back towards her. I stumbled and fell into her, but she caught me.

"Easy, boy. You getting fresh with me?" she said, grinning. "I don't mind fresh men."

Her comment confused me, and I looked her in the eyes. "Sorry?"

"How 'bout you buy me a drink first," she said. "We need to loosen you up before you can do this properly."

She had lovely eyes, and I felt myself being pulled into them. I shook my head to clear the thoughts away. "Sure," I said, wondering what she intended. Was I being daft, or was she interested?

I looked at the dance floor as we walked towards the bar. Ricki and Becky were still trying different dance steps. Georgie had moved on to a different girl who looked like she was in university. He was laughing and being typical Georgie, and she laughed right along with him.

Tina grabbed my hand and dragged me through the crowd until we were standing at the bar. She yelled across the bar. "Smitty, two Jack and Cokes!"

Smitty looked back at us and nodded, before putting another order up at the other end.

"Jack and Coke?" I asked.

"Jack Daniel's whiskey and Coke," she said, smiling. "A proper country drink. It will get your heels moving."

"I see," I said, noticing she was still holding my hand. I gently released my grip from hers. "You come here a lot?" I asked.

"Before I was born," she said. "This is where my parents met and conceived me."

"Conceived?" I asked.

"Oh yeah," she said. "In the back of a car in the parking lot. Romantic, huh?"

I couldn't tell if she was being serious or having me on. She had a lot of energy, and I hoped she wasn't planning on conceiving anything with me in the parking lot. This was a strong-willed young woman and reminded me of Annie.

"How long you been hanging with Ricki?" she asked.

"Less than a year," I said. "I'm writing his biography."

"Damn! Cute and a writer?" She exclaimed as Smitty put the drinks down in front of us.

"On Becky's tab?" Smitty asked.

She nodded without removing her eyes from me. They kept pulling me in, and I glanced away to the stage as I took a drink. I didn't much like the Coke, but the whiskey was sweet.

"Why don't we take these to our table?" I suggested.

"I would love to," she said with a grin. "We can get to know each other better."

I turned towards the stage and she grabbed my free hand again. I didn't resist and pulled her over to the table where Laser sat eyeing the crowd like he was on surveillance.

"Laser, Tina," I said. "Tina, Laser. He's Ricki's brother."

"I knew that from his rugged good looks," she said, smiling. "Pleasure to meet ya."

"Pleasure to meet you, too," Laser said.

We took seats, and I sipped the Jack and Coke. It was loosening me up, though I rather thought it wouldn't improve my dancing.

"What do you do here in Durango?" I asked as Tina turned towards me.

"I don't live in Durango," she said. "I live in Wray."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Eastern part of the state," she said. "I'm just visiting Aunt Becky. My parents grew up here, but left when I was six. We're in the rodeo, so we travel a lot. I've been here many times."

"Rodeo?" I said. "What do you do in the rodeo?"

"Barrel racing," she said.

"I am familiar with that," Laser said. "I have ridden a Bronco or two in my day."

She turned to him. "Really? Where?"

"Back in Columbia," he said. "A friend of mine owns a horse ranch."

"How exciting," she said, laughing. "What else have you done?"

"Bull fighting," he said. "In Spain."

"Damn! Aren't you exciting?" she said.

Admiral Boring couldn't compete with that, and I hoped it would disentangle me from her web. She was aiming for something, and I didn't want to be a part of it. I wanted Mercy, and spending time with anyone else felt like cheating. It didn't help my resolve when she was so pretty.

"I've never ridden a horse," I said. "Though I always wanted to try. You know, watching John Wayne as a child."

She grabbed my leg under the table and squeezed. "I'll show you how to ride."

"It is a great experience, Harry. You should try it," Laser said, smiling. It was rare for him to smile, and I wondered if he was having me on.

"Yes, I probably should," I said. "When in Rome."

"You've been to Rome?" she asked. "Now that is exciting."

"Rome?" I said. "No, it is just a saying."

"Well, when in Colorado, learn to ride," she said, squeezing my leg again. "Come on, let's get you sorted out on that dance floor!"

We left Laser and our drinks and marched hand in hand to the dance floor. We waited until the current song ended before walking out to the middle. Most of the people were leaving the floor, heading back to their tables.

"Time to slow it down," the DJ said as the lights dimmed.

A slow country song played, and Tina grabbed my left arm and wrapped it around her waist before grabbing my other hand in hers and pulling me close against her.

"There, that is how you slow dance," she said.

Her curves touched me in ways I found pleasant. Even with her boots I was taller than her, and when I looked down into her eyes, I drifted into their dark pools. There was longing and desire, and she smiled to make her intent even more clear. This was a temptress capturing me for her latest conquest. Her eyes were her greatest weapon.

I tried to follow her steps as we whirled around the stage, but my ineptitude could not be solved by one Jack and Coke. Thankfully, we avoided the other couples whirling around us with far better skills.

"Just follow me," she whispered. "You're doing fine."

"Thank you," I whispered as I slipped deeper into her eyes. Was it the alcohol or my male ego that had me so mesmerized? This beautiful black widow was wrapping me in her web, and I was helpless.

"Later, I'll teach you to ride," she said.

What had she meant by that? I ignored the comment as we slid across the floor in a tight embrace. Her feminine curves felt marvelous pressed against me, and I realized it had been too long since I'd been intimate with a woman. I wanted that once more.

The song ended, and she kissed me gently on the lips. "Now, was that so bad, Harry Holden?"

I shook my head. I was a victim of her feminine wiles. Her kiss was sweet with whiskey, and the light scent of her perfume lingered from our exertions. I wanted another kiss, but held back.

“Come on, let’s freshen our drinks,” she said, grabbing my hand and leading me off the floor.

She trapped me with my own ego and bent it to her will. Every time she grabbed my hand, there was an electric spark that foretold of intimate embraces and sweet kisses. My mind and body could not escape from this sweet young lady. She had ensnared me, and I was too stupid to resist. After so long without, why would I refuse?

In the whiskey soaked recesses of my mind, Mercy floated, suspended in a hazy conviction there was something between us. But the here and now cast doubts on that illusory dream as I was swept away on the currents of pheromones. Tina had set her claws, and I was one drink away from falling for her, regardless of Mercy or anyone else.

I woke to the familiar hum and vibrations of a car. My left cheek ached, and my head throbbed as though I had sustained trauma. I struggled to remember where I was or what had happened, but nothing surfaced. I remembered barbecued ribs, but everything after that was dark. Drinking? Probably why I felt hungover. But where? With who?

I struggled to open my eyes, but a brief glimpse brought waves of nausea, so I closed them and remained still. No one talked, though someone sat on either side of me. Ricky? Georgie and Pen? Who was driving?

Flashes of a young woman in a blue plaid shirt raced through my mind, but I could not hold the face in my inner eye. What was her name? It was on the tip of my tongue, but only Mercy came forth. I knew it wasn't her.

I tried sitting up and opened my eyes, this time without the nausea.

"Glad to see you aren't dead, mate!" Georgie said to my right as he grabbed my leg and shook it. "Thought maybe we had lost you."

"Lost me?" I said. "How?"

"What do you remember?" he asked.

"A girl?" I said as I saw another flicker of the girl in the blue plaid.

"Sure," Georgie said. "Remember her name?"

"No," I said, looking over to my left at Ricki.

Ricki turned to me. "Her name was Tina."

My head still throbbed, and when I rubbed my left cheek, there was pain. "What happened?"

Georgie started laughing. "You were in a fight, mate!"

"I was?" I said. "How did I do?"

"Knocked out straight off," Georgie said, laughing. "But, hey, you survived. That's something."

"Who?" I said. "Did Tina have a boyfriend?"

"Nah, nothing like that, mate," Georgie said. "It was a friend of the guy fighting Ricki."

"Ricki?" I blurted. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, Harry, thank you for coming to my aide," Ricki said. "You really shouldn't jump in if you don't know how to fight. But thank you anyway."

Georgie laughed. "Guess your boxing lessons in university didn't help. We should join a club when we get back home. You know, prepare for next time."

I ignored the comment. I had no intentions of learning to fight. "What happened Ricki?"

Ricki turned to me. "After my last set with the band, a young lady came up to me and kissed me. She had caught me by surprise. Anyway, her boyfriend got upset and threw her to the ground. That is when I chastised him for his rude behavior and helped her up. You never hurt a woman, especially if you love them," he stopped, and I imagined he was thinking about Annie.

"Anyway, the young man started cursing and his friends came to assist. That is when you intervened to stop it. You were very drunk, Harry," he said.

"And then I was knocked out," I concluded.

"Yes," Ricki said.

"What happened after that?" I asked.

"Well, the young man attacked me, but I handled it," Ricki said.

A familiar voice from the driver's seat interrupted. "He broke the kid's arm and nose."

"The nose was on purpose, but the arm was an accident," Ricki said.

"Wow, you broke his nose and arm?" I was incredulous. It didn't sound like the Ricki I knew. It sounded more like Laser.

"Did Laser teach you to do that?" I asked.

Laser answered from the passenger seat. "No, I have never taught Ricki anything. He has been learning martial arts since being stranded in New York. You have to be tough to survive the streets of New York."

"And Mr. Goldstein allowed this?" I asked, having a hard time believing he would sanction such a thing.

"He was the one who suggested it," Ricki said. "I'd been badly beaten before I met Mr. Goldstein."

"Oh," I said. Between rabid fans and aggressive paparazzi, being able to handle yourself was imperative.

"Sheriff, why are you here?" I asked, realizing he had not come with us.

"I am keeping you all out of jail," he said. "Lucky for you, I know the sheriff in Durango very well. He and I grew up together. The guy Ricki beat up was his nephew. Fortunately, his nephew has a short

temper and many run-ins with the law, so it was easy for my friend to drop the charges. However, Ricki will pay his medical bills.”

“And compensation for his pain,” Ricki said.

“But he attacked you,” I said.

“It don’t matter, mate, if you are famous, everyone comes after you for the money. Best to settle it rather than let a jury decide,” Georgie said.

There was an inherent unfairness, but what did I know. I was glad I didn’t have to pay for being knocked out. I was a nobody, and truth was, the court would probably side with me. Should I file charges against the bloke who did this? I decided no. Best to get this wedding over and leave the wilds of Colorado. I would survive.

“So, who was this Tina?” Georgie asked with a grin.

“Wish I knew,” I said, catching glimpses of her in my mind.

“Damn shame,” Georgie said. “She was a beauty and liked you. You two were dancing so close, you looked like one person!” He laughed again. “Wait till, Pen hears about this.”

“Please, don’t tell Pen,” I said, not wanting everyone to hear about a young lady I couldn’t even remember. “You said to dance with someone, so I did. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Alright, mate, I hear ya,” Georgie said. “It was just nice to see you with a woman again.”

“Tina was Becky’s niece, but that isn’t who Harry wants,” Ricki said. “He wants Mercy.”

I didn’t disagree. After everything that had happened, I wanted her even more. I had a persistent feeling I had cheated on Mercy by being with Tina. What did this mean? I was only dancing, right?

“Mercy, huh?” Georgie said. “Thought you said she wanted nothing to do with you?”

“Maybe, but she is a very nice young lady!” I said forcefully.

“Whoa, mate. Easy on,” Georgie said, putting his hands up. “You are right, Ricki. He has it bad.”

I closed my eyes to ignore them and calm my pounding head. My non-existent love affair with Mercy was becoming a topic of conversation far too often, and I hadn’t even had more than a moment to speak with her. It was all ridiculous and would likely never happen.

What was her night like? I doubted it involved fighting or anyone being knocked out. Only I was so lucky. I desired to be more than a cordial acquaintance to Mercy, but it didn’t appear she entertained

similar notions. She'd been rather distant, and I suspected her interest, assuming she'd ever had any, had waned since winter.

Who could blame her? I was a foreigner from a far-off England. When I really thought about it, how realistic was it? I remembered Ricki and Annie and sighed. I was just making excuses. If you wanted something, you had to get it. You couldn't wait for it to fall into your lap. If we loved each other, we could find a way. But was it love? It confused me.

\* \* \*

My pounding head kept me from going to bed, so I took two Tylenol with a glass of cognac. Georgie had mentioned he might stop by to help himself to some of my liquor since they were running low, and I had agreed, hoping he would ask Pen to marry him. He wasn't even drunk compared to me. And after their night on the town, it was a perfect moment to make their pledge to each other.

I wanted to see them happily married. They were perfect for each other. As they were my best friends, I naturally wanted only the best for them. I believed marriage was best.

I flipped on the tele and waded through channels before stopping on a wildlife show about the Serengeti. A cheetah was currently stalking a gazelle, and it was the least stressful thing I could watch while waiting for the Tylenol and alcohol to ease my pain.

I had a red mark on my cheek from the punch that took me out, and I hoped it wouldn't bruise for the wedding. A black eye would be out of place at a formal affair, and I didn't want to offend Annie or Mr. Goldstein on this special day. I hoped Pen might be able to use her makeup to soften the look before the wedding. If a bruise appeared by morning, I would ask her.

I took another sip of the cognac just as someone knocked on my door. It would be Georgie to raid my bar. I sat up in a wave of pain and made my way to the door.

When I opened it, Robby was leaning against the doorframe with a mischievous grin. She swayed forward and back as though drunk.

"Robby," I said. "What are you doing here?"

She walked past me into the suite, and I closed the door behind her. Best if no one saw her.

"Why are you here?" I pressed.



She swayed over to me and grabbed my face. "I wanted to check on you after your fight," she said, eyeing the mark on my cheek. Her actions made it hurt more, so I gently pulled her hands free.

"I am fine, thank you," I said.

"Country boys don't take too kindly to your kind, Broke Back Mountain or not," she said, grinning. "Lucky you went down so fast, or it could have been worse."

"What kind? English guys?" I asked.

"No! You know, gay," she said, winking. "It's just me, Harry. You can come clean."

"I will not be coming clean or whatever," I retorted. "The fact is, I was dancing with a girl tonight. I believe we kissed several times," I said, instantly regretting it.

"Really?" she said, eyebrows raised.

"To thank me for dancing with her," I said, backpedaling. I barely remembered the kiss on the dance floor, and anything beyond that was hazy. However, I had an overwhelming feeling I'd been interested in Tina.

"What was her name?" Robby said walking to the bar to pour a drink.

"Tina," I said before realizing Robby wasn't old enough to drink. The last thing I needed was to be responsible for her current state by giving her liquor. "Stop! No more drinking. My God! You're not even legal."

She laughed. "Really? You won't give me a drink? I am a legal adult, you know."

"Be that as it may, you don't need anymore," I said.

She walked over to me. "Did you buy Tina drinks?"

"Yes. At least I think I did," I said, not certain.

"So, you'll buy perfect strangers a drink, but not one of your besties?" she said, pouting. This instantly put me on guard. Was she flirting? Since when were we friends? Okay, we had a mutual friend in Annie, but did that make us friends? And why was she hitting on me if she thought I was gay?

"Perhaps you should go home," I suggested.

"Why?" she asked. "You don't want me here? Maybe you prefer guys."

"I am not gay," I insisted.

“Show me,” she said as she grabbed me around the waist. “Go on, put your hands around me and kiss me like you mean it. Prove to me you’re interested in a woman and I will let you be. Pretend I am Tina.”

She smelled wonderful, like fresh taffy, though I couldn’t make out the flavor. Her bright pink skirt highlighted athletic legs, and her white top showed cleavage. She gazed into my eyes, and though they were out of focus, there was a hunger lurking within.

I lost my mind and put my arms around her. I could not deny the attraction, but kissing her like I meant it? How? I could think about Mercy? What the hell? If it stopped the nonsense, it would be worth it.

I pictured Mercy in my mind and closed my eyes as I bent down and closed my lips on hers. It was long, passionate and induced immediate bodily sensations. Was this how it felt with Tina, too? I tried to pull away, but she pulled me tighter and slipped her tongue between my lips.

An immediate taste of cherry intermingled with alcohol flooded my senses, and I melted into her, following her lead. We held each other and tasted each other for longer than I had intended. When we finally separated, I was scared. I had liked it more than I wanted to. And to make matters worse, I had thought about Mercy while doing it. *Damn!* It felt so wrong, but so right. I could not trust myself with her.

We gazed into each other’s eyes, and I felt a tingling sensation raise the hair on the back of my arms. This was not a normal reaction, and it frightened me. I needed her to leave before it escalated. My mind whirled with thoughts of intense passions, but a rational part of me wanted Mercy. This was just a girl, only recently out of school. I could not do this, no matter how much I wanted to.

“Damn, boy. You know how to kiss,” she said. “If you were gay, it would have been such a waste.”

She wouldn’t let go until a knock at my door interrupted us. Georgie to the rescue!

“That would be Georgie,” I said, pushing her away. “He wants to raid my bar.”

She reluctantly released me and leaned back against the couch to steady herself. When I opened the door, Mercy smiled at me before seeing Robby. Her smile faded, replaced with a look of shock.

“I am so sorry, Harry. I didn’t realize you were busy,” she said in a panic.

“What? No! Robby is just checking on me after being knocked out,” I said in a vain attempt to explain.

She glared at me, frowning. "You don't have to explain, Harry. There is lipstick on your face."

"That would be mine," Robby said. "He is quite the lady's man!"

I lowered my head in shame as Mercy stormed away. "Mercy, please, I want to explain."

She refused to turn and disappeared into the stairwell, fleeing back to her room. This was a nightmare come true. I had sprung the traps of two young women, and it would cost me the third one I wanted. All was lost.

I shut the door and turned to Robby. "Why did you say that!"

"Say what? The truth?" she said, laughing. "Excuse me! I didn't know you had a thing for her."

She walked over and grabbed me again. "Don't worry, I'll make it up to you," she said as she leaned in to kiss me again.

I pulled away gently and held her at arm's length. "Look, Robby. I like you. You are a very nice young woman, but as you aptly pointed out, we are besties not lovers."

"Oh, but you want more than that," she said, pulling herself against me again. "I feel it when you hold me. You want me and I want you, why fight it?"

She wasn't wrong. I wanted her. But it wasn't right to just give into my carnal desires without some emotional connection. At least it wasn't what I wanted. I'd had casual sex before, but this wasn't what I truly wanted at this stage in my life. I wanted a relationship, and it wouldn't be with someone who thought I was gay fifteen minutes earlier. I needed to send Robby home and figure out a way to get Mercy back.

"Kiss me again and tell me you don't want me," she insisted.

"No," I said. "This is wrong, and I won't do it."

"Your body ain't saying that," she disagreed.

"Because my body is a fool," I said, trying to disentangle myself from her.

"Or your body is smart," she insisted.

I pushed her away and stood with my hands on my hips, staring at the ground. Every fiber in my body screamed for me to love this young woman, but I somehow held back despite my weakened resolve.

"I don't believe you," Robby said, starting to unbutton her top. She slipped it off and let it fall to the floor. She wore a plain white bra holding back petite breasts.

"Robby, don't do this," I said.

“But I want to,” she said. She slowly undid her bra, holding it in front, teasing me as I imagined what lay underneath.

I walked over to her and she let it drop to the floor. “Oops,” she said, smiling.

Before I could stop her, she grabbed me in a tight embrace and pulled me closer. It felt too wonderful, but I gently pushed her away and bent down to pick up her clothing.

“Please, I need you to leave,” I said.

She stood there exposed, grinning at my obvious resolve. “I know you are not gay, so what is it? Are you not attracted to me?”

“No, I am very attracted to you, but I like Mercy,” I admitted.

“Mercy?” she said. “You barely know her.”

“I barely know you,” I said.

“Touché,” she said, pausing. “Before this wedding is over, you will.”

She grabbed her clothes and reluctantly put them on, eyeing me as she did. I tried to look away, but she was exquisite.

“I see your desire, Harry. You don’t fool me,” she said, grabbing me in a last embrace. She pulled herself against me hard, and we both felt the same thing. She grabbed my hand and placed it on one of her breasts. “Feel what you are missing. Bet you don’t sleep tonight,” she said, leaning in for one last kiss.

She released me and opened the door. “If you think what you saw was great, wait till you see the rest. You won’t regret it, Harry.”

After she closed the door, I nearly collapsed. She was right and knew it. I was an idiot, ready to fall for her femininity. I escaped this time, but what about the next? We had to walk down the aisle together and spend most of tomorrow together. How long could I resist? With Mercy no longer speaking to me, would I finally just cave?

Damn it, why did I have to come back to this insidious town? These young women were desperate for an escape from their small-town reality. I came here to do a job, but was entangled with two different women. None of this helped me or Ricki, and I felt homesick. I wanted the familiar comforts of my flat. I wanted Finn to curse at me before nipping my finger. I was so far from home, that everything was exaggerated and out of proportion. What started out innocuous ended with me knocked out, pursued by two women, and scorned by the one I wanted. This was not normal.

I turned off the tele and headed to the bed. Robby was spot on, I would not sleep.

After eating Tylenol like candy and washing it down with a shot of cognac, I felt passable. I checked my phone and read a text from Georgie saying he wanted to see me first thing in the morning. There was another from Vivica that read ‘WTF!!!!’. It didn’t take much to figure out what that implied, and I dreaded the day ahead.

My sleep, if there was any, was filled with wild women chasing me as I ran in a panic calling for Mercy. I was conflicted, and even the cold shower to start my day had not cooled my awkward feelings for Robby. She was not what I needed, but what I wanted. The conflict consumed me.

I walked to the bar and poured another cognac as anxiety overwhelmed my senses. I was a young man, and intimate thoughts of ladies were completely natural. Why was I stressed and felt like drowning myself in self pity and self-flagellation? Why was this happening?

I put the drink down and took a seat on a barstool, cradling my head, moaning. I deserved this for my unbecoming behavior after women trapped me with their desires. I felt an enormous amount of shame because of Mercy.

Why had she come to see me late at night? Had she wanted to talk? Or was there more? I would never know since I’d blown my one chance by trying to prove something to a child. I was an idiot, but the temptress was beautiful, and I still felt her curves against my body. I moaned again. How would I get through this wedding with her by my side?

A knock at my door brought me back to reality. Who could it be? I was tempted to ignore it, but that would only exacerbate the situation. I picked myself up to answer the door.

“Mate, you look like bloody hell!” Georgie said too loudly.

“Come in, Georgie,” I said, walking back to my drink.

Georgie closed the door and joined me. “A morning pick me up? Since when do you have those?”

“Since I flushed my life down the loo,” I said, taking a hefty mouthful.

“Easy, mate, you have a big day ahead,” Georgie cautioned as he poured himself one. “Anyway, I have news.”

“They have canceled the wedding, and I can go home?” I said.

“No,” Georgie said with a frown. “I asked Pen to marry me.”

“Oh. Sorry, mate. I didn’t mean to ruin this splendid news,” I said. “I am happy for you!”

“Thank you,” Georgie said. “I want you to be my best man, Harry.”

My smile faded before I caught myself. “Yes. The answer is of course yes!” I tried forcing enthusiasm into my voice, but I dreaded the prospect of another stag party. This one I would have to plan.

“Okay, I get it. Last night didn’t go so well, but our wedding is a year away. We’ll get it right next time,” Georgie said, trying to console me. “What happened? You didn’t sleep well?”

“That and so much more,” I said.

I rushed through the basics of my encounter with Robby and Mercy, and Georgie took it all without comment. I finished with my dreadful confusion about the two women.

“What is the bloody problem?” Georgie said. “So you have two women interested in you? Great, take advantage and do something.”

“Take advantage?” I asked. “You think I should take advantage of these two women?”

“Hold on, mate,” Georgie said. “That isn’t what I meant.”

“Should I sleep with Robby while trying to get Mercy to come back? You know, play them both so I end up with at least one of them?” I said in a mocking tone.

“No, not that,” Georgie said, frowning. “Now that you know Mercy is interested, and she knows Robby is interested, take advantage of her jealousy and use that to get closer to her.”

I narrowed my eyes and grinned. “Georgie, when have you known me to do that?”

“That’s just it, mate,” Georgie said. “You’ve never done it, so it will work.”

“Are you crazy? Nothing you said sounds right!” I insisted. “I cannot lead Robby on to make Mercy jealous.”

“You’re right, do nothing and lose them both,” Georgie said with finality before downing his drink.

“Thanks,” I said. I was swimming in self pity and didn’t want to hear anything rational. Even if I could do such a thing, I would sabotage it like everything else. It was ridiculous.

"That big ol' head of yours, Admiral Boring, is going to cost you," Georgie said. "If you want Mercy, you need to stand up and fight for her. Because she is jealous, you need to do it now! Tell Robby to bugger off and tell Mercy you told Robby that."

"She thinks I slept with Robby, Georgie!" I said, trying to punch holes in his argument.

"Doesn't matter, mate," Georgie said. "If you want her, you will go to her and tell her everything. If it is the truth, she will know you're not lying."

I hated when Georgie was right. Of course, I needed to talk with Mercy and tell her what happened. But how? I was certain she didn't want to see me again.

"I don't think she will talk with me," I said in a pathetic tone.

"The way you sound, I don't want to talk with you," Georgie said. "Wake up boy and take command. Demand she talk with you. Do not take no for an answer!"

I didn't want to admit it, but he was right. It was just so out of character. Take command? Me? Hardly. But if I didn't, I could kiss this one chance with Mercy goodbye. What did I have to lose?

"You're right, Georgie," I said, standing up. "I'll do it!"

"Damn right you will!" Georgie said.

I grabbed him in a tight embrace and slapped him on the back. He whispered into my ear. "It pains me to see you unhappy, mate. You deserve someone."

We released, and I nodded.

"You want breakfast with me and my fiancée?" Georgie asked, smiling.

I nodded. Admiral Boring was spoiling their momentous day and needed to make amends. Perhaps tea and Tylenol would be my ticket to turn this day around. If I was to face Mercy, I needed to be at my best.

\* \* \*

"She doesn't want to see you, Harry," Vivica said. "I must admit, I thought you were someone else."

Even though I cannot see her face, her disappointment flows through the phone. "I am someone else," I said before realizing the weirdness of the statement.

"Clearly!" she said.

"Please, Vivica, hear me out before you cast judgement," I said. I wanted to tell her everything.

"Why should I?" she said. "I spent half the night talking with that poor girl, and she is very upset."

"Does that mean she likes me?" I asked.

"Liked, Harry. Past tense," she said.

"She was so cold towards me when I first saw her, I wasn't sure she liked me," I blurted, happy to hear what she thought. Up till now, it was only suspicions, but this confirmed it.

"Didn't you hear me?" Vivica said. "She did like you."

"Look, I can explain," I said. "If after I do, you still believe I am nothing more than another stupid example of my gender, I won't argue with you and will leave her alone."

This was a gambit since Vivica was a wild card. She understood women far better than I did, and maybe it was over. But Mercy had liked me at some point, so I had to win her back.

Vivica was silent as she mulled over my proposal. "Okay, Harry. I owe you at least that."

"Not over the phone, please," I insisted. "Can you come over to my suite?"

There was a knock at the door.

"Hold on, there is someone here," I ran to the door and opened it. Vivica stood there looking radiant as ever, but the scowl on her face ruined her natural beauty.

"Oh, you're here," I said, putting the phone down.

She stormed past me and took a seat on the couch. I closed the door and took the chair next to her. I decided against commenting on how wonderful she looked. Flattery would not endear me to her at that moment.

"Okay. First off, I am a dumb male," I said.

"Good, then we're done," she said, trying to stand.

"No, we are not!" I said too forcefully. "Sorry, but there is much more. Please, hear me out."

She sat back down and folded her arms. I understood the universal gesture.

"Would you like anything to drink?" I suggested.

"No thank you," she said. "Can you get on with it, please?"

I nodded and started by explaining my feelings for Mercy and how they started somewhere during our winter trip. I explained how those



feelings had grown since then, but confused me. I admitted I was also confused by the very notion of love.

I recounted the awkward conversation with Mercy in the hallway after we had collided and how that muddled my feelings for her. I had felt rejected by her. Then I explained Tina and what I could remember about the night before. I even confided that we kissed on the dance floor. I explained I was drunk, and that it had been a long time since I'd been intimate with a woman. I admitted I had enjoyed it and that it might have turned into something more if I had not been knocked out.

However, I insisted that despite Tina, I couldn't stop thinking about Mercy. I told her I felt like I was cheating on her even though we'd had no relationship. Up to that point, we were only cordial acquaintances. I was confused, and my male ego took advantage.

I went on to explain my painful recuperation when Robby visited. I hadn't known what she had wanted, especially considering with her insistence I was gay. So I admitted I bragged about Tina to stop her ridiculous comments. But that was a mistake, and it resulted in Robby grabbing me and demanding I kiss her to prove I wasn't gay. I confessed my male ego had enjoyed it, and that we had kissed longer than I had wanted considering I was thinking about Mercy. Of course, my tale sounded bizarre, but I assured her it was the truth. Georgie had said it. If it was the truth, she would see that.

I continued explaining how I had been expecting Georgie when Mercy showed up. Between the lipstick on my face and Robby drunk in my suite, she had concluded the only thing she could. She had then stormed off to Vivica's room. I told her my evening ended with Robby taking off her top before I sent her home to prevent an escalation. I did admit I was tempted.

Vivica sat through it all with a blank expression, but she unfolded her arms and appeared less concerned.

"Look, I know this is stupid... that I am stupid, but that is what happened," I insisted. "I desired those women, yes. But it has been a long time since I've had a girlfriend. In my heart, I only want Mercy, but she's given me the cold shoulder."

"Robby took her top off?" Vivica asked.

I nodded.

"I knew she was a wild child. It's not surprising considering she's friends with Annie," Vivica said. "I thought she was going to attack the exotic dancer last night."

"Exotic dancer?" I asked.

"Yes, the stripper Robby lined up for the party," Vivica said. "Men aren't the only ones who enjoy an occasional show, Harry."

"No, I guess not," I said.

"Anyway, Robby showed an extreme amount of interest in him," she said. "However, no hanky-panky for anyone. I mean, the guy had a wife and kids for God's sake."

I tried to imagine what wife would be alright with their husband stripping for strange women.

"Anyway, I remember when I was eighteen. It can be a crazy time," she continued. "Hormones rage, and you are a minted adult. Sometimes craziness is an inherent rite of passage for both sexes."

I suspected she had some rather interesting stories to tell about her own teen years, but I would not ask.

"You surprise me, Harry," she said.

"Really? How so?" I asked.

"Robby was half naked in your suite after a night of drinking and dancing. Every man I know would not have let that pass," she said. "I would not have let that pass, assuming it was an attractive young man."

"No?" I said.

"No," she said. "I believe you about Mercy, Harry. You've restored my faith in you."

"I am glad to hear that because I value your friendship, Vivica," I said.

"However," she began, "you will not tell Mercy anything you just told me. That poor girl is confused, and that tale might push her over the edge."

"But I thought truth was always best," I said.

"Sure, after you've been together for a while," she insisted. "She is feeling vulnerable. You have to understand, Annie and I pushed you on her last night. She admitted she treated you poorly in the hallway and felt guilty about it. That is why she went to see you. But after seeing Robby, well... it kind of broke her."

"Then all is lost," I said, dropping my head.

Vivica shook her head. "I didn't say that. You just need to go about this delicately."

"Well, then it is lost," I concluded. "I am as delicate as the proverbial bull in the china shop."

"Well, Harry, you do seem horrible at these things. That is why I will talk with her first," Vivica insisted. "I'll explain how you feel

about her and explain Robby in a way only a woman can. Coming from you, it won't sound good. Coming from me, I think she'll understand. She saw how Robby was last night."

"And what do I do about Robby?" I said. "She is still after me."

"Well, if she has her mind set on you, be careful," she warned. "Young women will go to great lengths to land a guy they want, or think they want."

"You mean like taking their tops off," I said.

"That, and so much more," she said.

"You speak from experience?" I asked.

She smiled. "Perhaps."

"With Ricki?" I said.

She replaced her smile with a frown. "You know that to be true, Harry. But let's just say he forgave me, and I have forgiven myself."

"You are a wonderful person, Vivica, and I hope this relationship between you and the reporter goes well. I can't thank you enough for helping me. You are a genuine friend."

"Thank you, Harry," she said, smiling again. "In this business, we have few friends, or maybe I should say real friends. Because of that, the ones we love mean that much more. You are one of those friends I love, Harry. And I am so glad you aren't the man I thought you were!"

"Me, too," I said, hoping we could salvage this situation with Mercy. Talking with her would be the first step, but based on what Vivica had said, it might be a giant hurdle.

\* \* \*

Ricki appeared at my door earlier than expected as I readied for the rehearsal at the business retreat. In fact, Ricki had never appeared at my door. Usually, I met him in the lobby or in the car out front. It was obvious what he wanted to talk about, and I braced myself. My clumsy handling of two women was ruining his and Annie's big day. I pictured Mr. Goldstein telling me to get back to the job at hand. He would be right.

I saw disappointment in Ricki's eyes, just like in Vivica's. He had hugged me when he came in, but it had felt remote.

"Harry, you are a great friend, so now I must be one to you," he began as I sat at the bar, listening. "Mercy is a wonderful young lady. She is kind, beautiful, and has her heart in the right place. However, she is someone who needs a person who will treat her well."

"And you no longer believe that person is me," I concluded.

Ricki hesitated. "Not exactly what I was going to say, but I have concerns."

"Did you speak with Vivica?" I asked.

"Vivica? About Mercy?" he said.

"Yes, did you and Vivica speak about this situation?" I asked again.

"Well, no we haven't," Ricki admitted. "But I have spoken with Annie and Robby."

"And?" I said.

"And Robby is very excited to be dating you," Ricki said. "She feels she has stolen you from Mercy."

I lowered my head in frustration. Vivica was right. This young lady would not let go.

"But I am not dating Robby," I said.

"Then, why did you spend the night with her?" Ricki asked.

"I did not spend the night with her... or sleep with her or anything. She is just a young woman showing a great deal of interest in me."

"Lusting after you?" Ricki asked.

"Yes, I know, hard to believe," I said. "Two girls in one night is unheard of."

"You mean Tina?" Ricki said. "She lusted after you, too?"

"Well, she kissed me on the dance floor," I said.

Ricki stood and went into the small kitchen to get water. When he returned, he gave me a wry grin.

"Harry, what you are experiencing is a common phenomenon people experience when they are with famous people. Strangers want to experience that fame, so they make advances to those around the famous person," Ricki said. "I am sure Vivica has told you about this."

She had, but I didn't think it was because of Ricki's fame. Vivica was very desirable, famous or not.

"Yes, she has mentioned it," I agreed.

"Robby is a very attractive young woman from a small town and sees her best friend marrying an exotic foreigner who will whisk her around the world to experience more than Snowchute. It is natural for Robby to feel saddened and jealous by this," Ricki paused. "She may see you as her ticket out of this town into a bigger world like Annie. It is not that you aren't desirable, Harry, but it may not be the only reason for Robby's behavior."

"No, no, I am not desirable, you can say it. I already know that," I said. "It just took me by surprise, especially after she constantly insisted you and I were lovers."

"You and me?" Ricki said, laughing. "Sorry, Harry."

"No need to apologize. I see the humor in it," I said. "I thought I could convince her otherwise by kissing her."

"Then, why did you take her clothes off?" Ricki said. "Were you going to make love to her to prove you were not gay?"

"What? No!" I said in shock. "What did she tell you?"

"She said you kissed her and it was wonderful. Then you undressed her and slept with her," Ricki said. "It is alright if you did, Harry. I am just concerned about Mercy."

"Well, that is not what happened," I said. "She challenged me to kiss her to prove I wasn't gay, which I did. Then Mercy showed up and stormed off after putting it all together. Then Robby took her own top off to seduce me."

"And her seduction did not work?" Ricki asked, confused. "You did not want to sleep with her?"

"Yes, I mean no. I wanted to sleep with her, but I gave her the top back and insisted she leave," I said. "And that was it. She left, and I went to bed—alone."

"I see," Ricki said. "So, you want Robby but prefer Mercy."

"No," I said. "Robby is a beautiful lady, but she is very young and not what I want in a woman."

"She is the same age as Annie," Ricki said, distressed. "Do you think Annie is too young to marry me?"

Now I was alarmed. "No, you both have something I do not. Love. I do not love Robby, but I feel like I could love Mercy. Maybe I already do... I don't know."

Ricki saw my distress and smiled. He walked over and put his arm around me. "You are worthy of love, Harry. If it is right, it will happen."

"At this point, I no longer believe that," I said.

"Okay, now that I have a better picture of what is going on, I will help you with Mercy," Ricki said, clapping his hands as though ready to work.

I shook my head. "No, you will not, Ricki. Vivica and I are working it out, and you need to focus on your wedding and future wife. We are here for you and Annie."

"But I cannot see you so sad, Harry," Ricki said.

"I am always sad when it comes to love, Ricki. I do not think anyone can change that," I said.

Ricki frowned. "I will at least talk with Robby to stop her spreading lies about the two of you. I cannot let that stand when she is Annie's best friend."

"Please, say nothing," I pleaded. "She is young, and I will not have her embarrassed by her actions. I will let her down gently."

"I do not think it will be easy, my friend, especially if she is telling people you slept together," Ricki said.

"I know. Vivica said the same thing," I agreed. "However, I will try."

"Good luck!" Ricki said before looking at his watch. "It is time to go."

"I am ready," I nodded.

"To walk down the aisle with Robby?" Ricki asked.

"I am not looking forward to it, but I will make it right for you and Annie," I said.

"Thank you, Harry," Ricki said.

Robby and I had our arms interlocked as we waited for the signal to enter the tent and walk down the aisle towards the stage set up at the other end. As the Maid of Honor and Best Man, we preceded the sheriff and Annie, taking our place in the line of men and maidens fanning out on either side of the pastor.

Mr. Goldstein would lead the procession with Charlotte, who had acted as Annie's surrogate mother over the years. Laser and another friend of Annie's went second. Her name was Elizabeth, but went by Lizzie. She'd eyed all of us with suspicion when we had met earlier and stayed far from us until we had lined up for the rehearsal. Laser might scare her.

Even though we had been there thirty minutes, Robby had kissed me multiple times and grabbed my hand incessantly. She was persistent, and the longer I let it go, the harder it would be to stop her. However, I wanted to get through the rehearsal before dealing with the situation. It did not help that Robby looked beautiful.

She wore a nice fitting, solid blue skirt that highlighted more of her legs than was appropriate, and that was paired with a white woven top that accented her feminine features. She'd come prepared to fight and was doing her best to disarm me. It was working. She was wonderful to admire.

I tried to focus on the task at hand, but her warmth and curves as she pressed up beside me made it challenging. I wanted to put a stop to her foolishness, but it was difficult to ignore her. When she wasn't around, I found my resolve strong and resolute, but as soon as I saw her smiling face and longing eyes, it all crumbled.

Robby's eyes were a far cry from the cold, penetrating stare Annie had given me when she arrived with her father. She must have said nothing to the sheriff, as he wore his standard dark scowl. I felt for Ricki having him as a future father-in-law.

Robby pulled my interlocked arm up to her lips and kissed my hand. "Have you ever thought about marriage, Harry?" she said. "I mean really thought about what it would be like to be with the same person forever?"

"Not really," I said, disturbed by the conversation.

"I have," Robby said. "I have for a long time."

"I see," I said. "And what have you decided?"

"I don't want to get married," Robby said, much to my surprise. "At least not any time soon. I urged Annie to rethink this, but she insists she is in love."

I remained quiet as I considered what she had confessed. I didn't know whether to believe her. Did she see our relationship as nothing more than sex? Maybe Ricki was right, and it was her being jealous of Annie.

"And what do you see happening between us?" I said, deciding to confront it while there was a delay in the rehearsal.

"Us?" she said. "I thought I made that clear, Harry. I want to sleep with you."

"And that is all?" I said. I would be her one-night stand? Was it hormones and the wedding making her act this way?

"Are you saying you do not want to be my boyfriend?" Robby asked, sounding hurt.

"Boyfriend?" I said. "I don't know you."

"And you keep resisting my attempts to change that," she said. "I guarantee you won't be sorry."

"Look, Robby, you are a beautiful young woman, but I want to be with Mercy," there I had laid it out and prayed she would respect it.

She kissed my hand again. "Not after we sleep together."

"Look, I do not want to sleep with you," I said, releasing frustration to emphasize my resolve.

"Whoa! Slow the anger train," she said, squeezing my arm. "You say you don't want to, but everything in your body screams that you do. I feel it even now. You are attracted to me, and I to you. Stop resisting our natural attraction and let your primordial instincts take over."

How could I win this argument? She was right. Even arguing with her, I could not stop thinking about the night before and our kiss or her nakedness. There was a deep attraction. Hell, even the smell of her was intoxicating.

"Yes, I get it, there is an attraction, but that doesn't make it right. We are not cave dwellers giving in to every impulse," I said.

"Are you telling me you've never given in to impulses?" Robby said in disbelief. "I don't believe you."

I shook my head in despair. "What can I do to convince you I do not want to sleep with you?"

"Sleep with me," she said.



"That makes no sense," I said.

"Look, we hook up and see what happens," she said, squeezing my arm. "One time, and you will want more. Then we can build on that. You don't realize how good I am. I've learned many things in my brief life."

I wasn't winning and needed to stop. "Look, let's get through the rehearsal first, and then talk."

She released my arm and spun me towards her, grabbing me in a deep embrace. She reached up and planted her lips on mine, holding my head so I could not escape. The kiss was wonderful, and I could not help myself from succumbing to her.

"Damn you!" I said after we parted. I looked around, but no one had seen us.

"You have no idea, Harry Holden," she said, interlocking our arms together.

"Did you leave lipstick on me?" I asked in a panic. The last thing I needed was for Annie or Mercy to see it.

"Chillax, you are fine," she said.

I didn't feel fine, and I hated myself for enjoying it so much. I still relished the minty taste of her mouth and tongue. I wasn't strong enough to withstand her wiles, and I feared I would end up sleeping with her.

I looked behind, and Annie and her father were just getting into the line as music played once again. It was time to act our part in this wedding, but I felt unraveled. I had to pull it together and make this a joyous occasion for Annie and Ricki.

The woman instructing each of us when to march, waved at us, so we started the slow march, trying to synchronize our steps with Laser ahead of us.

We went through the entire ceremony, practicing multiple times before everyone felt ready for the big day. Robby and I didn't exchange words throughout the practice, but feeling her by my side elicited images of us embraced. I couldn't shake her from my mind. What would I do when Mercy arrived?

\* \* \*

All the groomsmen and maids of honor sat at a round table near the front of the tent for the rehearsal dinner. It was a small crowd of forty people who were mostly family and friends of Annie's. I had asked

Ricki if his mother, brothers, and sister were coming, but he had said his brother was shooting his show and his mother refused to fly.

It saddened me to hear this, but he assured me they would join the event over a private internet stream. He also confided his mother was less than enthusiastic about him marrying such a young American with little to her name. As he recounted, his mother had finished her rant with "... she is not even Catholic!" I suspected that was why his other brother and sister were not attending.

In my mind, a disapproving mother was better than no mother. I knew Ricki loved his mother and accepted her demeanor towards his future bride. He was a man of his own desires, and no one would sway him. I tried to imagine a meeting between Annie and his South American family.

Mercy arrived with one of Annie's friends and was sitting at a table with people I didn't know. We locked eyes once, but then she had looked at Robby and turned away. I wanted to talk with her, but Vivica had remained staunch in her resolve to talk first. That talk was still pending.

"Tell us, Harry, what will you recount about this wedding in the book?" Mr. Goldstein asked, pulling me from my thoughts. I suspected he was refocusing me amid the turmoil the women had caused. I knew Vivica had mentioned the situation to him.

"It is a wonderful affair in a fabulous, albeit remote, location. It is a fitting location considering they are both from rural mountain communities. I like it is not pretentious as a good deal might imagine considering his success. It is regal, yet simple, and blends the best of the natural surroundings with the modern amenities fitting someone of his stature." I hoped that was enough to allay Mr. Goldstein's concerns.

"Hmm. Spoken like a genuine writer," he said, smiling. "And the bride and groom?"

I turned to watch them sitting with the pastor and sheriff. "They come from very different worlds, despite the similarities in their backgrounds. Both have a single parent that is not supportive, and yet they march onward showing love can conquer all," I said pausing in thought. "They are very much in love, and I doubt weather or any other catastrophic delay would diminish their final union. They are happy."

"And do you believe it will last?" Mr. Goldstein pressed.

I continued staring at them for a minute before answering. "Yes, I do," I said as I turned to look him in the eye. What I saw was contentment with my state of mind. I had allayed his fears for now.

"They are like swans," Laser said in his thick accent.

"Swans?" Robby said, confused. "Why swans?"

"They mate for life," Laser said.

"Whoa, for life?" Robby said, grabbing my leg under the table. "That is impressive. I kind of thought birds were whatever mate they could attract each season."

"For some, yes, but not swans," Laser said.

"Huh," Robby said. "I guess I do not see myself as a swan then. I don't think I want to mate for life," she squeezed my leg again to emphasize her comment.

"Neither do I," Laser said, grinning.

"I think it is so romantic," Charlotte said. "I could mate for life, if I found the right person."

"I thought you were married?" Robby said.

"Yes, I am," Charlotte said without further comment.

"What about you, Lizzie?" Robby asked, urging the quiet girl to engage in conversation. She had the underwhelmed look of someone who would rather be at a quilting competition than sitting with us.

"I don't know, never thought about it," she said without commitment.

"Really?" Charlotte said. "A beautiful young lady like you has never thought about a future with Mr. Right?"

"Not really," she said. "There are no Mr. Rights in this town."

"That is for sure," Robby said, squeezing my leg again. I wanted to remove her hand but didn't want to make a scene. Thank God for long tablecloths.

"Yes, I see what you mean," Charlotte said.

Mr. Goldstein had heard enough and excused himself from the table. I did not know if Charlotte was angling for him, but considering her comments about marriage, it was possible. I took advantage of Mr. Goldstein's quick retreat and made my own.

"Sorry, I need to go to the men's room," I said, standing and making my way to the back of the tent. I exited and headed for the main lodge when I spotted Mr. Goldstein in a heated conversation with Vivica. Standing next to her was Ronald Timmons, her new love interest, and Mr. Goldstein was livid.

I ignored them and bolted into the lodge to locate the loo. After taking care of my needs, I walked back towards the tent as a voice called out to me in the great room.

“Harry!”

I turned to see Mercy standing in the doorway leading out.

“Mercy, hello” I said. I didn’t want to talk with her until Vivica had, but considering Vivica’s current situation with her father, it might never happen.

“Can we talk?” she said with a sad note in her voice.

I walked towards her and nodded. “Yes.”

“Not here,” she said, looking around. “Follow me.”

We went back through the door and moved off the porch towards the surrounding forest. The deciduous trees were interspersed with the pines from winter, and their bright green leaves contrasted nicely with the darker shade of the needles. This made the forest appear less ominous and foreboding.

We walked silently until we neared the edge of the trees, but Mercy continued through them, so I followed. I was out of my element and concerned we might get lost, but she appeared to know what she was doing.

I turned back to look for any signs of the lodge and tripped on a fallen log. I caught myself on another tree, and Mercy rushed to steady me.

“Are you alright?” she said, holding my shoulder.

“Yes, sorry. I was not watching where I was going,” I said, staring into her eyes.

She released my shoulder and looked at the ground. Was she sad or confused? Either way, I was to blame.

She looked at me and spoke. “Harry, I realize we barely know each other and all, but I came to the wedding because of you. I love Annie and Ricki, but I really wanted to see you again.”

“I understand and I wanted...” I started before she cut me off.

“Please, Harry, let me finish,” she insisted as I stopped talking. “I felt something between us this winter, and I wanted to see if it were real or some infatuation. When we ran into each other in the hallway the other day, I was not prepared to meet you, and the collision put me off. I have a knack for making things uncomfortable with people I like, and in your case, painful.”

“Yes, we seem awkward together,” I said, realizing this was not going where I’d hoped.

"Anyway, when I came to your room, I was not prepared to find you with Robby," she said with angst in her voice. I felt she was leading the conversation to a resolution to push me aside and return to her own life. "Robby is a young lady who takes what she wants and can be quite blunt about it. I am not a big fan. However, I understand why you desire someone like her. She is exciting and unpredictable. Wild, if you will."

I wanted to say something to dissuade her from this course, but what? She'd caught me with my proverbial pants down and lipstick on my face. And she wasn't wrong. A part of me desired Robby and her wild ways, but the real me was not attracted to her aggressiveness. I remained quiet to let her finish.

"I've been confused about my feelings towards you and realize that is my problem. I cannot make up my mind because I never can make up my mind. I am always this way. Always awkward and unable to make decisions without other's approval. My parents, my teachers, my uncle, anyone."

She paused, and I waited for the bomb to drop that would end this relationship before it began. Something stirred within me, and I realized it was sadness for the loss of something with so much promise. I was about to speak when she began again.

"I've made up my mind, and I want to go to Switzerland to train to be a concierge despite my less than stellar performance last winter! Now I have to make another decision, so I can get on with my life," she said with finality.

"Wait, Mercy. Can I say something, please?" I urged before she ended it.

But she didn't respond. Instead, she grabbed me and planted her lips on mine. We both lost our balance and fell onto the soft pine needles. I was shocked, pleased, and confused, but dared not let go as we kissed as though we'd done it for years.

The stirring inside me changed to one of incredible joy as we discovered what we'd both longed for. It was not awkward, and it was not painful. Our lips parted, and our tongues tasted each other for the first time. Was this sensation love?

We parted, laughing like young kids goofing on each other. This was something magical, and we both knew it.

"Made your decision?" I said in between laughs.

"I have, Mr. Holden. I choose you," she said formally.

“Oh my, Miss Cummings. I am flattered and ecstatic with your decision,” I said with a formal voice.

We kissed once more, this time slower. My mind was a cauldron of emotions that were confusing and yet made perfect sense. She was my swan. I felt it, but she was heading to Switzerland and me to London. How would that work? I ignored such practical thoughts and sank into her embrace as we tickled each other’s lips with our tongues, exploring gently.

We both desired the same thing, but neither of us wanted a passionate encounter on the forest floor. We finally stopped kissing and helped each other off the ground. It was best if we headed back to the rehearsal despite the energy running through both of us. I didn’t know if there was more I should be doing as the best man, but I didn’t want anyone searching for us.

I thought about Robby and panicked. “Robby!” I said before stopping. “I don’t know how to thwart her. She is a very determined young lady.”

“I knew it!” Mercy said with anger edging her voice. “That tramp! She knew I was interested in you.”

“Okay, okay, let’s stay calm,” I said, squeezing her hand. “She is a vivacious girl, and I don’t want to make a scene.”

“I’ll make a scene with her!” Mercy said, and I felt pride she wanted to fight for me. “You didn’t make love to her, did you?”

“What? No!” I blurted. “She kept calling me gay, and I wanted me to prove to her I was not. So I kissed her. That is all, I swear.”

“Gay?” she asked, confused.

“She has some stereotype about English blokes,” I said. “I suppose she imagines we are all dandies.”

“Typical teenager,” Mercy said, turning towards me, planting another kiss on my lips. “I can take care of Robby.”

“Please, this is Annie and Ricki’s special time. I don’t want conflict,” I urged.

“No conflict,” she said. “Just stick with me when we get back inside the tent.”

I didn’t know what she intended, but I would follow her lead no matter where she led. No doubt about it, I was smitten with her and finally understood what Ricki and Annie had. It was a feeling you could never live without that person. I knew love.

As we neared the tent, I noticed Mr. Goldstein and Vivica were no longer arguing outside the lodge and worried about how that would

end. I loved them both, but they were bull headed and strong willed. The daughter took after her father.

As we entered the tent, Mercy swung our arms together casually as she smiled for all to see. When she was certain nearly everyone was watching, she turned me towards her, and we embraced, kissing for a long while. Our lips parted, and she whispered in my ear before releasing me.

"I will see you in your room later," she said, smiling as she let go and returned to her seat.

Though I could not see myself, I knew I was grinning. I walked to my table and noticed Robby staring, but without malice.

I retook my seat, and everyone remained quiet until Charlotte broke the silence.

"I didn't know you and Mercy were an item," she said.

"What?" I said, reeling from my encounter. "Yes, we met last winter."

"I guess," Charlotte said with a knowing smile. "She is a very sweet girl."

Robby spoke. "Yes, very sweet," she said before grabbing my leg and squeezing hard. She paused before leaning over to whisper to me. "Game on."

Damn it, what was this girl's problem? She was persistent and thought it was some game. One she intended on winning. She did not care what I thought or wanted. I was like a trophy deer in her crosshairs, and she would not call off the hunt. I had to warn Mercy to expect anything.

We lay in each other's arms on the large couch in my suite, and it felt so right. It felt like we'd been doing this forever. She smelled wonderful, and her touch was enticing on my chest. The curves of her body as we enfolded each other teased with dreams of pleasures yet explored.

"Harry, what did you think of me when we first met?" she said without making eye contact.

"Well, to be honest, I felt sorry for you. I mean, we kept having so many mishaps, and I saw the terror on your face after each one. I knew you just wanted to please your customers, but we did not exactly have a professional experience. I mean professionally like you wanted." I wanted to be truthful with her. "I must admit, when you saw me naked, I was shocked. Then I saw how that had affected you, and I felt sorry."

She laughed. "I am the one who should be sorry. It terrified me. My uncle already doubted my abilities, and I wanted to prove him wrong, but everything with you was..." she left it hanging.

"I am not sorry, though," I said.

"About what?" she said.

"About you seeing me naked," I said. "It is such a personal thing, and to be honest, after the initial shock, it didn't bother me. I think maybe that was the first time I thought about you differently."

"Differently?" she asked. "You mean sexually?"

"No, not like that," I said. "Like you might be more than a worker trying to kill me. Like you were someone I might like to know rather than someone I should report to management. After our drink together in the pub that same night, I guess I had feelings for you."

"That quick?" she said. "I didn't think about you that way until our lunch together. To be honest, I was busy fearing for my job."

"Well, our curious encounters were surreal. They were dangerous liaisons with injuries. Something was pushing us together, but far too hard," I said.

She laughed. "I'll say."

"Anyway, when I got home, I couldn't get you out of my mind," I said.

"Really?" she said. "I'd have thought you'd be happy to be far from someone hell bent on hurting you."



"And what about you?" I said.

"Me? Well, I admit it seemed weird we kept running into each other, literally. But there was something about you. You were always so nice not to turn me in, and you never seemed mad. Even after I almost killed you at the retreat. I guess I liked that about you, being nice and all."

"Nice?" I said in mock surprise. "That's not who you date, that's the guy you become friends with."

"No, no," she assured. "I want my date to be friends with me. Friends with benefits."

"I hope more than friends," I said.

"Most assuredly," she said as she leaned up and kissed me.

She tasted like brandy mixed with something I couldn't place, but enjoyed. I felt stirrings and our bodies tensed with anticipation. We finally parted, and she breathed out heavily while staring into my eyes.

I brushed a strand of hair from her face and smiled. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"Why does it feel like we have done this before," she said in a whisper. "We haven't made love, yet I feel like I know what it will be like."

"And what will it be like?" I asked.

"Wonderful," she said as she undid my shirt, rubbing her hands along my chest.

"I have to agree with you," I said, pleased with where this was headed. "I feel like I have known you for years. Loved you for years."

Her hand stopped, and I wondered if I had gone too far using the four-lettered word.

"Love?" she asked.

"Sorry, I don't mean to scare you," I said in a panic. "I sometimes wonder if I even know what love is."

She stared into my eyes, and I grew nervous. It felt like love, but was it really? Why did it feel like I had known her for so long if our relationship was just starting? She felt it too. Wasn't that love?

"I am sorry, if I made you feel uncomfortable," I said.

She put her fingers to my lips. "Shhh," she whispered. "You think you don't know what love is, Harry, but this is love, right here and now. I feel the same."

She removed her fingers and pressed her lips to mine. This time she moved on top of me and I felt the curves of her body press against me in an intoxicating way. I slid my hands over her backside and down

her thighs, the feeling sending waves of pleasure through both of us. She moved her hands down the sides of my legs. Our hands locked, and she sat up, straddling me as she placed my hands on her breasts. Feeling her excitement excited me, and she rocked her hips back and forth over me.

A loud knock on the door interrupted us, and I released her breasts as she stopped moving.

“Who the hell can that be?” I said in disgust.

“Robby?” Mercy suggested.

“Oh, God, I hope not,” I said, feeling anxious.

“Answer it. This will put her ambitions to rest,” Mercy said. “I want her to see us together.”

I buttoned my shirt until Mercy put her hands on mine to stop me. “Don’t.”

I realized why she didn’t want me to and smiled. I pulled her down again and kissed her as the knocking sounded once more. They seemed anxious.

“I’ll be back,” I said, slipping out from underneath her. I looked as disheveled as Mercy’s hair and shirt. She leaned over the back of the couch to watch me.

I opened the door and Georgie barged through, ignoring Mercy and the dim lights as he paced around the room. “Thank God, you are here, Harry,” Georgie said in a nervous tone. “I need to talk with you.”

Georgie stopped and looked at me before turning to the couch where Mercy waved at him, grinning.

“Oh, I am so sorry, Harry. I didn’t realize you were entertaining,” Georgie said, embarrassed. “I’ll talk with you later.”

He started for the door when Mercy stopped him. “You will not talk with him later,” she said. “You will talk with him now.”

“What?” Georgie and I said in unison.

Mercy smoothed her clothes as she moved around the couch towards me. “You will talk with your friend, Harry. I need to shower and get ready for bed, anyway.”

“Miss, I am so sorry,” Georgie said.

“My name is Mercy, and you need not be sorry,” she said smiling. “Harry and I can resume our discussions later.”

She slid her arms around me and whispered in my ear. “I expect you in my room when you are finished.”

She kissed my cheek and left. Georgie and I were staring dumbfounded as the door closed behind her.

"Bloody fucking hell, mate!" Georgie said. "Why did you answer the door? I like her!"

"We thought it was Robby," I said.

"What?" Georgie said, confused.

I shook my head. "Never mind. What is so damn important?"

"I am going to be a father," Georgie said matter of fact. He looked ready to hyperventilate.

"Bloody hell!" I said in disbelief.

"It's true," he said, pacing once more. "She took one of those tests and it was positive."

"How?" I said. "Surely you've used protection all these years."

"Of course," he said in a panic. "It didn't work this time, or that time, or whenever."

"Well, how do you feel?" I said.

"Terrified," he said. "Me, a dad? Come on then, you can say it. I am the last person who should be a dad."

"Don't you want kids?" I asked.

"Course," he said. "But not until I grew up."

I laughed, and this made him nervous. "I hate to break it to you, mate, but you have grown up."

"Bloody hell!" he said before taking a seat in a chair.

"What about Pen?" I said. "What did she say about it?"

"I don't know, I left after she told me," he admitted.

"You left?" I asked.

"Told her I was getting ice," he said.

"You don't even have an ice bucket," I said.

"Right, can I borrow one?" Georgie said before putting his head in his hands and moaning. "This was supposed to be a romantic trip and proposal, but now it's all bollocksed."

"Really, mate?" I said, trying to ease his mind. "You proposed to her, and she accepted. Now you are going to have a beautiful child together? Nothing is bollocksed. It sounds romantic to me."

"You think so?" he said, lifting his head.

"Of course," I said. "Go to your future wife and mother of your child. She is probably scared and upset after you left."

"Fuck!" he said, realizing his mistake. "You're right, mate. What was I thinking? She is pregnant and I upset her," he stood and headed for the door.

"Georgie?" I said, stopping him. "The ice bucket is by the sink."

"Oh, right," he said before heading to the kitchen to retrieve it.

He opened the door, and I stopped him just as he was about to leave. "Don't forget to get ice in the bucket," I said as he nodded. "Oh, and order some champagne. She will forgive you. Go celebrate with your beautiful fiancée and congratulations!"

"Right!" he said before walking down the hallway towards the elevator. "Champagne!" he said as I closed the door.

\* \* \*

I stood in the hallway for an eternity before knocking on the door. I had waited for an older couple to enter the elevator and leave before I knocked, though I did not think they had even noticed me.

The room was silent, and I grew nervous. Was she asleep? Did I misunderstand her? I had taken a shower and cleaned up before coming to see her, but the delay made me nervous. I knocked again, this time louder.

"Come in!" Mercy called out.

I opened the door, and the room was dark save for the light in the bathroom. It was like the room I'd had last winter, two queen beds separated by a table and lamp, a cozy seating area in the back of the room with a tele on a small table against the far wall.

"Have a seat, I am almost done," Mercy said through the cracked bathroom door.

The clean scent of a shower filled the humidity in the room, and there was a touch of perfume that enticed me with its fragrance. I moved to the back of the room and sat in a chair. I wanted to sit on the bed, but that seemed too forward.

"Nice room," I said, breaking the silence.

"Just like the one you had last winter," she said.

"Yes," I agreed.

I heard sounds as she set things down on the countertop, and then there was silence. The door swung open, and she entered the room back-lit by the bathroom light. She was naked, and my mouth fell open.

"I thought it would be only fair since I saw you naked last winter," she said.

"Yes, only fair," I said as I stared at her beautiful physique.

"Are you going to just stare?" she said. "I am cold."

"Oh, yes!" I said, jumping out of my chair. I grabbed a spare blanket from the end of the bed and wrapped it around both of us before gently kissing her. "Is that better?"

"Yes, but I would be warmer if your skin was against mine," she said, staring into my eyes. "I can help."

Within a minute, we were in our birthday suits entangled under the covers. She smelled so sweet, and I discovered the fragrance I had detected earlier was dominant behind her ears. I kissed her lips, her neck and her body as she moved her fingertips across me. We moved as if old lovers, knowing what each desired.

That familiar sensation washed over me, and I knew I could not live without her in my life. This was surely love, and it enveloped us as we enveloped each other. Any lingering thoughts of Robby were erased as I held onto the person I would spend the rest of my life with.

I kissed her and pulled her into me so that we merged into one. Each touch, breath, and tensing of our bodies increasing our desires. We were one. A singular part of the Universe that had thrust us together so painfully. Now there was no pain, only pleasure.

\* \* \*

When I woke, Mercy's body draped over me, and my arm cradled her softly. She still smelled sweet, and emotions swept me away once gain. I looked at her peaceful form and everything in the world felt right. We belonged to each other as it was meant to be.

She stirred, and the feel of her soft body moving against mine was exciting. I held back my passions to let her sleep longer. No light spilled around the curtains, so it was not yet morning. I turned my head gently and spied the clock next to us. It read 3:42 AM. I turned back, staring into the ceiling.

I had never felt so relaxed and certain of myself. I couldn't wait to finish Ricki's book so I could get on with my life with Mercy. She stirred again, and I brushed hair away from her face.

She squeezed my left leg between her legs and moved her hand across my chest as she woke. "Mr. Holden, are you coming on to me?" she said with eyes closed.

The warm rich smell of her in my arms and the squeezing of my leg brought me back alert, and I slid my arms down her back lovingly. "Miss Cummings, I would never presuppose such a thing."

She moved her hand down my chest and came to rest below my navel. "I will presuppose, sir," she said before moving her hand further down.

I could not resist and rolled her over onto her back. I began a series of kisses from her neck down her body, nibbling on her ear, lips and other body parts as I moved downward.

She arched in pleasure, and it aroused me. She finally grabbed my head and pulled me on top of her. The feeling of *déjà vu* was strong as I enveloped her once more and we connected deeply. It was more than making love. It was like finding a lost treasure you'd never realized you'd lost. Now that you had found it again, you never wanted to let it go.

I whispered into her ear as we moved in unison. "I love you."

She responded with a deep, sensual breath. "Yes."

Neither of us could have imagined such an experience awaited us for all this time, and now that it had arrived, we didn't want it to end. Waves of pleasure crashed against us, and we rocked back and forth on the seas of passion before being washed ashore, tired, but satiated from the journey. Admiral Boring was no more.

**I**t was obvious I wouldn't have anything to celebrate with, but I searched anyway. I had delivered the final version of the book to the publisher that morning, and celebrations were in order. Later that afternoon, I would meet Georgie at the pub for a much-deserved dinner and pints. But now, something other than tea was required to mark the occasion.

Pen would not be joining us at the pub as she stayed home to care for their son. Georgie tried to back out to stay and help her, but she had insisted he go celebrate my important milestone. I rather think she needed a break from Georgie's overzealous attentions doting on her and their new son.

Born George Albert Williams II, their son had weighed in at a hefty 3.74 kilos at birth and was increasing in weight over the last three weeks. Pen had persevered through his birth well considering her slight stature and was well on her way to recovery. I had never seen her so happy, and Georgie walked around like a proud peacock, impressing everyone who would listen about the over-generous weight of their son.

I was happy for the both of them and imagined myself there someday. Unfortunately, those days seemed too far off as Mercy and I sat a thousand kilometers from each other, enmeshed in our careers, she preparing to start hers. I was waiting for her Zoom call, but she would not be available for at least fifteen more minutes, so I spent the time straightening up my workspace and searching for an apéritif as if she were coming in person.

I missed her dearly since the brief three nights in Snowchute during the wedding. We followed that by two fabulous nights in Paris during the holiday, but then a long stretch since. Her schedule was brutal as she worked hard to finish her schooling by the June graduation. I had slaved over the book, finishing it in April so the publisher had time to format, print and distribute by June. June was an important month for both of us.

Ricki and Annie's wedding had been a success, marred only by a minor incident involving paparazzi that Sheriff Wilkinson's deputies handled neatly. I played my role as best man brilliantly, even if I said

so myself, and helped launch them on their romantic island getaway the following day.

After that miraculous first night with Mercy, I had transformed into the best man flawlessly, and even Mr. Goldstein had given high praise. Robby had relinquished her pursuit, despite her threats, but I suspected Annie and Ricki had played a role in getting her to change her mind. I'd walked on cloud nine for months, relishing the wondrous feelings of love as I channeled that passion into my writing. Even I was impressed with the results, though my editor made me tone down the more flowery prose in the end.

Nonetheless, it was finished and off to the printers. I was still on cloud nine. Love was an intoxicating adventure, and both of us were experiencing it for the first time. The distance made it daunting, but we texted almost daily, called at least once a week, and connected through Zoom once or twice each month so we did not forget what each other looked like.

Not bloody likely, considering she occupied my dreams each night. I had found my Juliet and I her Romeo. Not even distance could quench that flame.

"I love you," Finn said as he walked past my laptop waiting for Mercy to connect.

He had become enamored with her as much as me and learned to say, "I love you," mimicking how we often ended each call. Though they had never met, I pictured him casting me aside for her feminine affections once she came to London. Though I knew it was silly, I was jealous of my little friend and his interest in my lady. Love was a powerful emotion that often led to silly behavior from all parties.

I put the last of the dirty teacups in the sink and spotted a bottle of port hidden behind cookbooks on a shelf across the kitchen. It was rather old, and I wondered if such a thing went bad. I decided it best not to test it and threw the bottle out.

I rummaged through several more cabinets before giving up. If I had any liquor, it was thrown out long ago. I never drank at home except for occasional wine.

Finn said, "I love you," again, but this time, the laptop spoke back.

"I love you, too, Finn. Is Harry there?" Mercy said in a warm voice.

I looked over at the table and Finn was puffing up his feathers and spreading his wings in joy.

"Bloody hell!" he squawked as I moved the laptop around so she could see me.



"My, isn't he feeling his oats this morning?" Mercy said smiling at me. "How are you, Harry? Big day!"

"Hello, love. Big day indeed," I said. The distance made the heart grow fonder. "Best part of the day is just starting."

"I agree," she said, blowing me a kiss. "Unfortunately, I can't talk long. They are doing evaluations earlier, and I am up in a few minutes."

"Damn, I wanted to read you the ending," I said. "Is this an important evaluation?"

She nodded. "With Mr. Singh."

"Oh, dear," I said, realizing the significance. Mr. Singh was the dean of the school and was instrumental in the placement at the end of the year. "You'll want to impress him for sure. I understand."

"Yes, I am nervous," she admitted. "He always looks at me like I have leprosy."

"Maybe that is his way of showing his interest in your career," I said, trying to calm her.

"Yes, I am sure that is it," she said.

"I thought you said you were top three in your class," I said.

"I know. I am, but I can never forget my bumbling antics in Snowchute. It keeps me on edge, like I will turn some corner and knock Mr. Singh down," she said.

"Oh God, no!" I said. "I don't want to compete with another suitor, especially one as accomplished as Mr. Singh."

"Ha-ha," she said, smiling. "Come to think of it though, he is better looking than you."

"Then I will don my armor and make my way yonder to challenge him to a duel," I said, teasing. "No man shall have thee save I."

"Hmmm. Maybe not a great idea considering he also holds a black belt in some martial arts," she said all serious.

"Then, I am defeated. I concede to the better man and wish you and Mr. Singh a grand and wondrous life together," I said, bowing.

"As if," she said, laughing. "Although maybe we could have a few dozen children together."

"I love you," Finn said as he jumped on the keyboard and rubbed the screen with his beak.

"Another suitor?" Mercy said. "Oh, dear! You have been vanquished, Harry."

"I shall always cherish Snowchute," I said, bowing again.

"I so wish I was there," Mercy said, frowning. "What happens if I don't get Paris?"

"Don't think about it. With your record and how you are going to wow Mr. Singh today, you'll have your pick of the litter," I said, trying to reassure her.

It was frustrating not knowing where she would be placed, and it weighed heavily on both of us. Based on the prestigious school's academic rigor, placement could be at any top hotel around the world. Though students never got to choose, being in the top five often brought Paris to the forefront.

"What if they send me to Dubai?" she said, moaning. "I don't want to live in the desert."

"They will not send you to Dubai," I said. "I am certain it will be Europe."

"Bloody hell!" Finn squawked again. He sensed our distress.

"Damn straight, Finn. Bloody hell!" she said.

"Hey," I said, looking in her eyes. "You are the woman I love and plan to spend the rest of my life with. I will travel the globe to see you, even the desert," I put my fingers up to the screen, and she placed hers against mine. "I love you," I said

"And I love you, Harry Holden," she said, kissing the air with her lips. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck, love," I said, sending an air kiss back.

She disconnected, and I sat back as Finn flapped his wings. "Bloody hell!" he squawked again.

"You're spot on, Finn," I said.

\* \* \*

"She fears they will send her to Dubai," I said between a bite of chips.

"That would be splendid news," Georgie said, placing his pint down. "She could meet a rich oil minister and join his harem."

"Hilarious, mate," I said sounding too glum considering this was a celebration.

"Look, when your book sells, and it will sell, you'll make millions and can compete with oil ministers," Georgie said laughing. "Cheer up, mate, you'll be together."

"I'm pleased the book is finished and very proud of it, but millions seem unlikely," I said. "I only get five percent of sales."

"Five percent of a boatload of money is a boatload of money!" Georgie said. "Trust me, mate, this is going to be big."

His story was excellent, and the incident in Snowchute followed by a wedding had drummed up incredible interest. When I talked to Vivica months earlier, her boyfriend Ronald had predicted a hundred million in sales the first year. I didn't believe that, but maybe a million. It would be enough money to travel to wherever Mercy ended up.

"I miss her, mate," I said before taking a drink from my pint.

"I know," Georgie said. "Any chance you two can get together before she goes to wherever?"

"Maybe," I said. "But it depends on whether I am on the book tour. The book releases at the same time. Chances are, we'll still be thousands of kilometers away."

"Rough, that" Georgie said.

"Ricki just sent me an invitation to their anniversary concert at The O2," I said, changing the subject. "Tickets for you and Pen. He's even putting me up at the Brown's Hotel where he and Annie are staying."

"Nice," Georgie said. "But I am not much into Latino sounds, mate. Maybe I should stay home and watch Junior while you and Pen go."

"Yes, you know my Latino collection is quite large," I said, frowning. "Don't be ridiculous, you will come with Pen."

"I am not sure she will want me there," Georgie said. "Lately, I feel like she is trying to push me out the door whenever she can."

"Listen, mate. You can't smother her and your son twenty-four seven," I said. "You are a doting husband and father, but she needs a break. Think about what she went through. Three point seven four kilos! Bloody hell."

"You're right, my mum said the same thing," he said. "Look, I can't help it. I love them so much. I am happy, what else can I do?"

"Have pints with me like old times," I said. "Let Pen settle into a routine. When the concert rolls around, she'll be ready for a date night."

"Date night?" Georgie said perking up. "That could be nice."

"Especially at the Brown's."

"Too steep for me, mate," he said. "I am not a millionaire like you."

"Well, you have friends in high places," I said. "Ricki insisted you both stay there."

"That man is so..." Georgie said at a loss for words. "Please thank him."

"Will do," I said. "I just wish Mercy could come."

"Why can't she?" Georgie asked. "They work them like slaves at their first job?"

"More than likely," I said. "The first year is critical. If you don't impress, it may be your last job."

"Bloody hell," Georgie said. "She chose the wrong profession, mate."

"She likes it and is good at it, so it's the right one," I said. "It'll just be difficult for us that first year."

"Sorry, Harry. I will be happy to throw back pints with you while you wait. However, if you need other desires satisfied, I do know a young lady looking for a millionaire," Georgie said grinning. "Couldn't hurt to keep the old eye steady and all."

"Sure, I mean if Mercy is going to be dating rich oil ministers, seems only fair," I said grinning.

"That's the spirit, mate!" Georgie said, raising his glass. "Any port in the storm!"

"Any port in the storm!" I said clinking my glass with his, laughing.

"I am going to report you to the misses," Janice said as she dropped off two more pints. "Especially that sweet girl of yours, Harry."

Georgie grabbed Janice around the waist and pulled her close. "But Janice, what would Mike say about all those ports you visited in America?"

"Ha!" she said. "He already knows about those."

"Well, aren't you the vixen?" Georgie said, releasing her.

"Why do you think he doesn't care?" she said, winking.

"Bloody hell!" Georgie said, laughing.

"Your American girl, Mercy," Janice said, "she comin' soon?"

"I wish," I said. "She's still in school and after she graduates, she could end up anywhere in the world."

"Sorry, dear," she said. "I would love to meet her."

"Someday," I said, lifting my glass. "To love!"

"To love!" Georgie said.

"Couple of puffs, you are," Janice said, waving us off as she walked back to the bar.

"A puff, am I?" Georgie said, laughing. "Well my love, I'll tell that young lass you are unavailable."

"Good one, mate," I said, laughing.

So much was happening, I could barely keep up. There were photo shoots, interviews, and book signings as it launched across the world. I was traveling throughout Europe, and the publisher was entertaining an American tour. I would be busy for the next six months as I pushed the book to as many fans as possible.

Fortunately, I had cleared my calendar for Ricki and Annie's anniversary concert the following month. They were on tour together, and based on everything I had read, it was a tremendous success. She sang duets with him in between his regular sets, and the fans loved her. The tabloids were abuzz with the 'child bride' of the hot Latino pop star.

Vivica hated that moniker and had insisted Ronald prevent the National Voice from calling her that, or she would cut him off from his precious source. When she got going, she was as unstoppable as her father.

As usual, Mr. Goldstein eschewed reporters as he steered Ricki and Annie's course to heights only a few like Elvis and Michael Jackson had known. They were young, they were on top, and the train would not stop. The tabloids spoke of rumors that Annie would sign her own deal with a label and begin recording her first album. I knew it would happen; she was very talented.

I was in Zurich for a book signing but took the day off to visit Mercy at school. She'd graduated and was waiting for her placement. She claimed they would announce it today, so I was driving the hour distance to the small town to be with her when she found out.

We were both nervous, but I felt certain they would place her in Paris after the wonderful reviews she'd garnered from field work over the holidays. She was a natural, and everyone loved her.

She had given me the address of the school, and I was making my final ascent up the mountainside. It was both a hospitality school and resort for winter travelers who skied on the nearby glacier. It was beautiful and seemed less wild than the Rocky Mountains of Snowchute. Perhaps I was just a Euro-snob who preferred the civilized environment of the Alps.

I parked the car and walked into the main entrance of the resort, checking in with the front desk to get my bearings. I was told I could

wait in the bar while Mercy finished her final meeting with Mr. Singh, but I stayed in the foyer instead lest I drink my nervousness away. I texted Mercy where I was and waited.

Though the resort was not ostentatious, it serviced a high level of clientele based on the cars coming and going past the front door. While I waited, I spotted two Ferraris and a Hummer which were not common in Europe where petrol was so expensive. The beautiful young woman escorted from the vehicle looked accustomed to wealth. I thought about my Volkswagen rental and laughed. It was a fine car, but not worthy of the resort.

“Harry!” Mercy’s voice called across the foyer.

She looked radiant and yet distressed, and I took that to be a bad sign.

“Can we please get out of here?” she pleaded. “Take me to lunch in the village.”

“Sure,” I said. “What happened?”

“I’ll tell you after we are down there,” she said, grabbing me in a tight embrace. I felt her body tense, revealing her placement had not gone as planned.

I kissed her and grabbed her hand to lead her to the car. Her distress was palpable, and I prayed I could ease her mind. Wherever she went, we would make it work.

By the time we found parking and seats in an outdoor café, her initial distress had receded. She wore a beautiful summer dress that fit into the natural beauty surrounding us. I had missed her and feared the reveal. We ordered lunch and drinks, and I waited patiently. She ordered white wine while I ordered a Perrier, conscious of my mountainous drive to Zurich.

“Well?” I asked, too impatient to continue waiting. “Dubai?”

“No, that would have been better,” she said, frowning. “He said I was one of the best students he’d ever had and wanted to reward me by placing me in one of the most prestigious hotels in the world. Naturally, I thought Paris, but no.”

She stopped to take a breath, and I was nearly falling from the edge of my seat.

“So?” I urged, trying to stay calm.

“I am going to Hong Kong!” she said, holding back obvious tears.

The words rang through my ears, but my mind couldn’t process them. Did she say Hong Kong? I knew that name. It wasn’t in Europe. Damn, it was in China!

"Oh, no," I said without emotion. We would still be thousands of kilometers away. "I am so sorry, love."

"Right?" she said. "What the f? And he calls it a reward!"

"I will visit you as much as I can, dear," I said in a valiant attempt to console her.

"I am sorry, Harry. I know, this affects both of us," she said, grabbing my hand across the table. "The Universe tried so hard to smash us together and now it's tearing us apart. Far apart!"

I shook my head in disbelief. She was right. Our relationship was so right, so pre-destined, and yet we were being tested. Was that it? A test of our love? If we survived this, we would survive anything? I already knew I wanted to be with her forever.

She let go of my hand and drank wine. "I feel like getting drunk and... other things," she said.

"Come with me," I said.

"Yeah, that is the idea," she laughed.

"No, come with me to Zurich," I said. "Spend time with me and come to my book signing."

"I have a few days before I leave for Hong Kong," she said. "No reason not to."

There was a tiny glimmer of a smile surfacing on her face, and she shot me a mischievous grin. "What kind of room do you have?"

"Rather small, but ideal if you want to be close to the one you love," I said.

Her face finally bloomed into a smile, and it lit up my day brighter than the sun overhead. "I would love to be close to you," she said.

I leaned over the table and kissed her, nearly tipping our drinks.

"I must pack a few things," she said.

"No problem. My signing isn't until tomorrow afternoon," I said.

"Oh, goody!" she said. "I know how to spend that time."

It would be a much needed diversion considering the news about Hong Kong. I was just as upset, but wanted to remain calm to help us make it work. Bad news was neither wanted nor expected, but we had to deal with it, nonetheless. Moving forward despite obstacles was an inherent part of life, and in England, they called that characteristic a stiff upper lip.

The clock read 10:30 AM, but it felt more like five. I stirred from our passionate night of love as I spooned Mercy in the hotel room in Zurich. Despite our exertions, she was beautiful when she slept. Her body merged into mine like a key in a lock, and I was entranced by her curves, clinging to them as I prayed for the moment to last forever.

I slowly traced my finger down her side and brought it back up the front, ending on her right earlobe. Before meeting her, I had only read about incredible experiences like these or watched them in the movies. But it wasn't the same as experiencing it yourself. This lovely person, the person I wanted to spend eternity with, had become an extension of myself. A yin to my yang. Two sides of the same coin. One could not be whole without the other. It was a powerful feeling you gave yourself over to without pause. You would do anything for them, and they for you.

I thought about Hong Kong and closed my eyes. It would be difficult, and she would need to spend at least a year there to gain the experience and recommendations needed to travel wherever she wanted. But in reality, they preferred three years. Though she hadn't any real preference, she loved Paris, but anything in Europe would work.

Of course, I preferred England, but a short train ride or flight to the continent was reasonable. But a trans-global flight to China was something else entirely. I didn't even want to think about how many hours the flight would be from London. Both of us would need at least a week to see the other after factoring in the travel time. Even America would have been better. At least she had family and friends there. But Hong Kong? She didn't know anyone.

She stirred and turned to face me. I held her and rubbed her back.

"I don't want to leave you," she whispered. "I can't."

I kissed her and pulled her tighter. "I don't want you to leave."

Tears fell onto the pillow, and I wiped them from her face. "What if it will always be like this?" she cried.

"No, no, it won't," I said, wiping more tears. "We will be together, I know it."

"How?" she sobbed.

"I don't know, but we will not be beaten," I said. "We will be together, forever. I promise."

She buried her face into my chest and sobbed. I continued rubbing her back, trying to calm her despite my own concerns. It was easy to



talk about a stiff upper lip, but difficult to have one. My heart ached and my stomach churned with the fear of losing her.

After a short while, her tears subsided, and she looked into my eyes. I saw love, and it made me melt like the first time we kissed in that forest so far away. I laughed and kissed her. She laughed as we embraced.

It didn't take long for our pain and sorrow to turn into heated passion. There was an urgent energy driven by our fears of leaving each other. It was a miracle that had brought us together, and nothing could keep us apart. If we had only a few days before we separated, we would take advantage like it would be our last time together.

I thought about the time, but tossed that aside in favor of her taste and touch, igniting my desires. We were once again a single entity as we wrestled our passions with a fervor that spoke of future longing and pain. Today we were here, today we would become one.

After only a month, I was burned out from the incessant book signings. So as I settled into my vast room at the Brown's Hotel, I was ready for a respite. I wanted to see Ricki and Annie again. Even seeing Georgie and Pen would be a special treat after my long absence. Spending night after night in distant hotel rooms was killing me.

Finn ignored me on the Zoom calls with Aunt Lucy and squawked, "Bloody hell!" in the background to protest my absence. I wondered if it was me he missed or if it was the calls with Mercy that had become a ritual during the boring days at home.

Mercy had settled into her new position at the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong. She admitted it was spectacular and shared a small room with a coworker. She was living at her job, making it even more difficult. The long hours and lack of a personal life took its toll.

She loved the work, but admitted she was exhausted at the end of every shift. This made it difficult to get out and explore Hong Kong. The protests against China over the self-governing of Hong Kong were a present threat, so even if she wanted to leave, there was an inherent risk. She was not happy, and it pained me to see her suffer.

Being so far apart brought feelings of despair, and the incredible few days in Zurich only worsened those feelings when we remembered what we were missing. The time difference exacerbated our situation. When it was 9:00 PM in Europe, it was 3:00 AM in Hong Kong. Six hours didn't seem like a lot, but when both of us were working unusual hours, it made connecting challenging.

Then there was the cost. They allotted her a specific amount of long-distance calls at the hotel's expense, but it was to be used to talk with family in the states. I footed the bill for our calls since she didn't make much money fresh out of school. Fortunately, she didn't have to spend much either. Her housing and meals were paid for if she ate in the staff dining room, so she saved nearly all her money for a visit to me and her family.

I insisted I would pay for her to come to London, so she could spend her money visiting America and her family. She'd said her father was wealthy enough to pay for him and her mother to visit Hong Kong, but he had also said he would rather see Antarctica. She hadn't

taken that to be a good sign. Maybe they could meet in the middle and see her in Europe while she visited me. I needed to meet them, eventually.

It was all academic since she could not leave Hong Kong until after the holidays. I struggled to imagine five more months without her, and she felt the same. It was an ache we could barely tolerate.

I eyed my luggage sitting by the dresser and decided to unpack. I would be here three nights while Ricki and Annie were in town. The third night would be the show, and I looked forward to seeing it considering I'd only seen online videos Vivica posted. I wanted to see them sing their duets live.

Georgie and Pen would join us the last night for the show. They wanted to stay longer, but it was challenging to get someone to watch young Georgie. Both Georgie's and Pen's parents worked, so babysitting a young child was not always possible. As it ended up, Pen's sister agreed to watch him for the one night.

She was a single woman with no roommate and loved her nephew. But she'd had to take off a day from work to make the schedule work, and I had thanked her for the sacrifice on my behalf. She'd responded it wasn't because of me, but because of Ricki Heart. She was a huge fan, so I promised an autographed copy of his biography. It was the least I could do.

I finished unpacking and headed downstairs to meet Ricki and Annie for dinner. They had just arrived in London a couple hours earlier and were excited to see me. I was excited to see them and hoped my casual wear would be appropriate for dinner at the Brown's. I wore a jacket but skipped the tie which I hated.

The maître de gave me a skeptical once over, but led me to the reserved table, anyway. Once seated, they served me a pint of bitter without my asking. It would be top service tonight now that Ricki Heart was in town. I waited thirty minutes, filling the time by sampling the bread and butter. Finally, the maître de escorted them back.

Both looked fabulous, and I swore that sweet little Colorado girl had been replaced by an international model. Her brilliant designer dress accented all the right things, and she had aged beyond her nineteen years. The child bride had grown up. Ricki didn't look any different, but he seemed far happier.

"Harry!" Ricki said as they walked up.

I stood and hugged him before hugging Annie. She was fuller than I remembered and stunning.

"You clean up rather nice," I said to Annie. "You are breathtaking."

"Stop, Harry, please," she said. "We are friends, you don't have to say that."

"I do if I mean it," I said. "You are lovelier than I remember—if that's possible."

She laughed. "And you are most handsome, sir."

"Hardly," I said. "But thank you."

"My God, Harry. It has been too long," Ricki said as we sat down. "But you look great, except for the concern in your eyes, my friend."

"Mercy?" Annie asked.

I nodded. "Yes, it's difficult."

"I was so shocked when she told me Hong Kong," Annie said in protest. "What the hell? I mean one of their best and they exile her to China."

"We are so sorry, Harry. You two are wonderful together," Ricki said. "You'll be together, eventually."

"I know," I said through pursed lips. "Enough of me. Tell me about the tour."

"Oh, my God!" Annie started. "Unbelievable!"

"She is the star of my show," Ricki said.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Stop, your fans love you, Ricki. They are just happy I am making you happy. The women are all jealous though."

"That is true," he said. "But, Harry, you will not believe the rave reviews she has received from our duets. It is like *A Star Is Born*."

"Stop, honey. You're making me blush," Annie said, patting his arm.

"I believe it," I said. "I have read many of the reviews and seen video that Vivica sent me. How is Vivica and Ronald?"

"Ugh. That reporter?" Annie said.

"Yes," I said.

"Annie is not a big fan of his," Ricki admitted. "She doesn't like what he writes about her."

"I thought Vivica controlled that?" I said.

"She does," Ricki said. "But to be honest, he can only do so much when his editor overrules him."

"What things?" I asked. "It can't be worse than what I read over here."

"It isn't," Ricki said. "But they printed that her gamble trapping a pop star had paid off."

"That prick," Annie said gritting her teeth. "As if I fell in love with Ricki just to become a singer. I was going to be a singer, anyway!"

"We know, love," Ricki said. "Like I said, you must learn to ignore such things."

"Easier said than done when Vivica throws it back in my face," Annie said.

"I'm sorry, are you two not getting along?" I said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"It is not like that, Harry," Annie said. "I still love her like my sister, I just don't like her boyfriend."

"Good, you had me concerned," I said.

"I couldn't dislike Vivica. She's helped me so much on this tour," Annie said, smiling. "Without her, I'd be lost."

"It is true," Ricki said. "Vivica is basically managing Annie's career like Lenny does mine."

"Career?" I said. "Do tell."

Annie turned giddy. "I am going to make my own album on Ms. McCawlie's label! It'll be my own music, with her help of course."

"That is fantastic," I said. "When?"

"In the fall," Ricki said. "I hate for her to leave me, but she needs to make her debut as a solo artist as soon as possible."

"Wow, that is so fantastic," I said. "Ms. McCawlie is lucky to have you."

"Other way around, Harry," Annie said.

"You will do great," I said. "Allison has asked me to do her biography."

"Of course," Ricki said. "After the reviews mine has garnered, you will never worry about work again, Harry."

"I guess," I said.

"Please say you will do it, Harry," Annie begged. "I want you to come there when I am recording. I want a friend to be there."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes, really," she insisted. "Please say you will."

"How can I resist?" I said not certain how to make that work. "I will have my agent contact Ms. McCawlie and see what can be worked out. My current book signing tour is scheduled through the holidays, but I'll be honest, I've had enough."

"Oh, everything is so perfect!" Annie said. "Oh, Robby says hello."

"Ah," I said. "Tell her I said the same."

"Don't worry, Harry. She isn't pining for you," Annie said. "She's found another interest. A professional snowboarder."

"Well, good for her," I said, relieved. "Sounds like a better fit than me."

"Oh, yes," she said. "And he is quite handsome. Oh, sorry, Harry. I meant nothing by that."

"It is alright," I said. "She deserves someone like that."

"And Mercy deserves you," Annie said, trying to make me feel better. "I wish she were here."

"Me, too," I said.

"I will tour Asia next year, Harry. Maybe you and Mercy can join me in Hong Kong?" Ricki said, trying to take the sting out of Mercy not being there.

"Maybe," I said. "Thank you, Ricki."

"Oh, I almost forgot," Ricki said. "I have a surprise for you for being such a great friend and fabulous writer. A wonderful way to celebrate the book's success. However, I will not reveal it until the night of the concert."

"He won't even tell me," Annie said.

"These things can be delicate to arrange, and I think it best to keep it close to the vest," Ricki said. "Lenny was against it, but I insisted."

"Against what?" Annie said.

"Hush, you will both find out before the concert," Ricki insisted.

"Thank you, Ricki. Whatever it is," I said. "Is the book doing well?" I signed autographs and watched people buy them at every event, but knew nothing about sales. The publisher was tight lipped but promised I would receive my first check in the third quarter and every quarter after that.

"Number four on the New York times best sellers list," Ricki said. "And it has only been a month."

"You mean I'm a New York Times bestselling author?" I said dumbfounded.

"Yes, and you deserve it," Ricki said.

"I nearly cried when I read parts of the book," Annie said. "Thank you for being so gracious with me."

"You know I could never hurt you, Annie," I said. "You are one of the best things to happen to Ricki and me."

She started tearing up. "Oh, Harry, thank you. You are both the best thing to happen to me."

"Now, dear, don't ruin your makeup," Ricki said, hugging her.

"I'll be back," she said, getting up to run to the ladies' room.

"I am sorry," I said.

"Don't be, Harry. She is emotional about everything since Snowchute," Ricki said, smiling.

"It's been an incredible journey, Ricki," I said. "Thank you for taking a chance on me."

"Nonsense, my friend, you brought me to life on those pages as you have so many historical naval officers. You are a talented writer, Harry," Ricki said, raising his glass of sparkling water. "To the book!"

"Yes, to the book and to your tour!" I said.

We clinked glasses and drank. Annie returned, looking more composed and refreshed.

"What are we toasting?" she asked.

"The book and the tour, dear," Ricki said.

"I'll drink to that," she said, grabbing her glass. "Don't get me crying again."

We all drank, and then Ricki kissed her. They wore their love on their sleeves and it was a wonderful thing to see. It made me miss Mercy, but I kept my feelings inside. I was here with friends, and I wanted to celebrate their happiness and success, not wallow in my self-pity.

"Is marriage as wonderful as I imagine?" I asked as they parted.

"Better," Annie said. "Are you going to propose to Mercy?"

"What?" I said. "No, that is not why I asked."

"Really?" Ricki said.

"Well, I want to ask her someday, but not now. At least not while we are so far apart."

"It is okay, Harry," Ricki said. "You can confide in us. We will tell no one."

"Well, I have thought about it," I said. "But our lives are out of control. It just doesn't seem like the right time."

Ricki and Annie looked at me and then at each other before breaking into laughter.

"We wouldn't know anything about that, Harry," Annie said between her laughs.

"Sorry, Harry, but our lives were not in a place of calm and serenity when we got engaged or married," Ricki said. "We are not making fun of you. We are trying to support you."

"I know, I know," I said. What was I afraid of? After Zurich, any doubts about our love evaporated.

“Do you want to marry her?” Annie asked.

“More than anything,” While the thought had gone through mind during our current turmoil, I hadn’t actually decided until that very moment. I wanted to be with her forever, so marriage was the next logical step. But this decision only made our situation more depressing.

“Do you think she wants to marry you?” Ricki asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Annie frowned. “You know, Harry.”

I grinned. “Okay, yes, I believe she wants to,” I admitted. “We’ve never talked about it, but when we were in Zurich, I don’t know, it felt like we already were. I love her.”

“Yes, I heard about Zurich,” Annie said with a tight smile. “You should have asked her then.”

“We’ve barely ever been together since Snowchute,” I said. “I guess it feels like it’s too early in our relationship.”

“Hmmm,” Ricki said. “Sounds familiar.”

“Okay, I get it,” I said. “But you guys were in love from the very start. With Mercy and me, it took some time, and awkward hardships.”

“But you knew it, when you realized you loved her, right?” Ricki said. “You knew at that moment you could not live without her?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “That is why it’s so hard to be so far apart. Look, I don’t want to rain on your parade, we will work it out.”

“Of course, you will,” Annie said. “Once you find love, you won’t let it go. Let’s order dinner, I am starving.”

Ricki signaled the server, and I picked up my menu and scanned it. I knew I wanted Mercy, but she was not on the menu. I made a mental note to call her when I got back to the room, regardless of the time. Her roommate might get pissed, but I didn’t care.

\* \* \*

I was putting on my jacket when a knock at the door interrupted me. I opened it to the rush of two men in dark suits grabbing me under each of my arms pushing me up against the wall. My feet dangled two feet above the floor.

“What the...” I stammered as a third man approached.

“Stay still,” he said as he began patting me down, searching from top to bottom. “He is clean.”



The two men dropped me and led me to the table before seating me in a chair. All three stood back and eyed me suspiciously. Two of them were definitely Latino and reminded me of Laser. They looked like trained killers, and I barely concealed my nervousness.

The third man had a lighter skin tone and spoke with an American accent. He was smaller than the other two, but looked just as lethal. He lifted a small radio and spoke into it.

"We are clear," he said before putting it away and turning back to me.

The door pushed open by two more men, one carrying a large duffle bag. What lethal weapons did they have in the bag? They took positions on either side of the door as a woman entered. They closed the door behind her.

"Hello, Harry," she said with a thick Spanish accent. "You know who I am?"

I looked at all the men but answered. "Antonia Ruez," I said.

She smiled and removed her dark sunglasses. I now understood Ricki's boyhood infatuation with her, she was stunning. She looked in her late forties, but easily could pass for late twenties or early thirties. Money was a great equalizer in the fight against ageing.

"Sorry for the theatrics," she said. "But, I am a target no matter where I travel, especially when I carry something of value," she pointed to the large duffel bag.

I remained silent.

"I wanted to thank you for your discretion when writing about me in your book," she said. "I know Ricki told you everything. His naiveté is one of his sweetest attributes. But my support of his career has not always worked out."

I thought about the Los Muchachos Pequenos and what had happened to the men who had abandoned them in New York City. They had each suffered accidents once they returned to Columbia, and I didn't want to suffer a similar fate. It had been quite easy to downplay her role in Ricki's life.

"I love Ricki, and I will do anything to protect him," she said walking around the room. "Mr. Goldstein has been most wonderful for him."

I agreed with that. Mr. Goldstein loved him as the son he never had. He would do anything for Ricki, though probably not murder as Ms. Ruez had.

"Yes, he is a wonderful manager," I said.

“And his choice of you was most fortuitous,” she said, turning back to me. “When I first looked into you and saw what you had written, I was livid.”

Uh-oh, I didn’t want her livid.

“You cannot compare Ricki to some old admiral,” she said in disgust. “He is like an angel.”

I thought about their affair and decided angel was maybe not the right way to describe him. However, I remained silent.

“But, you surprised me,” she said.

“Mr. Goldstein didn’t choose me, Ricki did,” I said. “He loved my earlier books.”

“You see?” she said, pointing at me. “He is an angel to take you under his wing and into his trust, even after reading your books. He is a good judge of people.”

It was a backhanded compliment, but I let it go. I did not want to argue with someone so dangerous.

“Your writing...” she said before pausing, “... is so true to his heart. Ricardo Corazon. His name is appropriate. I named him, you know?”

I didn’t but held my tongue.

“I was in Europe shopping when I heard about Ricki’s show,” she said, explaining. “I called the publisher, and they told me you would be here, so I came to bring you a small token of my appreciation for your efforts on behalf of Ricki, and myself.”

“Thank you,” I said, nervous that the publisher gave out my whereabouts. I supposed there wasn’t anything I should fear, though Laser had warned me I might be targeted because of my relationship with Ricki.

She cocked her head and one of the large men by the door brought over the duffel bag. He opened it and threw it down at my feet. There were bound stacks of freshly printed Euros. I stiffened as I realized what was happening.

“You will write my story as you did Ricki’s,” she said. “However, I will tell you when and where,” she paused. “It won’t be soon. There are things happening which make it... difficult.”

I did not want to know what was happening, but I suspected it had something to do with her brother and the cartel. I did not want to write her biography, especially if it meant going to Columbia, but I would not decline the offer.

“I would love to write your story,” I lied. “Just let me know when.”

“I will contact your agent when the time is right,” she said, signaling her men who moved to the door. “This is not for the book,” She pointed at the duffel bag. “This is a gift. Two-hundred thousand Euros. I have seen your apartment, maybe buy a new one. I doubt your lovely woman, Mercy, would care to live there.”

I stiffened as she admitted she knew where I lived and mentioned Mercy. How did she know so much about me? I didn’t want her to know so much about me. I did not want her money, but I could not refuse.

“Yes, thank you,” I said close to breaking.

She put her glasses on and looked around the room once more before leaving through the door. Her men filed out after her and closed the door, leaving me breathless. I stood and backed away from the money. Drug money.

What was I going to do with two-hundred thousand Euros in cash? I couldn’t go to a bank or invest it. This was money traced to the infamous cartel leader Alfredo Ruez. It was tainted and illegal money. It was blood money. *Shit!*

I had just finished lunch with Pen and Georgie before heading to my room for a quick nap before the show. Pen looked radiant in her new role as a mother, and Georgie still crowed to all who would listen about their new son. It was great to see them both happy. I was happy for all my friends and knew it would be me someday.

The meeting with Antonia the day before had unnerved me, especially after receiving the money. I had fled back to my flat and hid it under my bed, the most ridiculous place I could think of. If someone broke into my flat and stole it, I would be grateful. I did not know what to do with it, but would not mention it to anyone. In fact, I wouldn't mention seeing Antonia at all. If I eventually wrote her biography, I could wait until then before I mentioned her visit to the Brown's. She had said not now, but deep down, I hoped never.

Mr. Goldstein had stopped by while we were eating to say hello and thanked me for the success of the book. It was a top seller, and it translated into even more record and ticket sales. His songs continued to climb the charts and his shows sold out the day tickets went on sale. They had already extended his tour for another six months.

Mr. Goldstein was happier than I had ever seen him, but it was apparent Vivica and Ronald still upset him after I mentioned her name. She would not attend the anniversary concert as originally planned, but Mr. Goldstein didn't elaborate. I suspected it had to do with Ronald.

I was happy for Vivica but concerned about the rift with her father. Without much family myself, I was overly sensitive to familial relationships, especially those of my friends. But I was wise enough not to get in the middle of such rifts. I was disappointed she would not make the show as it had been far too long since I'd seen her. I made a mental note to call her later that week to discuss the concert with her.

I'd tried calling Mercy the day before, but I could not get hold of her. Apparently, they were working her like a dog. It saddened me, and I decided to send flowers to lift her spirits. She needed to know there were many people thinking about her and wishing her well.

Ricki and Annie were hosting an early dinner for us before the show, and I needed rest to get myself ready for the evening's events. I unlocked my door and eyed the freshly pressed clothes on the bed. Ricki had insisted on buying me an 'appropriate' outfit for the show,

and I couldn't refuse him. We had visited several stores the day before until we found the right outfit. Not my style, but I would not disappoint him.

I walked over to the bed and looked them over, noticing a rather beautiful designer dress next to it. They had mixed up someone else's cleaning with my own. I picked up the phone and called the front desk to inform them of this faux pas. I feared it might be a dress for Annie or Pen.

The woman at the front desk was very gracious and said she would send someone up right away. I hung up and looked my clothes over one last time. It was a nice pair of trousers with a shirt intended to be worn untucked. A casual but very expensive jacket completed the ensemble paired with shoes I wouldn't ordinarily wear. That was probably why Ricki had picked them out for me. He had an eye for fashion, something that eluded me. I picked up all the clothes and hung them in the closet.

I returned to the bed and leaned back, beginning to dose. I was awakened by a gentle knock at the door, so I roused myself to answer it. A young man with a cart pushed his way into the room. The cart held a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket.

"Management apologizes for the mistake, sir," the young man said. "Please accept this bottle of Dom Perignon, compliments of the hotel."

"I don't need champagne," I said. "The dress is in the closet."

"Very good, sir," the young man said as he set out a glass and popped the bottle. He gave me a healthy pour. "Please, sir. I cannot return it."

"Fine, whatever," I said, fishing in my pockets for an appropriate gratuity. I handed him the money and thanked him before rushing him out the door. I decided a glass of bubbly would help me nap.

I took the glass and sat in a chair to relax. Dom Perignon was a decadent treat normally beyond my means, but after everything with the book, I deserved it. It was a fitting celebratory drink.

"Damn!" I exclaimed. "He forgot the bloody dress."

I picked up the phone to call them back when a voice called out from the bathroom.

"Don't have them take it," the voice said, and my heart skipped several beats.

"Mercy?" I said in disbelief.

The bathroom door pushed opened, and she came out wearing only a towel. "If they take the dress, I won't have anything but this to wear."

"What the...?" I said, confused.

"Don't I get a glass, too?" she asked, smiling.

"Abso-bloody-lutely," I said as I ran over to her.

We embraced, and I lifted her off the floor, swinging her around as I kissed her deeply.

"Happy to see me?" she asked after I put her down.

"Oh my God, yes!" I said. "But how?"

"Ricki and Annie, I think," she said before kissing me. "I had just got off my shift and there was an envelope on my bed with travel itinerary and tickets to London. I almost called you, but the note said it was a surprise. My manager told me it was okay, so I didn't argue."

"Ricki," I said. "He told me he had a surprise for me but wouldn't tell me what it was until the night of the concert."

She released me and took a step back, spreading her arms. "Surprise!"

"Yes, it is!" I said, grabbing her again. I didn't want to let her go.

We separated, and she looked into my eyes. "Champagne, good sir?"

"My lady, it would be an honor," I said, sweeping her off her feet and carrying her to the bed. I sat her down gently, stealing kisses before retrieving the champagne.

"My word, maybe I don't need champagne, my head is already swimming, good sir. I hope you won't take advantage of me," she said demurely.

"Oh, don't worry, I will," I assured her as I poured a glass and brought it over.

"We should stop meeting like this," she said after a couple sips. "It seems so tawdry to meet naked in hotel rooms."

"Mayhap a fine musical event this evening to change things up?" I suggested.

She grabbed me and unbuttoned my shirt. "Well, not too soon, please. We are in a hotel room. Let's enjoy it a bit."

"My lady!" I said in mock surprise. "What kind of gentleman do you think I am?"

"The perfect kind," she said, pulling me on top of her as she fell back on the bed.

\* \* \*

“Oh my God!” Annie screamed across the dining room as she spotted me with Mercy in our new clothes. “How are you here?”

They hugged each other and nearly broke into tears. I hugged Ricki and whispered in his ear. “Thank you, mate.”

Suddenly, Georgie’s voice called across the room as he and Pen walked in and spotted us. “Bloody hell, is that Mercy?”

The entire dining room was staring at us as we met and exchanged hugs at this auspicious turn in events.

Mercy was all smiles and giggles as she, Pen and Annie swirled in their beautiful new dresses, admiring each other. Annie broke away and grabbed Ricki in a big embrace, kissing him.

“Thank you, honey, thank you!” she said.

“You are all so welcome, my friends,” Ricki said, smiling. “I would do anything for you.”

“And you did, mate,” Georgie said, laughing. “You are an incredible friend.”

“Please, sit,” Ricki urged as we spread out around the table. “There we go, girl boy, girl boy, girl boy. The table is complete.”

“How?” I asked. “This is the best surprise I’ve ever had.”

“This?” Ricki said, waving at Mercy. “This is not the surprise I have for you, Harry.”

“What?” I said. “Surely this is it. What could be better than this?”

“Thank you, Ricki,” Mercy said near tears. She was holding onto my hand, and I squeezed hers reassuringly.

“If this is not the surprise, then what is?” Annie asked.

“I think this is the best surprise,” Pen said. “It is so wonderful to see you again, Mercy.”

“And you all, as well,” Mercy said, trying not to cry.

“Ricki!” Annie said, insisting he share the secret.

“Okay, one minute please,” he said as he checked his phone. “Ah, here it is!”

We looked around the room as the same young man who had delivered the champagne to my room walked over to the table holding a brown envelope.

“Miss Cummings, there is an important letter for you,” he said as he handed her the envelope.

“Thank you,” she said, looking at it in surprise.

Ricki grinned as the rest of us eyed each other, confused. What was this surprise?

The young man stood waiting as Mercy opened it. She pulled out several documents and read them quietly. I could not read what they said, but the letterhead was from the Brown's Hotel.

We were all impatient as she read the documents carefully. Her face betrayed nothing.

"Come on, Mercy, what does it say?" Annie insisted.

Mercy looked up at me in shock. "It's a job offer here at the hotel."

"What?" I said. "Really?"

"Yes, miss," the young man acknowledged. "If you wish to accept, I need it in writing so I can return it to the manager."

She took the pen he handed her.

"What about Hong Kong?" I said. "Can you just quit after a month?"

"Hong Kong gave me a glowing recommendation," she said in shock. "In exchange for a person who wants to go there. We are swapping jobs."

"An exchange?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"Are you going to sign it?" Annie pressed.

Mercy looked confused and eyed each of us, as though searching for permission. "I don't know, I am so confused. Is this real?"

"I assure you, miss. It is real," the young man said.

"Well, love?" I said nervously. Why was she taking so long? This was a dream come true.

"I will live here, in London?" she said in shock. "With you?"

"Do you want to?" I said. "Because that would make me the happiest man in the world."

Tears formed in her eyes and she could not hold them back as she grabbed onto me. "Yes, I want to."

"Maybe I will come back later," the man suggested.

Mercy sat upright and screamed. "You most certainly will not!" She signed the job offer and handed it back to him with his pen.

We thanked him, and he placed the documents back in the envelope before leaving. I didn't know what to say as I held her tightly. I had never felt so much joy.

"Come on then," Annie said, extending her hand to Mercy. "Let's get you cleaned up before you ruin that beautiful dress."



Pen stood with them, and they escorted Mercy out to the ladies' room.

"Ricki..." I started. "I really don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing," he said, smiling. "Did you really think I could stand by while my friends were pulled so far apart? Never."

I began tearing up and grabbed Ricki's hand, squeezing it. "Thank you."

"Bloody fucking hell!" Georgie blurted. "This calls for some champagne!"

I'd drank enough champagne already, but I agreed with him. This called for some more bloody fucking champagne!

\* \* \*

"This is so surreal," Mercy said, lying next to me under the covers. "My life is surreal,"

She lay half on top of me, still sweaty from our exertions. I was on my back, staring at the ceiling as I drifted peacefully. It was surreal, and I relished it to the fullest. But it was overwhelming.

We had shed tears, discussed her move here, and made the most passionate love ever. A considerable feat taking Zurich into account. Ours was a true love story brought to life, and I was finally a part of the story. This was how love conquered all. We were meant to be together forever.

I hugged her. "It is surreal."

I released her and got out of bed, pulling on a plush hotel robe to retrieve bottled water from the fridge. I sat at the table and drank as Mercy pulled on her robe to join me.

The lights and sounds of London spilled around the edges of the heavy curtains, filling the room in a blue twilight that made Mercy glow. I couldn't wipe the smile from my face, and she smiled back as she sat on my lap and kissed me.

"You know, I can kiss you nearly every day, now," she said.

"What?" I said in mock surprise. "There will be days you don't?"

She kissed me again. "While I am staying and working here, we won't see each other every day, honey."

"Damn," I said before laughing. "I still can't believe it."

She stood and walked to the fridge for water. "I keep thinking it will somehow fall apart or turn out to be some cruel joke."

"Not with Ricki," I said. "That man is a veritable saint."

"We have to do something for him!" she blurted. "And Annie."

I thought about all that money under my bed at home and wondered what it could buy a person who already had everything. Somehow, expensive purchases did not seem to fit the circumstance.

"Any ideas?" she asked.

"No," I said, drinking water. My head was fuzzy from the champagne and my ears rang from the incredible show we'd witnessed earlier. The duets Ricki and Annie sang together were lovely, and their love sprang forth for all to see. It was a show I would never forget, especially with Mercy by my side.

"It has to be something simple and yet personal. Something they will both love," she said, sitting down to drink her water.

I thought about it for a moment. "I have an idea."

"What?" she asked.

I stood and pulled her out of her chair, moving her to the edge of the bed to sit her down.

"This may not be appropriate," I said, "but necessary for my idea," I said as I took her hand in mine and knelt down before her. "Mercy Renee Cummings, I love you more than life itself, and it would be my honor to marry you with your consent."

There, I had done it. Maybe not the right time or place, though it felt like it to me. Considering how surreal everything was, this seemed very appropriate.

She looked down at me in shock.

"I do not have a ring to seal this pledge, but you have my promise I will acquire a proper token of my love and your worth," I saw a glittering of tears stream down her face.

"Harry Charles Holden, it is my greatest wish to marry you," she said before breaking down.

I stood up and pulled her into my arms, holding her as we swayed from overpowering emotions. I finally pulled her head up from my chest and kissed her passionately.

She suddenly pushed me back. "Wait, how does this relate to getting something for Ricki and Annie?"

"We are going to ask them to be the Best Man and Maid of Honor at our wedding," I whispered.

She paused in thought before a smile spread across her face. "I like it. Simple, yet personal," she grabbed me and pulled me in for another kiss.

The flames of our passion were reignited, and we gently disrobed each other. I picked her up and moved around the side of the bed, easing her back into the soft sheets before lying down next to her. She glowed like an angel in the dim light, innocent and wonderful. I covered us from the chilly air and embraced her. Though tired from the emotionally charged day and ample champagne, our passion swept us away, lifting us on sweet winds to even greater heights.

## About the Author

This is the second book published by author NH Bruce, although he has published in other genres under a different pen name. This latest novel is the first in a series of books about London biographer, Harry Holden. This book is the culmination of a fifteen year gestation about a fictional Colorado town called Snowchute.



NH Bruce publishes novels traditionally and as *Books by Blog* on his website: [www.nhbruce.com](http://www.nhbruce.com). He published his first novel in 2005, and typically works two or more projects simultaneously. Woven between the releases of other novels, the Harry Holden series continues the tales of love and adventure for the hopeless romantic.

NH Bruce works and lives in Colorado, where he enjoys life with his two daughters and dogs. When not writing, he is often found on the pickle ball court, camping, or riding his bikes.

Visit his website to read his latest *Book by Blog*, and to preview other novels he has published.

"Life isn't something that happens to us, it is something we make for ourselves. Make your life into something wonderful."

-- NH Bruce