



MY

Mystery

BILLIONAIRE

TAYLOR FRISTE

My Mystery Billionaire

An Instalove, Secret Identity Romance

Taylor Frisette



Copyright © 2023 by Taylor Friste

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

1. Hendrik
2. Beatrice
3. Hendrik
4. Beatrice
5. Hendrik
6. Beatrice
7. Hendrik
8. Beatrice
9. Hendrik
10. Beatrice
11. Hendrik
12. Beatrice
13. Hendrik
14. Beatrice
15. Hendrik

16. Beatrice
17. Hendrik
18. Beatrice
19. Hendrik
20. Beatrice
21. Hendrik
22. Beatrice
23. Hendrik
24. Beatrice
25. Hendrik
26. Beatrice
27. Hendrik
28. Beatrice
29. Hendrik
30. Beatrice
31. Hendrik
32. Beatrice
33. Hendrik
34. Beatrice
35. Hendrik
36. Beatrice
37. Hendrik
38. Beatrice

39. Hendrik
 40. Beatrice
 41. Hendrik
 42. Beatrice
 43. Hendrik
 44. Beatrice
 45. Hendrik
 46. Beatrice
 47. Hendrik
 48. Beatrice
 49. Hendrik
 50. Beatrice
 51. Hendrik
 52. Beatrice
 53. Hendrik
 54. Beatrice
 55. Epilogue Hendrik: Six Months Later
 56. Epilogue Beatrice: One Year Later
- There's More from Taylor Frisette!

Chapter 1

Hendrik

About 15 Years Ago

My father and I are at lunch during one of his occasional visits to me at college. “Vader,” I protested yet again, in the Dutch we always spoke together, “I’m already making some money at it now, so I assure you, I do not need to be living at home while I do this.”

I was just finishing up my bachelor’s degree while also in my third year operating my startup business.

“Son, you got your skill for the numbers from me, and I can see very clearly that you are making a financial success of it. I’m very proud of you. This is why I wanted to come to the United States. Opportunity at all ages!” My father beamed as he did every time he felt vindicated in his decision to emigrate from his native Holland to the USA.

I knew he had to be good with money too, because he had paid for my first three years of college out of pocket, with no

loans or indebtedness. I guess I did get my facility for numbers and money from him.

Last year I moved into a shabby but serviceable apartment building to occupy a first-floor studio apartment. The rent was cheaper than the dormitory, and I would have lived there right out of high school if I had known how much money I could have saved by doing so.

“I have identified a good law firm to support the business. They are helping me rent office space and I am hiring my first three people this month, Papa. And I am contracting with a public relations and marketing firm at the first of the year.”

My Papa got a tear in his eye. What a softy! I really loved him. I patted his hand over the table. I had to respect a man who raised a child all by himself in a foreign country and developed a trade that paid him well.

“While you’re still in town, let’s go out tonight and listen to some music. What do you say, Papa?”

“You are the musician of the family. I trust you to pick a place with fabulous musicians. Sure, let’s do it!” He got that twinkle in his eye and I braced myself. “And will a nice young lady be joining us?” I winced. “Papa, no time for girls! I keep telling you and telling you.”

Chapter 2

Beatrice

A bout 5 Years Ago

“Gee whizz, mom, I keep telling you and telling you, a lot of women are in this field. Don’t worry about it so much!”

“All right, all right, BB. I just wanna make sure that you can find a real good job for yourself. That you can make your own way. A woman has to have her independence, you know. A woman needs her own money.”

My mother and I had had this conversation many times since I was in high school. She was so afraid that I would grow up depending on a man. She was very determined that I should acquire “market skills” and as I got older, I understood what she meant. Skills to earn me a good income.

“Maybe my first job won’t pay as much as the next ones, but don’t you worry, mom. I’ll be able to support myself. In this industry, I will be learning all the time because that’s just the way it is. And the more I learn the more I earn, right? You

keep saying that!” and I refrained from rolling my eyes at her. I knew she regretted dropping out of high school. I was the reason she had.

It isn't that technology is the “in thing.” It's that I love it and I have a knack for it. And it certainly isn't reserved for men like mom fears. Not if my cousins are any indication! They hardly know how to type an address correctly into Google Maps, and when they text me I almost need a translator!

Chapter 3

Hendrik

Two Years Ago

I'm really glad I chose this law firm. They took me seriously from the start.

And they were really taking me seriously today given the value of the business I had built and now was ready to sell.

“Well, sir, we have really told you everything you need to know about the three groups offering to buy you out. Although we recommend going with this second buyer, the decision is yours.”

By the end of that day, I suddenly had more free time on my hands than since I was in high school!

And I'm looking forward to the downtime.

I think.

If Carly were not so ill, I'd feel a lot better about this whole deal.

Ten days after selling my company, I was burying Carly.

Chapter 4

Beatrice

Present Day

“I’m glad I quit that job. And you know what? I’m glad I worked that job, too,” I told my mother. We were on our twice-weekly evening call. I had moved to a different part of the city and was pursuing a technology career after college as I’d dreamed of doing. Mom worried that I wasn’t earning enough to live in a good safe neighborhood, especially after I had let slip that I’d seen a mugging at the corner of my street three or four weeks ago.

It’s true this is not the safest neighborhood, but I can afford it and the apartment itself is clean and secure-ish.

And I can do better.

“BB, I know you already quit the job and if you need to come home to save money, please come home now. Your room is still here you know.” I rolled my eyes at my mom’s childhood nickname for me, but I knew she was right: I

needed a job and I needed one now. “I’ve got some savings mom, and I’ve had a number of interviews like I told you.”

I hung up very confident in the way things would go. And lo and behold, the very next day, I got an e-mail from a multibillion-dollar corporation in the city, MetriCooks, which specialized in digital security and all kinds of digital custom creations for large business clients.

It’s a good thing mom never asks me to explain my work. Ha ha ha. I’m not sure if she would understand what I was saying to her anyway!

After my “father” flew the coop, mom did everything she could for me. *I love that woman.*

The e-mail is the second interview!

Yay! Good thing it’s this afternoon. I don’t think I could stand waiting around for the chance to talk to them again.

I got presentable and went in for the second interview. It was actually the third one, but the very first was just a Zoom call with the hiring manager.

By that evening, I had a new job at double the money from my first job!

WooHoo and Kalamazoo, Too!

And best of all, it starts in two days.

“Mom! Guess what!?”

Mom’s thrilled!

And I am more than relieved.

Chapter 5

Hendrik

I could see out of the corner of my eye that the club owner was keeping watch over me. I liked Ralph.

When my Carly died, and I didn't come in to play for three weeks, I heard from some regulars that he went out looking for me. He never did find me.

In a way, I'm glad he only knows my first name. I needed time for my grief.

I have been playing in this club, how long now? I found it about six weeks after moving to the neighborhood. Right after I found the 70 CrossFit club. Ralph was good to me from the very start. He never asked who I was. He never got uppity about me just sitting here and strumming for a couple of hours two or three nights a week. He never even tried to make conversation.

God knows I didn't. And I said even less after Carly died, to anybody. Except to my lawyers, to make sure they sold the business for me in the right way. The bottom line of the deal

was that I needed to sell it for what it was worth. Not a dollar less. And I get zero personal publicity in the process.

I don't know how, but the attorneys negotiating the sale did it. Not one picture of me in the media. Not one call for an interview. Nothing much about me but only the company in the business media.

And what a relief that was, too!

I remembered the headlines, though. If the reporters couldn't get a live interview with me (and they couldn't) they'd find other ways to make billion-dollars news with someone else. And they did, thank goodness.

“Elusive Hank Enders, founder and sole owner of MetriCooks, sells his entire stake in the business for \$12 billion.”

“Hank the Hermit sells multi-billion-dollar tech company.”

“Where has the reclusive Hank Enders gone with his billions?”

I don't know where he's gone, guys. I'm just happy you're after this Hank fella and not me!

Out of the corner of my other eye, I'm noticing a tall, dark, beautiful woman intent on what I'm playing. Looks like she's alone. Well, it's about time to wrap up.

But this beautiful woman is coming my way.

Don't panic. Just another person walking around the club.

I couldn't help but notice she was tall—almost as tall as me—and had nice curves that her soft clothes could not possibly hide. And contrary to my straight thin, sandy hair, hers looked like a dark riot of tight unruly curls.

Nice.

Even to someone like you who shies away from all human contact? Yeah!

“Hello! I just had to tell you how I enjoy your music,” she gushed.

It seemed she was addressing everyone in the club; her voice was so loud!

“I was tired from moving. I just noticed the club today, so I came in to relax. First time I've been in. The bartender over there,” she waved toward Ralph the owner of the club, “told me that you play several nights a week.”

I didn't respond with more than a short nod.

“One of my college friends played 12-string acoustic, but he was a toddler at it compared to what you can do with the guitar.”

I continued to pack up and even moved toward the exit with a wave to Ralph.

She didn't relent, “I'm on my way home now, so can I walk out with you?” I just nodded.

The woman took my arm! What a brazen woman! But don't be rude to her.

At the exit, I looked to the right with a sort of nod to tell her that is the way I was going. Thankfully, she seemed to be able to read my mind. She was saying, “I’m going this way as well. If you’re going very far we’ll go right by my building.”

Hendrik! Wake up! What are you, twelve? Speak to the woman!

“So you’re from the neighborhood like me?” I looked at her.

She is so beautiful. Wow... Those eyes are amazing.

Yeah, and her curves, not to mention those soft-looking breasts that are leading her way?

Don’t be rude!

She was already responding, “Yes, I got a new job the other week and the commute was a killer from the very start,” she laughed. “So I looked around for something that I could afford, and where my mother wouldn’t faint if she came to see me there. And something way closer to the office.”

That she lived in this neighborhood at all really surprised me. Certainly, we were sort of on the borderline between gangland and a safe-ish neighborhood and an industrial zone that the freeway divided into two sections. But it sounded like she was living alone. That couldn’t be good.

And I said, “Didn’t you realize that this is a dangerous neighborhood to live in for a single woman? For anyone really now that I think about it.”

I noticed that she leaned into me. I don’t speak loudly. Plus I’ve been told that my voice is so deep that it always sounds

like I'm whispering.

Oh, well. I got what I got.

“Well, do you live here?” she asked, looking at me. I nodded. “Yes, I do. And I get your point,” I had to laugh. Something about this loud (*really loud!*), exuberant, gushing, chatty woman was ... comfortable. “I live about six blocks from here. The wrong way.” I looked at her pointedly and flashed my eyebrows up and down as if to say that I was aware that I wasn't following my own advice about the safety of the neighborhood. She couldn't know that I had an ace in the hole.

“Well, Kind Sir, would you like to make sure that I get home safely? You can walk me up and into my building just to make sure there are no boogeymen,” she laughed right back at me.

All, boy! She is indeed brazen. She obviously has no fear, either.

“Well, you're acting so fearless that I'll have to pretend that it's all an act. I will walk you to your home, Fair Lady.”

Where did that come from? Her confidence must be rubbing off on me.

Little did I know yet how much.

Chapter 6

Beatrice

I couldn't believe the barman when he said the musician was a single guy from somewhere in the neighborhood who just dropped in a few nights a week to play. And *Gadzooks!* the guitarist was simply the handsomest man I'd seen in ... forever. And his music was almost otherworldly.

Good thing mom had me singing in the choir in school. Music appreciation! I wonder if Zach, a sort-of friend from college, would appreciate this guy's playing, or be jealous of it.

This fellow wasn't much for words, but I had a good feeling about him. And what eye candy! Men always complain that I'm so tall, but this guy must have been 6'2" and didn't mind how tall I was. And gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous. OMG! That baggy shirt and those baggy trousers can't fool me. This guy works out.

How did that song go? *I. Want. Muh-sull.*

“So how long have you lived in this part of the world?” I asked him.

“Long enough to know better,” he looked at me with a smile.

Deep, quiet voice. I’m gonna have to be way closer to him if ever he starts whispering.

And those suspenders are so cute. Butterflies? Really? The guy has to have a sense of humor.

“Here we are. What do you think, Kind Sir, of the premises? Could a Fair Lady be safe here?”

He put his finger to his lips and I could tell he was pretending to think it over seriously before answering.

Yup, Jeepers, he does have a sense of humor!

He is so hot. Smokin’ Barbecue! I would love to see what’s under those baggy clothes of his. I’ll bet anything they’re not baggy because he’s lost weight recently. I think he’s hiding his gorgeous muscles.

And that’s all I needed for a challenge.

“Well, Kind Sir? If your inspection is not quite conclusive, how about coming inside and up to my place and checking it out?”

He seemed kind of surprised. But I also saw that he was looking me over differently now.

“Uhh, sure. I cannot let a Fair Lady be in any danger, right?” So I took his arm again and pulled him up the steps.

We went up to the second floor to my place and I unlocked us into the apartment.

“You had better do an inspection. Remember, no boogeymen!”

This fellow may be a little nervous, but he was *definitely* interested in me. I sensed that he was play-acting with me again when he put his guitar by the door and wandered my small studio apartment with his hands on his hips looking everywhere and nodding as he did with a little smile on his face.

He turned to look at me, “I have to look under the bed and under the sink, but so far so good.” He grinned and his face lit up and his eyes glowed.

Don't faint! Get a grip! It's just a guy smiling at you. Oh, be still my heart!

I followed him into the bedroom and he got down on all fours! What a guy! He looked at me as if I were six years old and said in a deep baritone whisper, “No monsters.”

His voice makes me melt. Oh. My. Jeevers!

I was standing really close when he got up and I couldn't help myself. I put my arms around his waist. “You did promise to check that kitchen cupboard under the sink. Come on,” and I pulled him to my tiny galley kitchen area.

This time he just bent over straight from the waist and looked under the sink. “Looks pretty innocent to me under there,” and as he stood I moved right in, put my arms around

his waist tilted my head up, and gave him a kiss right on the lips.

Mmm. More!

I pressed my body against him, lips-to-legs. And I stayed right with his lips and looked him right in his astonished eyes!

Go for it, girl!

I kept my eyes locked on his and winked at him with a smile on my lips that he had to have felt on his mouth.

And? He wrapped his long strong arms around my body. One arm around my upper back. And one arm grasping my buttocks.

Gaah-ahh-ahh-ly! I love musicians!

Chapter 7

Hendrik

What got into me? I'll never know. I hadn't done anything like this in, well, in forever! And it felt right. It felt like fun. This woman may be horny, and nothing more, but me too, come to think of it.

She felt soft but somehow pretty strong.

Hmm, I'll soon find out.

She stripped my clothes off as I returned the favor. She ran her hands over my upper arms and my chest, and I got an eye full of her breasts. They were pointing right at my chest all by themselves, with no bra.

Oooh, and I guess I am horny. Already hard, harder than I have been in months.

Once our shirts were off she came back to press her breasts into my chest. I leaned into the kiss she was coming for.

Ohhh, she feels so good. Warm, soft in all the right places.

She started to giggle, then laugh. “We have way too many clothes on, don’t you think, Kind Sir?” and went for my cargos. That was a little challenging since my shaft was already jutting and getting in the way. My suspenders were already dangling, my denim shirt was history. She had a short skirt on, and I fumbled to see how to undo her.

And then? This woman, whose name I had not even asked, and who did not know my own, took over. She pulled me onto her bed and straddled me so that her pussy was right over my cock and her breasts dangled, begging for me to take them in my hands.

I think I would have creamed right then and there if she hadn’t pulled away just a little bit and began stroking my muscles—my bulging arms and my abs.

She got just a tiny bit serious, with just a tiny frown on her eyebrows.

She looked at me, “So, six packs are a real thing?”

She burst out in giggles and dove with her mouth to my abs and licked each of those six muscles I have, all the way down to my pubic mound.

She looked at me impishly pulled up and sat right on my shaft!

Think baseball scores. Think political news of the day. I really will cream way too soon if I don’t.

And lo and behold, this luscious woman began to groan and moan telling me, “Ohhh, you are so hard. You are right on my

clit. I'm coming right now all over your hard cock!" And she did.

And I did too.

This is about the time you have to say something, so get going! If I could just stop panting long enough.

"I'm going to roll you over and stay inside your pussy," I rasped.

She got a big grin on her face and held on and I flipped us over on her large bed. "Want more? Cuz I've just come and you're keeping me hard as a stone." I was already thrusting.

So much for waiting for permission.

And in response, all she did was pant and moan again and say, "Yesyesyes! I'm coming again all over you!" and I thrust again, and thrust some more.

Oh no! Oh no. I'm coming again!

"Come with me," she panted.

I must have spoken out loud. Now! Now!

"Take it again, here I am!" I grunted and came for an amazing second time in a matter of a couple of minutes.

And mind-boggling to me as this all was? This luscious woman wrapped arms and legs around me and before I could even catch my next breath, was fast asleep in my arms!

Well, no need to wipe the grin off my face. She isn't looking anyway!

I just grinned and made sure she really was fast asleep before I left her.

Never to have mind-blowing sex with another strange woman again.

What was I thinking?! I've never done this. Ever.

When I left, I thought, "Oh, well, I will never see her again."

I was almost right.

Chapter 8

Beatrice

I woke up later in the night to pee. Mystery Music Man was gone without a trace. I had things to do today but I needed more sleep and after a couple more hours of snoozing, my alarm went off.

At the same time, my phone rang. Perfect timing.

“Hey, cousins! Are you on your way!?” What I had not told the mysterious music man last night is that I had not already moved but was moving today. True, I was moving to be closer to work. This just wasn’t my new place but the one I was leaving.

Hey, a little subterfuge can protect a girl. And getting a little bit of farewell nookie didn’t hurt at all.

Nookie?! That was a mind-blowing, drenching wet, orgasmic paradise! So satisfying I dropped to sleep even before he did. I think ...

Too bad I’ll never see that guy again.

The commute from this apartment was hell, and my cousins and I had found a new place that I could afford that carried their cousin-ly stamp of approval. It was much closer to my new office, but still in a sort of shaky part of town, according to them. But hey, I would hardly ever be home. And it was right near a major intersection. What could go wrong?

Chapter 9

Hendrik

Well, I guess you're still alive.

Your cock still works. Who knew? It's been long enough.

But I didn't even ask her name so maybe she's not interested in seeing me again. I'll probably see her at the club. She seemed to enjoy my music.

My head was emptier than it had been in a long time, quieter. My body was relaxed.

Duh! Your cock just got what it's needed for the past two years and you've been ignoring it! Relaxed, hell! You are a wet rag.

Jared was at the entry to my building. "Hey, Professor! My men said they saw you leave the club tonight with a really hot number! And we ain't talking music," he said. I arched my eyebrows at him and looked at him pointedly. "Ahem. Sorry, Prof. I mean, they saw you leave with a really beautiful

specimen of a woman ... and we aren't just talking about the music.”

I nodded seriously but had an internal laugh. Jared was the leader of the neighborhood gang. When I moved in here years ago he was barely in his teens but had moved up to raise terror in the neighborhood until, one night, I met him at the CrossFit club.

“Jared, you remember that time we met at the CrossFit club? What was it that made you talk to me that time?” I knew the story very well, but this was one of my ways of reminding him of his great potential.

“Well, you was stripped naked getting ready to get into the shower. Ahem, I mean you were already stripped naked for the shower,” I nodded at his correction, “And I saw your awful scars. Then we got talking about where they came from. Like that, Professor.”

“Then you told me as how you had moved into my neighborhood right out of high school, as soon as you had a little money ahead. With the little money you had in those days, you said it was the most you could afford and it was right in the middle of my gang's territory. I was just initiated when you moved in.”

I nodded.

Exciting days.

I shivered from the memories.

“Then a rival gang saw you as a good mark and went at you with the knife during a mugging. How long was you in the hospital again? Ahem. How long were you in the hospital, Professor?”

“Four days. We met two weeks later after my stitches firmed up a little bit.”

“Yes, sir! I remember how angry those cuts looked even then. I wasn’t the leader then. But we got back at the one who done this to ya. Ahem. We got revenge on the one who did this to you, Sir. And we’ve been watching out for you ever since.”

I looked at him and nodded with gratitude. “Yes, you have. And I know you don’t like to hear these words, Jared. But I love you and every member of your gang for doing this for me.”

Jared looked embarrassed but only for a couple of seconds.

The young man cannot fool me! He’s full of feelings.

And where are mine? Buried down deep in a cave full of grief?

After tonight, with that rambunctious woman, maybe not so deep.

“I appreciate you, watching out for me after the club. Did the men follow me to her place?”

“Yes, sir, Professor, as usual, we make sure you be safe. Ahem, we are making sure that you are safe. Jeffrey came to report, and Davy stayed over there to make sure nothing

happened to your lady. He'll stay all night, you never fear. And the hood, ahem, the neighborhood is quiet, sir.”

That was our deal. I taught them to read, speak and write standard English. I taught them what they needed to launch and manage online businesses. Legit businesses.

They watched my studio, my possessions, and the building it was in. And me.

A fair trade. More than.

Chapter 10

Beatrice

I hadn't been on my own long enough to have much stuff. My cousins brought over some old boxes and some big plastic crates out of their dad's garage.

My mom's brother made sure he watched out for his sister and me after my dad flew the coop. And I had a really good connection with my cousins, Jim and Mark. Mom made sure of that.

They are like brothers to me. Gadzooks, I love 'em!

“Bea, I think we've got it nailed. Do you wanna follow us over there in my buddy's jalopy or leave it here for now? Since we're all gonna come back over here to do the last scrub-up anyway, we can take his car then.”

“Yes, Jim, let's leave it here. But before we all come back to do that cleaning, I'm gonna buy us some lunch.”

I didn't own a car. In fact, in this huge metropolis well-served by a great subway system, I didn't know more than five people who actually owned and used cars every day.

Who needs 'em?



Jim and Mark made sure that my possessions were in the right place in the new apartment. We went back and spent the afternoon giving the old place a final once-over; they stayed with me to return the keys and get my security deposit back. I sent them home later after buying all of us some takeout for dinner.

“Tarnation, BB! You worked us to the bone!” But I knew they wouldn’t have let me do it alone or hire anyone.

“You boys are always bragging about those so-called muscles you have. Well, they just got put to the test!”

Mine, too. Once they were gone, I collapsed in a hot bath in my brand-new place.

Soak these aches away.

*I wonder if I’ll ever see my mystery musician again.
Probably not.*

But I could go to the club later. Once I’m settled. Once I have a new neighborhood routine figured out here.

For the first time since he left, I let my mind wander back to how hot the whole experience was. I sure was not going to tell him I hadn’t had sex in several years! *Gee Whiz!* A girl’s gotta have *some* secrets.

But I know I’m gonna be dreaming of him tonight.

Chapter 11

Hendrik

I had just woken up and made a smoothie, and Jared knocked at my door. He looked excited, and that got me worried.

“What is it, Jared?”

“Professor, that lady. That beautiful woman of yours? She and a couple of dudes are moving stuff out of her place!”

That gave me a jolt. The woman was preparing to move out.

Well. I was her Fond Farewell, I guess.

I still asked Jared, “Did this look like a legitimate thing?”
“Oh yes, Professor. Two Mistrs her own age and her were laughing and talking like they knew each other really well. It was those two Mistrs helping her move plenty of boxes, a bed, and a sofa. Really moving out.”

“That’s fine, then, Jared. As long as she looked safe.”

Nothing to do but let it be done. Jared and his men needed me today. Just focus on them today.

“Is everyone at the office?” I asked Jared. He nodded, “Couple the dudes, ahem, a couple of the men have some questions for you.”

I spent the rest of the morning with these former gang members turned literate, legitimate digital entrepreneurs. All Jared knew was that I was “one very high-tech dude.”

Without any details. Always the wallflower, always hiding in the shadows.

Really hiding in plain sight.

Over a number of conversations with just him at the gym or on the street with one of his lieutenants lurking in the background, we came to a mutual agreement. I had a lot of expensive equipment in my studio and they knew it. I also lived in a slum that was more dangerous than safe and we all knew it. When Jared saw my injuries from the mugging, he stepped up and proposed that the gang protect me, and not just my apartment—my whole building and the block it sat on.

And out of the blue, with no reflection at all, I told them that if they could learn to read and write good English, I would teach them how to make some legitimate money in the digital world.

That was before Carly died, so I had discussed all of this with her. Some of her last words to me were, “Take care of those young gentlemen. They have such potential. You did. And look what you became!”

We didn't have time for me to discuss how to do this with you, Carly. But I know you would agree. It's time for a change for the man who loved you, and who loves you still.

I still wished she'd let me marry her before she was gone.

Chapter 12

Beatrice

I had made the right choice by taking the job at MetriCooks.
It's been a great two years already.

I also made some new friends there pretty quickly, and kept them, too! A couple of them were new hires coming on about the same time as me, but most had been there since before the sale of the business a year and a half before I joined.

My direct supervisor was a man named Jeff. He was about the lowest-tech technology manager anyone around me could remember meeting! Unfortunately, he came in a few months after I did, and his predecessor was just a fond memory.

Frickin' Flute, but the guy was clueless! How'd he get where he is now?

It was a mystery to me. Cousins Mark and Jim teased that my boss “slept his way to the middle” and I called them reverse sexists.

We had a good laugh, but shucks! The guy was one hot tech-mess!

“Bea! How are you feeling about Jeff being the one to present the product next week? Your signature is all over the thing, and he’s gonna take credit!”

Joseph was one of my biggest cheerleaders in the department. “Joseph, I’ve said this again and again. The business owns my work. I don’t have my name carved in blood on it.” But I was frustrated. Jeff didn’t have the first clue how to present my product. He didn’t know what it was for in any detail or how to explain to any other tech head how it functioned.

Heck, he didn’t even get what kind of client it was made for.

Jeff? What a jerk. But at least he gave me free rein to create and get the job done.

“I know how you feel about your creative license, Bea. It’s just the principle of this thing. The guy wants to own everything any of us create. It’s like we don’t exist.”

I just have to shrug. I had made my peace—more or less—once I got the measure of Jeff and his ego. “Joseph, are you still refusing to go to the convention? I’m just too curious not to go. So much creativity out there now!”

Joseph holds a grudge. But I love my work too much. I’m going to the convention. New ideas come from hearing new ideas!



I took the subway. I got there around 10, about an hour after it started. My boss Jeff was just getting on stage to present. MetriCooks is making three separate presentations at the event. The convention organizers have rented a university theater seating 2000 for three 12-hour marathon days of presentations.

Dadgummit! As big as the place is, I'm not finding a seat.

I stand just inside the door at the back of the theater.

A couple of minutes go by and the door opens. I ignore it. I'm too busy being pissed at Jeff!

I am trying to keep my voice down, but what Jeff is saying is so ridiculous! What the heck is he talking about? I mumble to myself trying to keep fairly quiet.

Great Jupiter! The jerk is an idiot! He gets me so mad!

I'm holding up the program in front of my face for some discretion. But I can't keep myself from mumbling and grumbling, "*Great Guns*, the man doesn't get it. The man shouldn't be up there. How can he present something he never understood? I *told* him how it worked and he's making *goulash* up there."

Someone had stepped up to stand beside me. He got my attention when he leaned over as if to talk to me or hear what I was saying. I finally broke away from my frustration to look at the man. It wasn't that dark. And ...

Mr. Mystery Music Man!

*Big smile on his face. Gaah-ahh-ahh-ly Gee Whizzikers!
He's more handsome than I remember!*

And he doesn't seem to hold a grudge, since he's grinning at me.

Without me noticing, he had come to stand right next to me, nearly shoulder to shoulder. I looked up at him again.

He's looking happy and worried at the same time.

He leaned in closer and closer to me and then quietly whispered near my ear, "So this guy doesn't know what he's talking about?"

I looked over at this tall gorgeous, muscular man who had given me one heck of a going-away party. I was still angry at Jeff and commented, "He absolutely does not, but he wouldn't let me do the presentation."

He whispered to me in that deep, sexy voice I was starting to remember, "Then perhaps we won't give him any of our time or attention. Do you like fruit smoothies?"

Huh?

I looked at him and nodded. He whispered again in that hot, hot, low baritone, "Wanna get a smoothie with me?"

I nodded again.

I think if he asked to roll in cow poop in that voice, I'd do it.

My whole body is vibrating!

He clarified, "Why don't I buy you a fruit smoothie and you can tell me what he should be saying?"

He's shy! He went to take my elbow to guide me out and then drew back.

That's adorable! Scoopers!

He just gestured to the door and held it open to me. I followed him out.

“So,” he began, “The neighborhood gossip told me you moved out of the place I inspected so carefully for you. I hope your new place feels safer to you?”

You don't have to justify yourself. But he looked quite unaffected by my disappearance.

So why are you blushing? Talk to the man!

Just to hear his voice again. Wowzah!

“Well, yes, honesty is the best policy. I had lived there for a very short time and my family got nervous. So my cousins and I found a different place for me. And I was telling the truth! My new place is really closer to my job.” He gave me a raised eyebrow. “*Tarnation!* Really! It is!” I protested.

“And may I deduce from the person standing on stage just now that your new job is at MetriCooks?” I nodded yes, and asked, “You know tech companies?”

When he just nodded, I remembered that we didn't know each other's names. I stuck my hand out to him, “Pleased to meet you, Kind Sir! My name is Beatrice.”

He gave me a big panty-wetting smile.

OMG! I want him again!

Then he responded by gently taking my hand and shaking it with care, “Pleased to meet you, Miss Beatrice, Lady Fair! Everyone calls me Hendrik.”

Okay, wet panties. Horny for him. But why do I feel so happy as well?

He briefly mentioned to me that he was an independent tech consultant. I briefly told him what I do. And on and on from there! We talked about technology for so long that the convention broke for lunch before we knew it. “*Thunderation, Hendrik! Contrary to my boss-man, you speak my language!*”

We decided to stay on for the afternoon session. It was as though no one else was in attendance. We were in our own little cocoon ... the only ones in the whole place.

I felt that good with Hendrik. Hendrik Endersson.

Chapter 13

Hendrik

Oh yes, this woman has some of her own mysteries about her. How could I know she was in technology until just now?

Beatrice Wills. She speaks so exuberantly about her work.

Why am I finding that so sexy? Who cares! I am.

This woman is a 110% gorgeous, strong (*does she work out?*) but still a soft-and-feminine-looking lady.

Admit it: You have been sneaking peeks all day at her!

She's tall. I like that! She's sort of gently curvy, but has a narrow waist, her hips and butt swell just so sensuously.

And those breasts! Be still, cock.

Those full round breasts of hers sit high and proud.

I haven't forgotten what her breasts look like. My imagination is going crazy with them! I wonder if she is wearing a bra?

Stop it! What are you, a horny teenager?

Ha, ha! No, I'm a horny grown thirty-something who hasn't had enough sex in his life.

Same difference!

Her face is a sort of blend of pixie and defiance. Probably from her pronounced jawline. Her yellow-brown hazel eyes turn sparkly when she's excited about something she says about the work.

She sure excites me ...

She has that riot of short-ish curly chestnut-brown hair I remember well.

I would love to run my fingers through her hair.

I didn't even get to do that when we were together, did I? Nope.

Time to step up!

“My Lady Fair, I have very much enjoyed chatting with you. But I'm starving! Can I buy you dinner? And then I may just have to inspect your new place for boogeymen ...”

Nice one, Hendrik! Boogeymen. And I just love all of her old-school cuss words. And, thinking of that ...

“You know, my Lady Fair, you have quite colorful curse words. And I'm not sure we can even call them curse words!” I chuckled as I looked at her. “Why the two-century-old cussing?”

She laughed at me, and I felt a surge of connection to her. “Oh, that's my mom and my uncle raising my cousins and me

not to swear. They just made a game out of pointing out old-style curse words from old films and old TV shows for us. And my cousins and I made a game of using them. They are probably more creative than I am with it. We all talk like this in my family. I guess I don't think much about it anymore, but you're right. Old-time!"

As she grinned, I asked, "No brothers? No sisters?" She shook her head and I said, "Same here. It is just me and my father." She confirmed that it was just her and her mother, and filled me in about her uncle and cousins, "It's just the five of us."

As we left the Convention Center, I questioned her about the type of food she would like to eat.

I don't want to be "that guy" who tells his date what they're going to eat and gets it wrong.

I did not have to worry. She suggested Greek, Lebanese, or Italian where she could eat "vegetarian" if she wished.

Whew! Girl after my own heart.

How true that would end up being!

Chapter 14

Beatrice

When Hendrik asked me where I'd love to eat, I felt a surge of relief. Even my cousins *jazz-ma-tazz* me about eating like a rabbit.

And about the mountains of food I eat. Oh well, we'll see what Hendrik thinks of that.

When he said I should pick one of those and we could look up where the nearest restaurant would be, I piped up, "Oh, let's go to the Greek near my new house. I've been there a lot and it's all delicious and the servings are huge." I peered over at Hendrik as I said this last. His eyes got bright, "Oh good! On the best of days, I have a huge appetite."

Whew, not only does he speak geek, he speaks Greek! Oh ... That's a good one! So,

"Not only do you speak geek, you speak Greek?! You are a true Renaissance man!" I told him, and I couldn't help laughing at my own good poetry.

I noticed that Hendrik was a man of few words, with that quiet, but deeply vibrant, sexy voice of his. He was a man of few words, even speaking technology with me all day.

Which he obviously knows a lot about.

Sort of reserved. He had a good sense of humor, but there was a shyness about him.

I'm the loud and boisterous one, but it doesn't seem to bother him. We surely are opposites in this!

We'll soon see if that chases him away. My cousins always told me I'd never get a guy being the loudmouth all the time. They don't know anyone who "belts" like I do, they always tell me.

A girl's gotta be what a girl's gotta be! And my name is ... Bea!

As always, I was entertaining myself with my own humor. And just as I have been doing all day, I got an eye full of Hendrik.

He's gently over 6 feet, but not much, because I come in at 5'11" with shoes on. His sandy brown hair floats around his long oval face. He's got prominent cheekbones that sculpt his face and dark blue eyes.

Eyes that I could get lost in if either of us held still long enough.

Do I even remember his body? Oh yeah! I really, really do!

He is chiseled. It has to be from lifting weights—large upper arms and rippling-strong chest and abs, thighs made of steel, and tight high buttocks.

Down girl! Down! You're getting all wet just remembering his nakedness.

Oh, I now remember something interesting. Those scars.

“Hendrik? It’s been some months, but I remember scars on your side, right?”

Aww, flibberdy-bidget! What if I’m wrong? He’ll think I sleep around with a whole bunch of scarred-up guys. Aww, Shmilblick!... Shmilblick!!

But instantly he started to nod, and I relaxed. “Yes, my Lady Fair, you remember correctly. I was mugged in that very neighborhood that you moved away from. It was, hmmm, about two and a half years ago?”

I asked a few leading questions to get him to tell me the story.

And shut up for a change and listen!

“It sounds like you had a good escape,” I observe when he finishes his story about how the muggers got away with his guitar but he got away with his life.

With a pensive expression, he agreed, “Yes, my father was really worried for a little while. But I guess being young and healthy helped me bounce back more than anything else. And I did get to the hospital pretty quickly.”

I am discovering layers to this man. And I'm not talking about the layers of his clothes over his lean strong body. He covers this strength with baggy beige chinos and no belt, and a pale blue dress shirt that looks one size too large.

“Is that your trademark look?” His eyes spoke his confusion. “Your suspenders,” and I finger one of the shoulder straps. “When we met at the club, you were wearing butterfly-covered suspenders.” He smiled.

“And today? Seriously?” I gave him my most melodramatic skeptical eyelift. “Hot pink and apple green giraffes?” And I shake my head as I ask it, “Tsk, tsk, Mr. Music Man!”

When we both burst out in laughter I just knew I liked this man.

A lot.

Chapter 15

Hendrik

I can't remember the last time I bought a girl lunch. Not since Carly. I also had not slept with another woman since Carly until Beatrice came along.

And not since.

Why didn't you go after her back then?

First of all, because it was the last thing on my mind. Second of all, I didn't even know her name. Third of all, Jared's men told me she had moved out of the neighborhood and I didn't know where.

And how am I going to find a woman whose name I don't even know? Ah, well. Here we are now.

I'm certainly not taking her back to my place. But I wanna get naked with her again.

Well, there are always her boogeymen!

“My Lady Fair, I know I am probably being presumptuous in assuming that you have had no Boogeyman Inspection since

moving to your new place? Right?”

To my relief and delight, Beatrice burst out laughing! “Well, *Jumping Jupiter!* You did mention that earlier. You must be reading minds! I was just thinking this very minute that I would be terrified to go back home right now because I haven’t had that inspection done.” Her eyes sparkled as she burst out in uproarious laughter and roped me in with some of my own.

“Well, Lady Beatrice, there is no time like the present to remedy that problem,” I whispered conspiratorially over the table into her ear. “However, if you have other plans, or need it to be carried out by another inspector...”

It was only a gentlemanly thing to do to give her an out, right?

Say yes, say yes, say yes.

“*Yee Gads*, Kind Sir! I definitely have not engaged the services of any other inspectors! Do you have time in your appointment calendar to fit in an inspection this evening?”

I shot a victory arm in the air (in my own mind at least).

Don’t show your relief to her. But boy, am I happy!

“Well, let’s enjoy the rest of our dinner, Lady Beatrice. I think we have plenty of time to make it to our inspection date.”

I knew what I would like to have for dessert. She was sitting right across from me at the Greek restaurant table.

Chapter 16

Beatrice

After a leisurely dinner where we both gladly ate almost two portions of everything, I sat back and looked at this handsome, chiseled, shy, and quiet man.

As he paid for dinner, I sat back and looked at this man whom I had rediscovered. I certainly have never had conversations this comfortable with a guy I'm planning on taking into my bed. Not even in college.

*Don't think about him! He doesn't hold a candle to Hendrik!
Not in any way I could name.*

I chatter all the way to my apartment. I watch this man closely as I do, because I am so aware of my cousins' frustration with me that I monopolize all conversations I'm part of. I watched this man carefully for reactions to my loud belting voice. My cousins have always told me that I could stand on stage at Carnegie Hall without a microphone and be heard in the last row of the balcony without any problem whatsoever.

Mom did always tell me to “own who I am.” But occasionally I did notice that wanting to impress someone for whatever reason had me doubting “who I am.”

He does seem rather relaxed. Not trying to shush me up. Not cringing.

Oooh, in fact, he actually seems like he’s been paying attention to whatever I’ve been saying. Those little head bobs of his are cute.

Not to mention those tiny crinkles around his eyes before he starts to laugh.

Gah-ahh-ah-ly, is he handsome or what?!

We walk up three flights to my new apartment. When he doesn’t roll his eyes at my three locks, I’m feeling even better about this guy. Especially when all he says about them is, “This looks pretty safe. But if I were you, I would change the lower lock to be a third key. A different key for each lock is a little extra layer of protection, right?” he added as he looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

“OK, I can do that sometime this week. So it’s all about giving the boogeyman a little more work to do as he tries to break into my place?” I start to chuckle until I see that he is dead serious as he nods in agreement.

This man is actually concerned about my safety! I like it.

He does a repeat of the boogeyman search. Under the kitchen sink. In the built-in closet. Under my bed.

Before he finishes his search, I have stripped to my birthday suit.

Chapter 17

Hendrik

This uninhibited woman is naked as a newborn before I get off my knees from looking under her bed for a boogeyman. I have only just started to swivel around to tell her, “And, final inspection, no boogeyman here either!” and nearly gasp at her beauty.

I was already hard when I entered her apartment, but now my cock points hard through the front of my docker jeans, leaving no doubt as to my state of lust.

She has made it pretty clear what she is after! Tall and curvy, and ready to touch!

And so I make my intentions clear as well. I stay down on my knees but pull her next to me to lick her belly above her pubic mound. I am holding her by her buttocks and moving down to her pussy lips, all protected by a curly dark maze of hair.

My cock bounced and ached. Luckily for me, she is a tall woman, and I didn't have to bend too much for my tongue to

reach her lips. I trilled my wet tongue on her clit and jabbed between her lips with the tip of my tongue.

Then she gently pulled away and came down to her knees facing me and took my lips against hers in a deep kiss as her hands played with my dockers. She opened me up and liberated my bouncing cock and inched herself into me so that my erection was trapped against our bellies.

Can I say how happy I was that my intention to have Beatrice for dessert matched hers for me?!

I stripped my shirt off, still right there with her on our knees. I traced the flat of my hands across her whole body from her face and neck, to her arms and buttocks. Tracing up her back and around to her breasts. Finding my way back down to her belly and her wetter pussy.

Then I plunged my face between her round, soft, warm breasts. I just basked. My hands roam to the sides of her soft tits and I gently push them deeper into my face.

I breathe her in.

Beatrice is not the only one breathing hard.

She took in a deep breath as I did this and let out a belly laugh. “I guess knowing that we are boogeyman-free has melted all our inhibitions! No audience. No monsters threatening to breathe down our necks!” And she laughed even more freely.

“I think I would turn into a monster if you didn’t let me touch you some more!” And I do a fake monster growl as I

dive back down to her wet lips, put my mouth on them and gently shake my head from side to side in another fake growl. She responds by grabbing my head and giggling as she grinds herself into my mouth.

I noticed that something is changing, and it's all good. So I stay with what I'm doing and hear her mumble, "I'm coming. Right now ... Right now!" I keep the soft wetness of my lips against her pussy and my tongue flat against her clit and move my head from side to side, slowly now, as I feel her writhe on the bed and lift her buttocks into me with pleasure.

I stay with her until she relaxes back into the quilt, and lick her into a new frenzy. I stopped long enough to say, "One more time, my beauty," and dive back into her wetness to bring her over the edge one more time. And once more. And once more after that.

This woman is so orgasmic! And I can't believe that I haven't spilled just being this close to her, and feeling her get off on what I'm doing to her.

But finally, the time came. "Beatrice! I can't stand it anymore. I need to come inside you." And in response, she just opened her legs wider, and took my shoulders to guide me up her body. And then reached down to guide my pulsating shaft into her vibrating pussy vault.

I didn't last long.

But Beatrice wasn't done yet, and my own lust seemed endless, too. I had spilled into her vault just as she was thrusting upward into me gasping with another orgasm of her

own. When I felt her relax out of it, I thrust several more times into her pussy.

And to my own amazement, I came one more time with a shout.

Chapter 18

Beatrice

“*T*hundering. Jumping. Jehosaphat. What in Tarnation?!”

I'm still gasping for air, so I don't know how we did it. But both of us managed to giggle, then laugh as we held on tight to each other.

And Hendrik is still locked into my pussy. Amazing! I like it!

I ask Hendrik, as I wrapped my long legs around his longer ones, “Are you going to disappear on me like the first time we were together, like a thief in the night?”

He has a sense of humor when he looks at me, “Thief? Thief? With three locks on your door to keep me inside?”

I spurt with more laughter, and when I've calmed down enough, I say, “You are absolutely invited to stay with me overnight, but I warn you though,” looking at him with my best mischievous face, “You're going to have to buy me a double breakfast. If you think you've seen me eat, you ain't seen nothing yet!”

“First of all, let’s get our facts straight!” Hendrik replies. “You are the one who disappeared on me! You moved out of the neighborhood like a thief in the night! And, might I add, with no forwarding address ...” And he wiggled his eyebrows at me to let me know, “But no hard feelings Lady Fair! I’ll buy you a triple breakfast,” he chuckles very quietly in my ear. “Before then I have a night of keeping My Fair Lady safe from all boogeymen and monsters.”

And as if to prove to me there were no hard feelings, he wrapped himself around me a little more snugly.

I fall asleep in his arms, so relaxed that I barely have the thought, “I have never slept in a man’s arms all night before,” before I’m asleep.



I had rolled over in the night at some point away from Hendrik and now roll back over to wrap myself around him. It’s the middle of the night. He *looks* sound asleep.

And what do we have here?

His shaft is hard as stone!

I wrap one hand around him and gently squeeze. I’ve already noticed he’s two hands long, so I shift on the bed and around him so I can pulse his shaft with both hands. Oh so gently, but soon his own hands are crawling all over my breasts and buttocks. His mouth is on mine.

This feels different from anything I've experienced. Warm. Intimate.

I feel like I have known this body and this man my whole life.

As his hands roam over me, I release his erection to rediscover the scar down the right side of his upper body and the one on his right forearm with my hands. I caress the ridged scars with a feeling of intimate possession that is brand new to me.

I stroke the scars with a feeling of wanting to keep him from hurting ever again.

I'm just melting the length of my body into his. Into his warm skin with his warm mouth on mine, and the heat of his hand on my cheek. His large hands splayed across my lower back and buttocks.

We don't budge for the longest time.

I've never just ... kissed a man.

No movement but our mouths on each other, eyes open and aware of the other one.

I could kiss him like this for ...

Forever.

But then, lust beckons us both. His tower of heat is pressed against my belly, pulsing at me to remember he is there. I arch my lower back away from him, take him again in my hand and guide him into me.

He slides in. I pressed back into him. And, again, neither of us moves from the lips-to-legs embrace we are in. Neither of us moves. We are just locked into each other.

And what is amazing beyond anything I've experienced is we do all this with our eyes riveted into each other every single second.

I'm so at ease with Hendrik.

And then lust beckons us again. I find myself squeezing his shaft with the muscles I'm surrounding him with. Hendrik responds with some gentle in-and-out moves.

He's still pressed close against my clit as he moves, and I take his face in my hands as he holds my buttocks and increases his thrusts.

We both come, at the same time.

And have barely moved to achieve this deep, intimate pleasure.

Chapter 19

Hendrik

We fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms after one post-inspection round of mind-blowing sex. And then? She woke me up!

Well, no! Be honest now, your own wet dream woke you up. She just took advantage of an opportunity your cock presented!

And I am so happy she did!

When I woke again, I noticed morning light coming through the window. Beatrice was curled up facing away from me, so I moved into her and gently pulled her into me.

I let my hand inch around to cup her pussy, and I think I must have fallen back asleep right then and there. As I fell asleep, however, I remember thinking ...

It's been a long time since I have done anything like this.

But then again, I have never felt anything ... like ... this.

It wasn't long before Beatrice rolled over into me, push me onto my back, and mounted me. When she collapsed with orgasm onto my chest I returned the favor and rolled her onto her back. She grabbed my buttocks and matched my rhythm as I thrust to my own pleasure, and she had another orgasm as I did.

Since I can't remember ever having this much sex in any one week, much less in any one night, I fell back asleep after making sure she had one more orgasm as I ground into her clit with my pubic mound at each thrust.

And before coming—one last time—in her pussy.

Oh, no. Scratch that. It will not be the last time. Not if I have anything to say about it.

Chapter 20

Beatrice

I woke up several times in the night. Just sort of came to a brief awareness as I rolled over. And each time I did, Hendrik, true to his word, was next to me in bed. Once, with his long lanky limbs sprawled half on me and half on his side of the bed. Once, wrapped around me with my breasts crushed into his chest. And once spooning me against his muscular chest. Holding me in his strong, bulging arms.

And getting into it hot and steamy, more than once.

Shazam! The intimacy ... Gave me goosebumps.

*I have never experienced a night with a man like this.
Gadzooks!*

After we finally peel away from another deep kiss, I shoo Hendrik off to the shower. My tiny little bathroom will simply not allow us, in our tall lankiness, to be in the shower at the same time, much less in the bathroom together. He steps into the shower and I deal with the tangles of my curls and of the bed sheets.

He steps out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and I pop in. As I reach for my own towel, he drapes it around me and pulls me out into his arms. Into another steamy hot, eyes-locked, lips-to-legs close kiss.

When we finally come up for air again and find our clothes, Hendrik again asks me what I like to eat for breakfast. He says, “And I do remember I owe you, let’s say, not a double but a triple!”

I just love that Hendrik eats the way I do.

It is so hard to tell my cousins or any of my workmates that it is quite possible for a vegan to eat more than a few leaves of lettuce and a slice of tomato and survive. So Hendrik and I discuss huge piping-hot bowls of oatmeal. Big bowls of fresh fruit. And a couple of huge pots of tea.

As we get dressed, I look over at him more than once.

*What do you mean you look over at him ‘again and again’?
You can’t keep your eyes off of him!*

And he’s so natural in his body. So open.

As we get dressed, neither of us can keep our hands off the other. I stroke his cheek every so often. I touch his arm. And he welcomes it!

This is definitely not a love ‘er and leave ‘er kind of guy. My first impression was false!

Well, be honest, you probably would have asked him to leave at the break of dawn anyway that first time. You were moving after all, and you didn’t want him to know it!

Water under the bridge ...

We tossed a few names of breakfast cafés back and forth, and realized that we had not been to the same places as each other at any time. He didn't know my breakfast places, and I never had heard of his.

“Well, my Gallant Knight! The possibilities are infinite, and it just goes to show you how much people in this town love their breakfast!” We had a comfortable laugh together about that. “Since you are paying for this triple header, let's go to a place that you like. I'm totally open to discovering a new breakfast café.”

And Hendrik blew me away with his response, “I'd better pick one that's pretty close by then. You exhausted me so much last night and into the early light of dawn this morning, that I certainly won't be able to walk far on my two legs until after a Big Breakfast!”

I burst into raucous laughter.

Which he matched with his deep, quieter rumble. I love it!

I looked at him from my laughter and nodded, “Well, my legs are made of rubber this morning too, so you have no excuses!”

Hendrik pulled me in again for a deep kiss with his eyes riveted on mine. He gently pushed some of my curls out of the way and stroked my cheek with one finger as he did so. I pulled him into me and held him close as my hand stroked up and down his spine. He looked at me and pulled away. I

looked back and shook my head to lisp, “Thuffering Thukatash, Hendrik, if you keep this up, we’re gonna be stripped to birthday suits again in spite of our starvation!” and in mock surrender, Hendrik threw up his arms and laughed, “I give up!”

I grabbed my keys, he took my hand, and off we went to breakfast. All through breakfast (*Because hey! I recognize a shy guy when I see one. So I can shut up—sometimes—and let him get a word in edgewise.*) I asked him about his guitar playing and performing at the club where I first saw him.

Where I promptly picked him up and took him home.

And what a brazen hussy I was!

And bless my heart! If I had not taken him home that night, I wouldn’t ever have recognized him at the tech convention ... Well, I’d just better stop this woulda-coulda-shoulda thing.

We are together now. And for a long time to come, I hope.

Chapter 21

Hendrik

Beatrice is the only woman I have shared any kind of conversation with, much less sexual intimacy, since the death of my Carly.

I am finding it very easy to talk to this woman.

And why not? She is smart. She's a good conversationalist. She's as sexy and as gorgeous as anyone I have ever laid eyes on.

She acts pretty uninhibited.

In a good way.

So I tell her about my father getting divorced just when he and my mother were planning to emigrate to the United States from Holland when I was three years old.

“Vader just decided that if my mother was going to divorce him and give him custody of their son—me—he would stick with his plans to emigrate anyway. She didn't protest. The paperwork was underway including me, a minor child, so it

didn't hold up his plans very much after he signed the divorce decree."

"Have you ever met your mom?" Beatrice asked me.

"No. My father proposed it to me when I was 17, but I declined. No animosity toward her. No bad blood. How could there be? Papa never spoke poorly of my mother. He just never spoke of her at all. So I felt no connection and no obligation to meet her. I don't even know what she looked like back then or now."

"No pictures or anything," she asked. I shook my head. "*Gee Whizzikers!*" and she took my hand.

Before we finished up breakfast, I made sure to have a firm date with Beatrice for dinner. I propose, "You mentioned Lebanese food, and I know a great place that does music. How about we meet there in a couple of days? What does the day after tomorrow evening look for you?"

She got a surprised look on her face and a big smile. "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah! Day after tomorrow evening would be just terrific!"

I gave her the name and address. She admitted she had not been to that place.

"They have Middle Eastern musicians that perform for about an hour every evening. I hope you like it."

I, for one, parted ways with Beatrice feeling on top of the world.

Chapter 22

Beatrice

We have eaten mountains of food together. Giggled. Talked tech (but not as much as the day we met at the convention, it is true).

The convention we met at was a mere three weeks ago, and Hendrik and I seem to be going strong.

Kinda scary.

Says the woman who has never been in a serious relationship!

What do I know?

I know Hendrik is different.

I know what a real orgasm is with him.

Whew, do I ever? He sure put a quarter in my jukebox!

We've spent many smokin' hot evenings in my bed, often waking up in the middle of the night to wrinkle the sheets again.

But we did lots of things together. A cult movie. The shore. He brought his guitar over once and played for a couple of hours just for me. Then I tried to get him to karaoke with me.

I'll have to work on that some more. He didn't seem to know what honky tonk music was.

Or maybe he does and is avoiding it!

Then there was that time last week when he suggested I might want to work out with him.

That was funny.

“Exercise?! Gasp! Well, bless your little heart,” I teased, and I fluttered my hand over my heart like a southern belle and put on what I’m sure was a cringe-worthy Southern accent, “Surely, sir, you don’t mean that you want me to glow, do you? Because as you know, when an effort is involved, horses sweat, men perspire, and women glow.”

That made Hendrik choke on his food from laughter since as usual, we were stuffing our faces with delicious vegetarian fare. “Does that mean, Fair Lady, that I don’t have a chance of getting you naked in a locker room?”

I really like Hendrik. My mom knew I was dating, but I kept it very casual-sounding. Like it was just a weekly meet-up at the coffee shop kind of thing.

Mom can be pretty nosy about this kind of thing when she gets going. Not to mention those cousins of mine!

All Nosy Parkers!

My cousins were like protective Knights in Armor about me. In fact, they were still both under the impression that they were waiting for me to find my very first-ever boyfriend.

So let them think that!

I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of letting them know that I was hot and heavy with Hendrik. That I was *dating* a man.

Little did I know at the moment that I was going to get hotter when I got some news about my steamin' hot Hendrik.

Chapter 23

Hendrik

Things are going very well between Beatrice and me. It has occurred to me more than once that our sleepovers of the past several weeks are always at her place.

Well, duh, of course they are!

What is interesting about that is she hasn't asked ... Not once ... Never asked where I live or if we should go to my place this time?

I wonder why.

And we also have not gone together to the club where I play every so often. I have only been back once a week since Beatrice and I started seeing each other.

I have been equally lax about checking up on the men, their education, and their business endeavors.

But they follow me whenever I'm with her. They've been keeping an eye out for safety on her building and block.

I love those guys!

Since Beatrice had to be at her office quite late for three nights in a row, I checked in with Jared, and was very happy to hear that Jared's wife was now able to teach their older child, a smart three-year-old, how to read! That was because Jared taught his wife how to read after he got better at it himself.

“You know, Professor, I can read. I truly can. It's just that I do it very slowly. And once I finish reading something, I try to figure out what I've read and I can't.” That was several years ago now. Ancient history. He wasn't my son. He wasn't my brother. But I was really proud of him. And his own pride ratcheted up several notches when he realized that he could now turn around and teach his wife to improve her reading skills using the exact same process he did.

Among them, Jared's men had an interest in four different types of mainly-digital businesses. Before any of them started them, however, they sat with me and picked my brain for how to go about things. Among them, they had a real flair for numbers, for products, for marketing language.

I'm proud of each and every one of them. And if I'm honest? They are like the little brothers I don't have.

And I need to do more for them.

Chapter 24

Beatrice

I have more than one project going on at work, and deadlines are close. “Business is booming, people!” Jeff loves to say.

As if he had anything to do with the boom.

It is early evening now and I have one last thing to do before going home and collapsing in bed. It’s my second of three late nights at work.

Unless Jeff gets another “Booming, people!” idea to keep us going longer.

I have been assigned to do some testing on two projects that two junior software coders had initiated. In the process, I couldn’t locate the notes about one long-time client’s specifications. I decided to go to the veteran on the team, a fellow named Craig, who has worked on many aspects of this big-deal client’s projects in the past. I haven’t worked with Craig much, but what I’ve seen of the guy makes me like and trust him.

I wonder why Craig never wanted to be promoted. Oh well. I'm just glad he's still here.

He would've been great in Jeff's job. How come no one thought of him for it?

It irritated me that Jeff was *still* on the job, but I never wanted to be in management. I love my work just as it is!

“Hey, Craig, I’m glad we have some wise man’s hands on this team. And I do need your wisdom on this thing.”

I once heard that he was like the 102nd employee hired by the founder of MetriCooks.

“Ha, ha, you’re funny, Wills. You? You, the *All-Seeing Eye* need a new set of eyes on a coding problem? Impossible.” He calls everyone by their last name and pulled out my department nickname, too. “I’m honored to serve the All-Seeing,” and he mocked a royal bow to me with a huge smile.

I kinda like that. Sense of humor.

“Whaddaya got?” he asked.

And straight to the point. I like that even better.

After spending about twenty-five frustrating minutes going over the thing, Craig looked up at me.

“Hendrik would never have let this slip by,” he pouted.

“Hendrik?”

My heart is beating wildly in my chest. Hendrik? Craig has suddenly made me think about the man that I've become closest to. The one I have not seen for two whole days now.

“The original founder of the company. You may think I’m older than dirt, all you young kids and coders. I’m not *that* old,” and he rolled his eyes at himself.

From habit, I blurt, “Craig, Hank Enders founded and sold this company. Not that guy you just named!”

Craig, very suddenly, got flustered. *Really* flustered.

This is interesting ...

“Shhhh. I never said that. I. Did. Not. Say. That. Wills, you NEVER heard me say that. BI ... iii ... iG secret. Should’ve held my tongue,” he leaned in sheepishly. “I’ve been holding it for years. Well, you just don’t tell anyone, Beatrice Wills, that I let slip the *real* name of MetriCooks’ founding genius. Please,” he pleaded.

He’s serious ...

His shame-filled wide eyes, his real chagrin at letting a real big cat out of the bag, and his conspiratorial whisper made me chuckle in spite of myself ... and my growing panic.

Craig shook himself, almost like a wet dog, then “Hank Enders would never have let this slide through I’m telling you!” he insisted. I noticed he said the *real* name of the founder *much* more quietly this time. He didn’t seem to notice my discomfort.

His own nervousness is too real for him to notice me. Thank goodness.

Craig just concluded by saying, “Who are the two coders that did this? Let’s go check it out with them and set ‘em

straight, shall we, Wills?”

I was in a tailspin.

Hank Enders? Is my Hendrik actually Hank Enders AKA Hendrik Endersson?

Endersson. Enders. My Hendrik Endersson?! I mean, how many men could there be in the world of tech with such a last name?

And ... Hendrik ? Sure, there've gotta be a few ways to spell that name, but Jeepers!

Relax, Craig only said “Hendrik” not any last name. They could be two different men. He never said “Endersson” or even Anderson, right?

I'm imagining things.

And if he is—if my Hendrik is ... Hank Enders?

Jumping Jehoshaphat! Hank Enders is a multibillionaire?!

I'm going to faint.

Thunderation?! Hendrik? A multibillionaire!

Hendrik is ... really the hermit Hank Enders? The media-absent Hank Enders?!!

Like most of the staff, I had not only never met founding genius Hank Enders since I was hired after his time, but had also never seen a photo of him. Not a single one. He was that camera-shy by all reports. I've never even met anyone till now (had I?) who'd even met him or had any “sightings” of him.

How can I know if it's the same man?

My head is spinning but I try to reel it in and chase after Craig as he goes down to the other workstations.

It is all I can do not to faint. And to rein in my growing anger.

Hendrik Endersson. A man I know intimately. Very intimately.

Or perhaps not ...

Chapter 25

Hendrik

I wonder why I can't get hold of Beatrice?

Even if she's very busy she usually texts back an emoji to acknowledge my message. Nothing. Not for three days since her third (and I thought last) all-nighter.

We haven't gone three days without speaking to each other. Now it's been nearly a week without being together.

She should've been done days ago with her night shifts.

I head over to her apartment building. She's not there, but with her evenings tied up at work, what did I expect? I find a scrap of paper and pen to leave her a note that I slide above the lock of her apartment door.

Maybe her night shifts got extended. But why hasn't she told me?

Jared's man is there, across the street from Beatrice's building. I look at him. He shrugs as if to say, "Sorry, Prof. No news."

Jumpin' Jehosaphat! Where is the woman?

I'm starting to speak like she does!

While that made me chuckle for a moment, I went serious and worried again.

I started going over every word I had ever said to her before her all-nighters began. Did I insult her? Did I say something I shouldn't have? Did I express an opinion that she's poorly reacting to?

Even so, she is so outspoken! She certainly would have told me how she felt by now.

I go over every minute that we spent in each other's arms, naked, in bed. Had I done anything to hurt her? She hasn't ever reacted at any time in any negative way toward anything I did to her in bed or that we did together.

Maybe something terrible has happened at her job. Could she have lost her job and not wanted to tell me? Could she have been demoted or reprimanded and too embarrassed to tell me about it? Maybe something happened that has seriously depressed her?

I can't imagine this woman ever experiencing depression. But ... I don't know her every nook and cranny yet.

I texted her again.

Little did I know what was in store.

Chapter 26

Beatrice

I'm having a flashback. Or a dream.

My boyfriend in college, James aka Jimmy, was a really interesting person. Since I have always been so outspoken and “belt” out all my thoughts, the fact that he was just as frank appealed to me. Finally, someone who wouldn't tell me to shut up! He couldn't; he was as loud as I was.

I'd had sex with one other guy in my senior year of high school, but since then Jimmy was my first lover. And I fell into lust with the whole idea of having sex with someone who was as handsome as he was, first of all. With a guy who was truly full of personality, second of all. There was also the fact that he was studying computer science like I was. We had study sessions together and met each other before and after our shared classes. He was living off campus, and I was living in a dorm. So it only made sense that when we would spend the night together it was at his place. We also spent some weekend afternoons together at his apartment.

It had never occurred to me that he was dating or having sex with anyone else.

Naïve woman! Sweet, innocent young thing that you were.

Until one day, one of my computer science lady friends and I went for coffee.

Jeevers, I can't even remember the girl's name.

Anyway, I couldn't get over the shock when she asked me, "So you're one of the girls Jimmy is dating, huh? How is he in bed?" I remember being so stunned internally that I—for once—had no words. I looked at her, and she wasn't being catty. I noticed immediately that she had absolutely no ulterior motives except girl talk when she asked me that. She had the same expression on her face as always. I remember that quite well about the moment. She was simply curious in quite an innocent way. She didn't even seem like she was interested in being one of Jimmy's girls.

But that all came with hindsight. A few seconds later, I blustered back at her, "Yeah, I'm seeing him." She nodded as if this were just confirmation of gossip she'd already heard. And just as nonchalantly as I could (trying to imitate her innocence), I asked, "So who else is seeing him by the way? Have you heard?" And the girl named three other women.

For the life of me, I will never remember how the conversation with that classmate ended.

I did know that it was the end of Jimmy—and all lying male *varmints*—for me.

Enough reminiscing and dreaming woman! I shook myself back to the present.

With Hendrik, it's just Déjà Vu all over again.

Again, I'm stuck on guy who's a liar.

And here I am again with another guy with "secrets."

A guy I can't trust.

Aww, fiddlesticks! What's wrong with me?

Do I even care to find out if he's a cheat? And how am I going to go about finding out if he's lied to me?

Dadgummit! What a mess!

I am fuming! I continue to fume all the way home after this second all-nighter at the office.

Thunderation! Frickin' flute! Sufferin' succotash!

Couldn't the man just casually have told me, "Oh, by the way, My Lady Fair, I'm a multibillionaire from having founded and sold the company you are now working for?"

And I'm getting madder by the second as I realize why I have never been invited to his place.

Heavens to Murgatroyd! The man is a multibillionaire! He just doesn't want me to see his palatial home, with all his house staff that waits on him hand and foot.

Is he embarrassed to take me home?

Is he hiding some other woman there?

Who does he really live with?

If he hasn't even told me his real name, how do I know he doesn't have eight children by three wives—with each one getting millions in alimony from him?

Or maybe he gets a kick from slumming it with me ...

And then I get depressed. I wait 28 years to fall for a man, and he's a liar.

OK, yeah, Jeepers, he's a billionaire.

Maybe.

All right. But does he have to give all billionaires a bad name by lying to me about it, hiding his life from me?

As I reach my apartment building, I didn't notice that a youngish man across the street who'd been pretending to use his phone now actually begin a real text. To Jared. Reporting in.

Chapter 27

Hendrik

Jared gave me some relief this morning very early when he told me his man on the scene saw Beatrice get home safely. But why didn't she text me?

If she won't talk to me, I won't know what's going on, will I?

I'm working with Jared and one of his youngest "team" members, who has some good skills with numbers. Jared can tell I'm not myself I guess because he pulls me aside and asks with concern on his face, "Professor? You got some worries that the men and me ... ahem ... and I can help you with?"

I'm tempted to wave this off, but an idea comes to me. "Yes Jared, I'm concerned about my Lady Fair, about Beatrice. She has not been in touch with me for days now. I have no idea what could be wrong."

"Say no more, Hendrik. We know where she lives, and the neighborhood is safe and all. But we have not been watching her own self. It didn't seem we should with you not going over there lately, right? But I'm going to send some of the men over

to keep an eye on her as well as her place. Do we know if she's still at work?"

"Jared, right now," I replied with a two-armed shrug, "I don't even know if she's in town. I don't know if she's in the hospital. So no, I don't even know if she's working. All we both know is that she got in safely in the middle of the night last night. Is she still there? We don't know, do we?"

I noticed Jared standing tall at the challenge. He always liked to do things for me, and I got it. "Professor, you are not to worry anymore about Miss Beatrice. We are on this! We got this!"

As Jared walked over to whisper to his young charge, and I saw the young man race out of the place, my thoughts turned to the last time I was with Beatrice.

"Horsefeathers! The boys will find out what's going on."

And I got a little smile on my face and a tiny bit of relief trying to list out all the cuss words Beatrice uses.

Chapter 28

Beatrice

There is no way I can tell anyone in my family that I've been dating a secretive multi-billionaire. They'd laugh me out of the house. They'll tell me that I'm the one that's been keeping secrets.

Or fantasizing.

And I have kept it secret about dating him. This is the first serious relationship I've had. They would tease me no end if they knew—and that's why they don't know now.

Oh, *fiddlesticks!* I've got no one to talk to about this! I certainly don't have a "BFF" to talk to. Never really did. Just my family, and some casual work friends. That is my world. And Hendrik, my first serious relationship.

Serious? How serious can it be with him if he won't even tell me who he really is?

Aw, Dadgummit! I'm an idiot.

With no one to confide in. With no one to moan and groan to.

So I'm just stuck wallowing all by myself in my own anger at the man.

I could ask Craig to tell me what he really knows. Now how could I threaten Craig into spilling a secret that he has kept, or almost kept, for so many years?

Bah Humbug! I have nothing to hold over Craig, and he was so embarrassed at his slip-up the other day that he's not about to confide in me or anyone else about it ever again.

And just think about it, woman: How can a man of such wealth who employed so many people for so many years have kept his own identity a secret with such success? My Hendrik cannot be Hank Enders! The truth would have come out ages ago if it were so.

Maybe Craig was referring to some Asian geek. Han Drak. Hen Drake.

Aw, stop it! You're driving yourself crazy based on no facts whatsoever!

Then again ... Rich people can buy silence. Rich people can buy anything they want. But why would my Hendrik—and I'm not saying he's Enders—but why would he want to hide who he is from anybody? He's such a great man!

Sure, he's really quiet. He's definitely on the shy side. Contrary to big mouth me. None of that could explain why he would be media shy. I can't think of a single reason for it.

Aw, Fiddlesticks! I'm driving myself crazy thinking about it.

No facts? Ah, facts!

I know.



I had a sudden inspiration. I really needed to find out if Hendrik was who he said he was.

Or not.

I hop on the subway and go to the club where I met Hendrik. It was still daylight, earlyish for the club, although they seemed to be doing a fairly solid Happy Hour business.

I recognize the bartender only to discover that he, Ralph, is the owner of the place. I ask him just nonchalantly as I sip on an orange juice what he knows about that acoustic guitarist that used to play here a couple of nights a week. “Has he been in lately?” I ask.

Somewhat to my surprise, he tells me about the man. Ralph reveals to me that some years ago the man just came in, sat down, unpacked his guitar, and—without a word to him or anyone else—just started playing.

Here I thought Hendrik was so shy. Well, maybe we’re not such opposites after all if he can do a brazen thing like that.

Ralph said, “I can’t forget that first night. He played. Didn’t look at anyone. For all I knew, he was maybe wacko. Maybe he was mistaken about where he was. Got the address he meant to come to all wrong. But when he paused that night after quite a long, amazing piece of music, he got a smattering of applause. He came back and every time he came in for the

first few months, he'd get a little applause. But the odd thing is he never talked to anyone. Not one single word came out of his mouth. I thought maybe he's not wacko, just maybe mute, you know, unable from birth to speak or somethin'. He was just kind of a very shy guy."

I ask, "Didn't it bother you that he just kind of came in like that?"

Ralph said, "Naw, he was no bother. And hey! I got free entertainment for my customers, right? It got to a point where he was coming in on regular nights every week and since this place has a regular crowd, it got so there was no more applause. But just a nice recognition that, 'Yeah, guitar man's in tonight. Cool.' I saw that my customers not only weren't upset, they liked it. So I just let it happen."

Getting late. You should get going. The subway runs less often at this hour.

Well, I'm kind of undercover, getting more intel about Hendrik, so I go back to my neighborhood cover story and ask, "Well, I really like music. And he's not here anymore, right? So ... Are you doing any karaoke?"

To my surprise, Ralph says, "Aw, no lady, please! You're the fourth one who's asked this year about it! Anyway, I'm thinking seriously about doing it. But not yet. Better to have Mr. 12-String here."

I ask, "Well, why don't you just test it out? Just start one night per week on your slowest night and I'll come in and kick-start it for you. I love honky-tonk and heavy metal."

That made Ralph roll his eyes and put his hands together in prayer to the skies! I asked, “What is your slowest night? I’ll come ‘round. Unless your 12-string guitar man comes in on your slow nights??” And that prompted Ralph to say, “I dunno. He hasn’t been in for a while.”

So much for gathering intel about Mr. Mystery Man! Some spy I am!

Doggonit!

Chapter 29

Hendrik

I had spent a day working with the men on a brand-new business concept they'd gotten interested in. Earlier in the day, one of the ladies in the gang also presented me with her business plan. In all these years, she was only the third woman who was part of Jared's crew to present a business idea to me, and I took it very seriously. I had known the woman for several years and had a good idea of her real, solid potential.

I still hadn't seen Beatrice since her late nights at work.

I was getting ready to turn in for the night, and my phone rang. Tired as I was, I rushed to answer hoping it was Beatrice. Instead, it was a number I didn't know, but local, so I thought it might be someone in Jared's crew. I picked up.

It was the local hospital.

They had just gotten my phone number from my father. He'd been rushed to ER by ambulance just after dark and the ER team had finally gone through his pockets and wallet. They found my name and number as Emergency Contact.

The nurse or whoever called me gave me enough particulars to know where to go once at the hospital complex, but no information about my father's condition. "No, sir, not over the phone. Hospital policy. Yes, I understand. The charge nurse or the doctor will give you the status when you arrive."

I didn't need to call Jared. He texted me and showed up at my door at almost the same time. He'd gotten copied on the call through our emergency system. I just told him in one sentence what I needed, and he drove me to ER.

On the way asked me what his instructions were. "Professor, the boys are at your service. You just tell us what you want and it's done!"

I cannot imagine going through this without Beatrice.

I send Jared to get Beatrice and remind Jared, "She doesn't know who you are, remember? She doesn't know you are one of *my associates*." I looked pointedly at Jared as I underscored the last words, and Jared nodded his understanding. "Take Luz when you go to Beatrice's apartment. Call Luz now so she's ready. Be gentle but persuasive when you tell her I'm at the hospital, and that I would like her to join me here. That's all you need to say."

"Okay, I'll call Trey. We'll get there faster."

This is the first time Beatrice is going to be exposed to anyone I know. She hasn't yet met Papa and she doesn't know at all about the gang.

Oh, well. I guess I just go with it. It's not how I imagined doing things, but ...

And I sunk back into worry all the way to the hospital.

Chapter 30

Beatrice

A knock at my door.

What? Who? At this hour?

I jumped at the knock, thinking instantly that something had happened to mom.

No! Don't even think it! Mom is just fine.

Fine, fine, fine.

Keep breathing now. Mom is just fine.

It's just the cousins popping in.

I pulled the door open with my heart in my throat and see two individuals I didn't know. One was a handsome young man with honey-colored skin, short very dark hair, and piercing eyes. The other was a strikingly beautiful curvy woman his age, with smooth coffee-cream skin and long silky black hair.

The man spoke, "Miss Beatrice? My name is Jared." He pointed to the woman, "Luz, my wife, and I are associates and

neighbors of your friend Hendrik. He's asked us to come to get you. He's at the hospital, in the ER, and would like you to join him. We have a car downstairs."

My reaction, internally, is "*OMG, Hendrik is hurt! He is at the ER! He's requested my presence! I have to go!*"

I never for a nanosecond considered not going with Jared and Luz. I just put some tennis shoes on, grabbed my carry tote and the house keys, and replied, "Lead the way."

Trey is introduced to me as another of Hendrik's associates. Trey's at the wheel and is driving quite quickly but expertly to the hospital from my apartment building.

You don't know these people, but use your words! You don't usually have much trouble in that regard.

"Trey is quite a good driver!" and get stuck for anything further to say.

No worries, because Jared jumps in and explains that Trey was trained and certified by several master stunt drivers. Jared comments with a small smile of pride, "We are in good hands with Trey behind the wheel."

Jared, and his wife whose name by now I've forgotten, and I rush together into the ER. It is Jared who spots Hendrik in a corner, his head in his hands. I raced over to Hendrik and didn't even notice when his two associates left. It would be quite a few hours before I thought of them again.

I'm under the impression that Hendrik is waiting for a doctor and ask anxiously in the sort of stage whisper that

hospitals seem to encourage, “What happened!? What’s the matter? What’s wrong with you? Speak to me! Hendrik?”

Chapter 31

Hendrik

I scoop her into my lap and tell her, “It’s not me. I’m fine. I’m fine. It’s my father. He’s had a heart attack.”

Beatrice takes my face in her hands. “Oh, no! I’m so sorry. How long ago? What do you know?”

“I’m not sure how serious it is yet or what condition he’s actually in. It was an ambulance that brought him here. I also don’t know who called it. I don’t know if father called it or a neighbor ... I just don’t know!” I moaned. “I only got a call from the hospital once father was in an exam room. I’m waiting for a doctor to come and talk to me.”

“So the doctors and nurses know that you are here, right?” I nodded. I had pulled her onto my lap, and now she kissed my cheek, and again took my face in her hands and looked into my eyes. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through. I can’t imagine how I would feel if it were my mom. I’m here for you now. I’ll wait with you.”

It was over an hour before the doctor came out to get me. He took me to see my father, who was still in an ER exam room. The doctor explained that their bed capacity upstairs was tight. He said that even though my father's heart attack appeared to be quite mild, they still wanted to keep him overnight for observation, and also monitor his vital signs for a while. In short, they were waiting for a room to take him to.

I took Beatrice by the hand and followed the doctor. She whispered to me when we'd gone halfway down a corridor together, "Are you sure you want me to be there? Don't you want to be alone with your father?" I could just shake my head and squeeze her hand, and so she followed me.

Father was asleep by the time I reached him. I kissed him on the forehead. Then I looked at him for the longest time, feeling very helpless.

Then I went out to find his charge nurse. She gave me a little more information than the doctor had, but not too much.

This was one of the longest nights I can remember. Beatrice never left my side.

Chapter 32

Beatrice

During the late evening and through most of the night at the hospital with Hendrik, I all but forgot about my confusion and anger at Hendrik for not telling me his real name and his real background. When it did pop into my mind once, I stuffed it back down into a corner.

Now is simply not the time. Even you know that! Let it be.

The very fact that he called on you tonight shows that he really cares about you. You are important to him.

And that should mean something.

At about 2:00 in the morning, I realized that it had been because of my misgivings, my suspicions and my anger that I had not seen Hendrik for several days. I asked myself if he wondered why I had been out of touch.

Well, he certainly doesn't know that you've been angry at him!

Now is not the time to think about this. Let it go.

I'm all about comforting Hendrik, because I know full well that his father is the only family member he has. But more than once, my mind wandered about what kind of emotional support I would need if my mother were in this situation. She is my only parent and this is one of the many ways Hendrik and I had felt connected.

I shuddered.

Shazam! I don't even want to think about losing mom!

We'd been at the hospital for over five hours when Hendrik got nervous about his father's condition again and went to find the nurse. She reassured him that his father was in a simple, restorative, natural sleep at the moment and that it was exactly what he needed to heal.

When the nurse suggested that he and I go home, Hendrik balked. He wasn't about to move and I could see by the look on his face it was no use for the nurse to insist. But a couple of hours later, he picked up his phone and made a call. I think he was calling that nice man Jared.

"Beatrice," whispered Hendrik. "I'm having you driven back to your place. You did say you have to work tomorrow ... uh, today ... and I don't want you to fall asleep at your keyboard."

At that point, I would have done anything for Hendrik, and so I nodded my agreement.

Unusually for me, I didn't even try to go to bed when I got back home. I drank two large glasses of water. I stripped and

got into a piping hot shower as hot as I could stand it, and stayed there until the hot water ran out. Then, contrary to all my habits of comfort (*Girl, you are in an odd state of mind to be doing this!*), I stood under freezing water until my body didn't feel the cold anymore. I made a pot of coffee and got dressed for work.

It was 5 by then, but still dark. I drank two mugs of coffee, poured the rest in a travel mug, and hit the road for the office. Getting there early would allow me to leave early if Hendrik needed me later.

And I will be there for him.

Whatever his name really is!



At about 2 pm, I made my way to the hospital with the intention of not returning to work. Jeff gave me no trouble about it. Joseph said he'd pinch-hit if needed. After all, I had gone in quite early.

It occurred to me to wonder where Hendrik's other friends and family were. Sure, he had told me that he didn't have anyone but his dad.

But he has to know other people he calls friends ... Where are they??

There was Jared and his wife. But they had called themselves associates and neighbors. Not friends. Maybe Trey was a friend?

My thoughts abruptly ceased when I saw a visibly exhausted Hendrik. His father was again sleeping.

Hendrik took me into the corridor outside his father's room. "I have spoken to my father a couple of times and he is just feeling a little weak. He can use both arms and legs. I was worried about that; don't ask me why, though," and he shrugged. Still worried.

I looked Hendrik over. He looked weak and tired himself. I asked, "Have you eaten anything since you got to the hospital last night?" He had not.

I proposed to go find the hospital cafeteria and bring him some food. "I know the kinds of things you like to eat so let me go down and see what I can find for you." He nodded, at first a little distracted, and then jerked alert. "Let me buy it," he said to me.

Then he just pulled out his wallet and gave it to me. "I've got cash in there. Or use the Visa card if that makes sense instead, okay? Buy yourself something, too, and we'll eat together across from Papa's room," he said, pointing to a "family room."

As I walked down the corridor to the elevator to go back downstairs and ask where to find the cafeteria, it occurred to me that I might have the answer to my earlier question about his identity right in my hand. I was discreet because there was one other individual in the elevator. But I opened his wallet and right there in the first window was his ID card.

Interestingly, it was not a driver's license but a state ID for non-drivers.

Interesting ... He doesn't drive?

What was more interesting is that he hadn't told me any lies at all!

His name is really Hendrik Endersson! Hendrik J. Endersson.

My earlier anger spiked all of a sudden—at my jealous, suspicious self—and then completely melted into bafflement. Now I was more confused than ever. What had Craig been talking about the other day when he said 'Hendrik' and then acted so flustered, only to revert to using the name 'Hank'?

Only my Hendrik, I hoped, would have the answer. If there was even an actual connection between Craig's slip-up and my Hendrik.

But this was definitely not the right time to ask him for it.



I knew that even after the night at the hospital, the shortened day at work, and more time with Hendrik, I wouldn't be able to sleep. I was keyed up.

I called my cousins one after the other to see if they would join me at our favorite karaoke club. Neither one was free.

“Go belt a few. If you haven't been there in as long as me, you need your fix!” urged my cousin Jim.

So I hopped on the subway and went there by myself. It was a tiny bit early for much of a crowd, but that suited me fine. Although I was wound up I wasn't sure how long it would take for me to want to curl up in bed and sleep a full night.

I walked in and the stage was empty. I sketched a wave to the bar man whom I recognized. When he saw it was me he got a big grin on his face and waved me over. "Where you been, girl? We ain't had nobody here who can belt 'em like you. Git up on that stage and give us one. How about *Tears in my Beer*? Special request on behalf of yours truly?" and he grinned big like he always did.

There were maybe four people sitting around the place. I got up there and soon I had those four people stomping their feet and clapping their hands to *Tears*. I set up *Honky Tonkin*, and then *Your Cheatin' Heart*, and ended with *Hey Good Lookin'* which I've always loved.

I felt really good.

And as predicted, tired. Go home.

I did.

Chapter 33

Hendrik

I am at my wit's end worrying about Papa, yet at the same time, thoughts of Carly and her death are haunting me. I know there's no comparison between these two emergencies. But I can't deny how afraid I am of losing my father today.

Beatrice has brought us a selection of food from the cafeteria, comically complaining about the lack of a healthy food selection in a place that's supposed to be all about health and healing.

As agreed, we went across the hall into a little family waiting room to eat.

“Hendrik, you wouldn't believe how long it took me to find just this little amount of edible food! *Creepers!* Who knew that hospitals think fried food is healthy for you? *Gadzooks!*” She went on and on with her usually hilarious old-style curse words, but I guess she finally saw that my energy wasn't into it.

She took my hand. “Tell me everything you are thinking. Everything. Just empty your brain onto my lap,” she encouraged and scooted even closer to me.

“When I got the news about Papa, all of my thoughts were about him of course, and I have to tell you—I thought he was dead. When I got here and they said he was just sleeping, I still believed he was going to die. He’s all I have now since Carly is also gone.”

Beatrice’s face told me she was trying to remember if I’d mentioned anyone named Carly before.

I went on to explain. I knew full well I had never mentioned Carly’s name in any conversation between us up till now.

“Some years ago, I met a girl named Carly. I fell in love. Oh, *we* fell in love. And we dated happily for the longest time before I asked if she would marry me.” I paused, then looked at Beatrice. “I was so shy and insecure about talking, having any kind of conversation. She usually did most of the talking, until I finally realized that she would not mock me for my geekiness or the way I stumbled over my words, but just expect normal adult conversations. I realized that she was *interested* in whatever I had to say and wasn’t ready to just pounce and mock like so many kids had done in my younger years to me. I got up the nerve and asked her to marry me. And she refused.”

Beatrice’s mouth fell open, but she nodded for me to go on.

“We kept seeing each other. She by no means wanted to break up with me, she said. But I knew she wasn’t telling me

something important. I thought there had to be a reason for not wanting to marry me. As you can guess, my mind spun in all kinds of directions since she wasn't telling me anything at all. I thought that perhaps because I had only my father for family, she didn't want me. You see, she had a pretty big family and got along really well with every one of them. Then I thought maybe some of my beliefs didn't line up with her own. Or that she didn't like how tall I was." I shook my head at the memory of how silly I'd been about it.

I admitted, "I really went from the sublime to the ridiculous in my head to figure out all on my own why she wouldn't marry me but was still willing to see me."

At my rueful grin and headshake, Beatrice only moved a bit closer to me. The look on her face and her nod encouraged me to continue, "Finally, one day we had a date to meet for dinner at a restaurant we liked a lot, and she didn't show up. She didn't answer her phone. A couple of hours went by. I panicked because nothing like this had happened between us before. Finally, her mother called me. I had met her family. They knew me pretty well. Carly was in the hospital."

I saw that Beatrice had tears in her eyes. She put one hand on my cheek and said, "Tell me the rest. I am here for you. I'm listening."

It took me a little while to compose myself but I continued, "As it turned out, Carly had been seeing doctors for several months for odd symptoms she had been experiencing. They ran all kinds of tests, I guess. I never knew what that involved,

since she had kept me out of it. Her mother admitted to me that she swore the whole family to secrecy about it; Carly had forbidden any family member to talk to me about it. She had stage four cancer.”

Beatrice gasped. “Because she knew she wouldn’t live very long, she didn’t want to marry me and turn me into a young widower.”

And I burst into tears at the telling of it. I couldn’t know that Beatrice was sobbing right along with me.

Chapter 34

Beatrice

That one afternoon I spent at the hospital was Hendrik was an eye opener about his past and somewhat about his struggles to ... what? Grow up? Become self-confident? Be in love again?

Plus, as he told his story, I noticed right away that he was speaking of Carly in the past tense, and I felt a foreboding. I saw feelings in his face. I heard emotions in his voice. He was still hurting so badly.

She was keeping a gigantic secret from him. Bless her little heart, it must've hurt like hell not to tell him.

And here I am, so recently cursing at a college love affair gone sour. Nobody died, and I was still in a right state about it.

In any case, everything I heard and saw gave me food for thought about the man I thought I knew so intimately.

I guess he doesn't know much about you as a young girl either, come to think of it. But for him to refer that strongly to

being bullied as a young boy, wow. Just wow!

Seeing the physically strong man who so confidently walks down the street leaves no picture in my mind of him being anything but sure of himself.

Strong and powerful. Confident and a good conversationist with his deep, vibrant voice. Funny and smart. That's how I see him today.

I do remember thinking how he must be shy. Yeah, at the tech convention, he did act shy. Well ... I was brazen enough for the both of us.

At the hospital, Hendrik had me come in and chat with his dad. I started to see his dad's behavior in his facial expressions and I chuckled to myself at this turn of events.

Now that Hendrik's father was back home, he decided to stay with his dad for a few days. His father both communicated reluctance for Hendrik to fuss over him and great pleasure that his son would do so!

Sound like mom much?!

Hendrik encouraged me to return to work. We spoke every morning when I woke up, then we spoke again at every one of my lunch hours and every evening after his father had fallen asleep.

Hendrik's last report was somewhat amusing to him, as I could clearly hear in his voice. "Vader is getting grumpy about staying in bed or in his lazy boy chair all day! He's been itching to get back to work, so tomorrow we're going to see

his doctor for a clean bill of health. Otherwise, not just the plant management but also the union won't let him back on the job. And if he only gets a partial bill of health, he also cannot go back to work. So Papa is pretty anxious until he knows what the doctor is gonna say."

When his father's doctor finally declared that he was out of the woods and ready to go back to work, Hendrik asked me out for dinner.

It is at that dinner that I decide I can finally confront Hendrik about his identity.

"Hendrik, remember those all-nighters I did before your dad was in the hospital?" he nodded. "Well, I had to go to one of the old wise men. We were having trouble with some coding."

Hendrik looked at me and asked, "Old wise men? I don't know what you mean by that, but by the very name you give them, I can't imagine what you, the All-Seeing Eye, cannot figure out on your own!"

I had admitted to him that the team had given me a nickname. "You tease, go ahead. Tease. I *am* the All-Seeing Eye." And I did some woo-woo things with my hands and rolled my eyes to prove it.

I took up my mission again, "That is what many of us call the most senior employees, the ones who were there when MetriCooks was just getting started. My old wise man is a guy named Craig Hillard, a really smart man I wish was my boss instead of Jeff the No-Tech-Walking-Ego."

I laughed and shook my head as I mentioned Jeff in this way, and Hendrik chuckled as well. “For my part,” said Hendrik, “I’m very happy about Jeff since that’s how I found you again!”

Not to be deterred from my mission, I said to him, “Well, Craig let slip that someone named Hendrik founded MetriCooks and then he got all flustered. Really, really embarrassed. Painfully nervous. So much so that he begged me not to repeat what he had just let slip ... apparently after so many years of keeping some kind of secret.”

I looked Hendrik square in the eye, “You wouldn’t know anything about a ‘Hendrik’ founding a company called ‘MetriCooks,’ would you now?”

Bad timing. Hendrik had just filled his mouth with a huge forkful. So I waited, so many questions still to ask him.

First—who are you, really?

Second—why have I never been to your home?

Third—who are these “associates” of yours, Hendrik, who came for me when your dad was hospitalized?

And more importantly—are you the multibillionaire founder of the company I work for?

Chapter 35

Hendrik

If ever the expression “saved by the bell” really saved someone, my phone saved me just then. My phone rang urgently at the same time I got a pinging text. I picked up the call as I swallowed the huge bite of food I had just put in my mouth.

“Yes, Trey,” I said instead of a hello.

I listen to Trey. He says that an attempt to break into my studio apartment has been stopped by the two crew members on duty.

“Have you called the police?” I pause and listen. “And the men? Oh no, Marianna, too? Any injuries?” And I listen some more. “I’m still at the Thai place,” and I confirmed the address to him, though he already knew it from having dropped me here barely an hour ago. “OK, excellent thinking, Trey! Thank you very much. She’ll be waiting for you.”

I look over at Beatrice who is dumbstruck by the words *police* and *injuries*. “My Lady Fair,” I sighed. “I have to go to

my crew now. My associates. They have foiled a breaking and entering and the police are involved. The whole neighborhood is apparently in an uproar. I don't want you to go with me because I don't know how dangerous it still might be." I looked her pointedly in the eyes, "You remember Trey?"

"Sure, if he's the stunt driver that drove me and Jared to the hospital the other day," she replied, with a crease of worry in her brow.

I nodded, "He's on his way to take you home safely, my beauty. I'll pay for our dinner on my way out." I see Beatrice moving to get up and take a firmer tone, "I'm serious, Beatrice. It's dangerous over there right now. I need to keep you safe. That's why I need Trey to take you back to your place. Will you do that for me, my darling?"

I could see that she melted with my use of the words 'my beauty' and 'my darling.' I didn't talk like that very much to her.

It's about time you did!

When I get Beatrice's promise, I pay the bill and we wait for our respective drivers in front of the restaurant. "Hendrik, my sweet. You will be safe yourself, won't you? You do realize I do not know where you live? Tell me you will be safe!" I reassure her that I have lived in that neighborhood for many, many years and have been safe all along. I absolutely do not remind her that that's where I got mugged and knifed! She doesn't need to think of that.

Soon enough. Soon enough.

Trey passes Beatrice into the back seat of his car. Before Trey gets behind the wheel he nods to me and gives me a high sign to show that he will text me when Beatrice is safe and sound in her own place.

I get in my own car driven by Trey's second-in-command, and off we go to my studio apartment.

The police are there and when I arrive, asking what the hubbub is, one of the beat cops tells me that a first-floor studio apartment door was battered but there was no entry due to neighbors (and the big cop nodded over to a couple of Jared's men milling around with Marianna, too) who interrupted the breaking and entering. I asked, "Was it the first-floor studio front?" The cop nodded. "That's my place," I told him.

The beat cop looked fairly admiring as he added, "Looks like these two neighbor men simply gave both thieves a punch in the solar plexus and when they were down they sat on them until we arrived!" The cop chuckled and shook his head. "Ballsy. But they coulda been hurt, ya know!"

So? A couple of members of Jared's crew got into it with a couple of wanna-be robbers. Since I'd identified myself and stated that the apartment in question was my own, I asked if I could go up and see what the damages were. That same beat cop went upstairs with me. I easily saw that he was right. The locks had held until Jared's men intervened. The cop went back down, not interested in entering my studio.

When the police had carted off the criminals and the neighbors had gone back to their dinner and televisions, Jared

and his men pulled me aside on the sidewalk. I shook my head and motioned for us to go up to my place. Once inside, Jared nodded to James who told me the story. They were keeping an eye on my block and the entrance to my building as they do on a 24-hour basis. They noticed some skanky-looking characters scoping out the building. And the rest, I knew from the beat cop. I asked if they recognized the two thieves. James nodded and looked to Jared who took over, “Professor, they are from the street gang six blocks West of here. A real dumb bunch if you ask me. No skills. No leadership over there. There is no reason for them to be here except that somehow they must have found out what you have in your place here. That’s all we can think of. But we can’t imagine how they found out. None of us talk. You don’t talk. Beatrice has never been here, has she?”

And I had to stifle a chuckle. They all leaned forward just a tiny imperceptible half-inch to hear my response. “No, she has never been here. As far as I know, she does not even know I live in this *area*, much less in this building,” and all the men relaxed, again imperceptibly, and I suppressed a grin.

I love these guys! No man could have better brothers.

Chapter 36

Beatrice

I am with Trey who is talking about some “professor” to the other young man in the front passenger seat. I can’t stand it anymore and when there’s a lull in their conversation, I ask who the professor is.

It’s really funny and disconcerting how they first look at each other.

Like kids caught eating the forbidden extra piece of candy.

There is a little amazement in Trey’s face, but not in the other guy’s.

Trey says, “Oh, that’s our nickname for Hendrik, because he is so much about teaching us and guiding us in our businesses.”

This is news to me. What does Hendrik know about ... guiding anyone in business?

I ask Trey, “Well, how did Hendrik learn all this stuff himself?”

Trey says, “The Professor never really told us that. But we are making money in our businesses, so we figure what he taught us is the real deal. We have big respect for him sharing his knowledge with us.”

Now I’m more confused about Hendrik than ever. A ... *professor? Teaching anyone about ... business ... and making money?*

I am doubting myself now. I don’t have anyone to speak to. I don’t really have a girlfriend.

I’ve never really been close to someone like I’m close to my mom and cousins. But I can’t talk to those boys. They’d spend the whole time teasing me and not listening.

So when Trey has “tucked me safely at home” (I overheard his phoned report as he walked back down my stairs), I call mom. She said she just happens to be shopping at her favorite mall, so we meet for a meal. My meal was sort of interrupted, but I can always eat anyway.

“Mom ...” I begin when we are at our table. Then I’m at a loss for words. Me. Miss Belt It Out.

My mom, no fool, stops fiddling with the tableware and looks at me with concern. “What’s going on? What’s the matter, sweetie?”

And so I reveal—to my immediately delighted mother—that I’m dating someone. And, out of nowhere, I’m on the verge of tears.

Mom reaches out for my hand and says, “Tell me what’s on your mind. What’s bothering you about dating this man?”

“Oh, mom, I’m second-guessing myself. After that bastard in college ... I’m not trusting myself to know this guy is a good man. An honest man. Or not.”

I don’t need to remind mom of that bad breakup in college. I’d been a wet rag for weeks about it, and mom knew the whole story.

Mom passes me a tissue and says, “Oh, honey! You can’t judge all men by one bad one. I mean, look at me. Where is your father? He’s not anywhere around. I didn’t do it right back then with him. I didn’t see him for who he was. I was just too young to be smart about such things. But we—you and I—have wonderful friends around us. They are all wonderful men and women. You know that. I’ve learned a lot about myself since then, and a lot about people. In spite of what my big brother believes ...” And she gave me a comical look that said it all.

My uncle was convinced we were just two damsels in distress. That without him and my *male* cousins we’d be lost to the ways of the world. My mother and I haven’t had a heart-to-heart talk in a long time, and her mentioning my uncle’s suspicion of our ability to make our way in life without him made us both laugh for a minute.

Mom sobers and says, “As you know, when I was still pregnant with you, your uncle told me, ‘Sis, you can learn the mechanical things about raising a kid. You can learn how to

change a diaper the right way. You can learn how to feed your baby. But a lot of it is just trusting yourself. Believing that you're doing things right.”

Mom gazes at me. “So what does your gut tell you, BB? Does your intuition tell you that you're doing the right thing by dating this man? By spending time with him?”

I couldn't answer yet.

She went on, “What I learned is you have to just trust yourself because everyone else will have their own opinion. And they'll be right or wrong, but in the end, you're the only one who can do it for yourself. You're the only one living your life. I made a wrong choice in high school. Not about having my baby. But about the man who made it with me.”

I rarely heard mom refer to him.

“But that's water under the bridge. The choices I've made since then were all *right* for me. Look how you turned out! You are smart. You have a good education. Heavens to Murgatroyd: You speak geek! And I never learned a foreign language!”

It was her standard joke to me once she understood what a “geek” even was.

She had made her point. “So tell me about this young man. What do you have in common? And what are your differences, since you seem to think there are some major ones?”

I look at my mom, comforted by her own revelations. I explain that, in fact, he speaks geek like I do. Without

revealing that I'd picked him up at a bar well before my story began, I tell her, "We met at the technology convention I went to a while back." We both get a laugh at mom's old joke which mom brings out right now. "Oh, I never learned to even say hello and goodbye in the Geek language."

We chuckle together. I think some more, "So, similarities? Well you know, he's an amazing acoustic guitarist and you know I love music. I haven't convinced him to go to karaoke with me yet, but I'm working on that. He's a vegetarian, mom!" and I smiled my biggest smile. "He eats mountains of food so we get along just fine in that regard. We've been to lots of restaurants where we've had great, great times talking. He's got a good sense of humor. And like me, he just has one parent. He's really attentive to my well-being."

And he is. Sending drivers for me. Making sure I'm home safe. And way back, at our first date, asking me about restaurants so that I'd be happy.

And in bed? Wow, he's always made it about my comfort and pleasure first.

Yes, he has.

I glance at mom, and she's just nodding. She says thoughtfully, "I didn't even think about what your father and I might have in common. One minute we're on our first date, and the next there you were. I never even wondered back then what he and I might have in common. I only saw that he was gone."

I tell mom, “Well, he just has his dad like I said. His dad was taken by ambulance to the hospital not long ago.” I explain about the hospitalization and how I thought about what would happen to me if she had any emergency like that.

“You know you can always, always call your uncle, BB.”

I nod.

Who could I count on? Really?

Sure, I have my uncle and cousins but I get a little tear in my eyes with mom when we talk about it.

Chapter 37

Hendrik

The men stay back for a while to discuss additional security for my building and my studio, and one says, “With all our tech-savvy, there has to be a way to first, protect our Professor and the building better, and second, to find out why that gang thought they could bust in here anyway. What went wrong that they even got in the main door downstairs? And then? Why here?”

I sit back and listen as these amazing men figure out how to keep me safer.



Why am I holding back with Beatrice? I all but admitted to her that I'd made a conscious decision that she would never come to my place.

But why not?

All I know is that Beatrice has been very caring.

During one of our earlier conversations, she hinted to me that she wanted to take me out for one of her music evenings, “Pretty different from the music you play,” she teased.

She was very nonchalant about asking me if I had been back to the club where we first met.

Where she picked you up! Ha! That’s a great memory ...

She wanted to know if I was continuing to play every once in a while at the club.

We had a whole conversation about that, but she wasn’t telling me what her karaoke “music evening” was all about.

I’m sure that woman has secrets and stories that will take years for me to hear.

Lord knows I’ve been keeping a few of my own.

I arranged a date with Beatrice for dinner the next evening to make up for our interrupted meal. I was so happy to see her that I couldn’t take my eyes off her for the longest time. To such an extent that she ordered for me because I hadn’t even looked at the menu.

“My dear, starstruck man! Holy guacamole! Are you sure you don’t want to order for yourself? The menu is right there ... You know, in your hand? That thing dangling at the end of your arm?” she teased me. But as I gazed at her beautiful face and luscious body and felt such love for her ...

Love?! Yes, you fool. L.O.V.E.

Well, I just shook my head and waved for her to order for me.

Beatrice asked me about my associates. I must have looked at her funny because she specified, “Jared, Trey, and Luz. And whoever else is lurking around you that you don’t talk to me about.” That shook me out of my love-struck haze and gaze.

She wanted to know in what way they were my associates, and what I was doing with them that made them call themselves my associates.

“Hendrik, are you in a business with them?”

My, “Yes. And no,” was absolutely not satisfactory to her. As we ate our food, I dove in to the story.

I explained how I had moved into a neighborhood a long, long time ago that was less than safe at the time. “I moved there because it was cheaper than my dorm room and closer to my classes than my father’s house,” I said. I told her how I’d been mugged and knifed quite badly. About my four days in the hospital. About how I met Jared a few days after my hospital release at our gym.

What I notice quite clearly is that my Lady Fair is dumbstruck. It’s not that I don’t let her get a word in edgewise. She looks like she doesn’t know what to say at all.

Well, this is all new to her. A new side of you that she is seeing.

“I was just finishing up college. And I had started a business while in college that was doing well enough, but I wanted to

save money and just put it back into the company. So I lived here. I stayed here. And 15 years have gone by and I'm still here.”

Finally she speaks up, “And so the attempted break-in the other day? Was that your house?”

“Calling it a house is a big exaggeration! It's actually a small apartment building, and I have been in a small first-floor studio apartment of it for all these years.”

I go on, “When I met Jared, he was just stepping up in his gang into a leadership role. But he didn't want his crew to be a criminal gang. He didn't want them to be poor. He didn't want them to be uneducated. In other words, when I met him, he had goals for himself and his crew that he didn't know how to reach. So, it just kind of evolved between us. In exchange for his crew making sure my building was safe at all hours by posting what I used to call Sentinels on the block, I figured out a way for them all to get educated and take care of themselves. And I started at the bottom. I found a method that has had international success in teaching adults how to read, so I got the method for them. Taught it to them. And then they started teaching it to each other, which is the goal of the method in the first place. I think they call it ‘each one teach one.’ From there, Jared himself and most of his crew started feeling more confident and wanted to know how to start e-commerce. Since that's what I started, sort of, in college, I knew how to make some money online. So I gave them some tips. They had all the ideas for their businesses. But I got them organized.”

Beatrice stepped in again, “So that is why they call you Professor, huh?” I nodded. “Later, a couple of the crew approached Jared saying they didn’t wanna do digital businesses. Trey, for example, wanted a limo business. So with Jared and a couple of the other fellows who were also interested in being professional drivers, we discussed the kind of business they dreamed about. Trey wanted a high-end business catering to the richer resident. He wanted to be the best driver in this big city of ours. And he wanted his own fleet of limos and town cars.”

Beatrice shared, “Yes, Jared and his wife bragged that Trey is trained and certified by a couple of stunt driving schools.”

“True. It was his own idea, and one other of his drivers is now in the program as well. They can offer that benefit to their high-ticket passengers. It’s a marketing tool, but in the city here, anyone who has spent any time in the driver’s seat or been a passenger knows that defensive driving is an absolute need. Trey and his team provide that to their passengers.”

I say that this all started happening while I was dating Carly. That Carly and I never lived together.

“These men are like the brothers I never had. A number of them have married since we met, and their wives cluck over me like mother hens. So, that is who they are. You’ll meet more of them soon, I think. They are very curious about the woman I call My Lady Fair.”

Then I laughed and at Beatrice’s perplexity, I said, “The women in the crew just can’t understand why they haven’t met

you yet!”

Chapter 38

Beatrice

I made a point of checking up on Papa by asking Hendrik how his dad was doing, even though he'd gone back to work.

He continued to help his dad regain his former outstanding muscle strength by first hounding him so that he ate well, and then by taking him to his gym in the late afternoons and having a personal trainer work with him. He made me laugh at his stories about how his father would grumble “how light the weights are that your *professional trainer* is making me lift, my son!”

I nearly laughed till I peed my pants the way Hendrik mentioned his frustration in one conversation. “*Gadzooks*, Beatrice! My father has to be the #1 hardest patient to take care of. *Sufferin' succotash!* You'd think that he was the only one on the planet. *Good grief*, he's a tough one!”

It was all I could do to contain my laughter at his adoption of my cussing. But I'm sure he heard the amusement in my voice, when I assured him, “Hendrik, my sweetness, you are a

strong determined man! *Great Guns!* Don't let your father take advantage of you. Just tell him 'horse feathers to that' and make him do what he's supposed to do!" At that point, both Hendrik and I were doubled in laughter over the phone.

After a few sessions with the trainer and hours of working out, even Hendrik had to admit that his father's strength was back. His father was starting to demand that Hendrik go do his own workouts and leave him alone. That he didn't need a nursemaid. Blah blah blah.

And that's when Hendrik knew his father was out of the woods.



I'm at work and others on my team are huddled together around their morning cold caffeine. There is scuttlebutt, some office gossip, that Jeff, my no-tech boss, is moving out of his position.

Moving or being moved?

I wonder. We've been doing great work in spite of his management. So what's really going on?

Joseph and the others on my team have just heard this rumor. I see that the others are satisfied but wary because if the company could put someone as bad as Jeff as a manager, what kind of professional—if any—would they assign next?

We all go back and forth on this before getting back to work. We agreed to join each other for coffee after work and

compare any news we can drum up before then.

At coffee this evening, Joseph and a couple of other team members talk about this shift in supervisors by saying to each other, “Oh, we want the All-Seeing-Eye as boss.”

“Guys, *she’s* right here.” I point to myself. “The All-Seeing-Eye is Hearing All, too, you know.” They all chuckle at my mock outburst.

Then the two hair-brained coders Craig and I had set straight looked at each other and waggled their eyebrows comically. Joseph saw it and demanded to know what they had learned. The one I had dubbed Red because that was the only color he wore, says, “Well, some of the men always wondered, but we heard twice this afternoon that Jeff ... Well that Jeff probably slept not to the top, but to the middle—by sleeping with the Director of Projects.” Red pauses dramatically.

When no one reacted or said one word when he mentioned the DoP, he threw out both arms and said, “People! The Director of Projects is a man. Lest you forget, if Jeff slept his way to the middle by sleeping with the Director of Projects, wouldn’t that make one or both of them gay, or at least bisexual?”

Well, Red got the reaction he wanted. None of us were thinking along those lines. None of us really cared about anyone else’s sex life. Quite frankly, I had enough to think about with my own, so worrying about who was or wasn’t sleeping with whoever else wasn’t on my horizons.

Red's sidekick, the other coder I called Floppy because of his long unruly curly hair (longer than my own hair and crazier, too), jumped in then. He'd heard that there was a big argument in the DoP's office mid-week last week. Just by lurking around and casually asking "if things had calmed down yet at the DoP's," he found out that it might just have been a lovers' spat followed by a noisy breakup between the DoP and ... Jeff.

Who knew that Jeff might be gay? None of us ever considered the matter. It just wasn't important.

Until his love affair went bust and affected our team.

Chapter 39

Hendrik

We were at her place after a leisurely dinner and Beatrice mentioned the supervisory change once it was no longer a rumor but officially announced.

Outwardly, I shrug and harumph every so often, basically just listening to her tell me how the news came to the team and how they'd confirmed the rumor.

Meanwhile, my head is going a mile a minute.

From what I know about Beatrice's skills and reputation, she'd be a natural to lead the team. They do call her the All-Seeing-Eye.

And geeks take such monikers seriously. We are all so wound up in our own cyber world that it takes an exceptional person to shake us up and make us pay attention.

Beatrice obviously has done that.

I looked at her with new eyes.

From what I know about her personality, she'd also be a natural to lead the team.

I say to her, when she's come to the end of her story, "I'm going to make a prediction. They at least nominate you to the short list of new manager candidates. You go at least to the semi-finals on this one. You're a natural leader, and you speak not only great Greek," referring to our favorite ethnic foods, "You speak Geek fluently!"

I had made her laugh, but she looked a little worried.

I know a way to erase those worry lines.

I slid over to her sofa right next to her. I slinked my hand up her shirt and pulled it over her head. "I have noticed that you're pretty brazen lately," I look at her with a twinkle in my eye.

"What do you mean?"

And there are those worry lines of hers again.

So I pull her close to me, and I say with exaggeration, "Well ... I'm *sure* you dress *appropriately* at work." She raised her eyebrows at me. "But I've noticed that whenever we're together on a date, you don't wear a bra."

To my great pleasure, she burst into laughter, "How else am I going to seduce the man of my dreams? A woman's got to use her wily ways in the best way she knows how. Right?"

I throw up my hands, "*Gasp!* Noooo!! Say it ain't so! You have a man of your dreams??! *Shazam!* And who might that be, Lady Fair??"

In response, she jumped me! She planted her warm lips on mine and pressed her naked breasts against my chest.

My shirt didn't last long. Neither did the rest of our clothes. And when she turned away from me and bent over in all her naked glory to pick up our clothes, I just couldn't resist. I said, "Don't move a muscle." I was so hard by then I wasn't sure that I could wait. Her luscious booty was calling me as she bent forward enough that I saw her pussy just begging me to take her.

I just had her spread her legs a little bit and I scooted under her on my back and licked her wet. But I warned her again, "Don't move!" I scrambled up to stand behind her and told her, "Guide my cock into your pussy vault." I licked my fingers and got my cockhead wet.

Beatrice reached through her legs for my shaft and moaned, "Come here, I've got you." I held her by the hips and gently pushed myself deep inside her pussy. She moaned again, "I think I'm coming right now. Why have we never done this before?"

That made me even harder if that was even possible.

Baseball scores. Political crisis. Don't come yet!

I rocked into her and heard her sharp intake of breath as she shouted out, "I'm coming!" and I began to thrust with more energy.

Knowing she'd had an orgasm, feeling her grip me, I thrust harder and harder, faster and faster. And did my own shouting.

And we collapsed in gales of laughter on top of our abandoned pile of clothes.

Chapter 40

Beatrice

It didn't take long for management to confirm that Jeff would no longer be in charge of my team. What wasn't clear is if he still had a job in the company. But I have to admit none of us worried very much about that. We were more concerned about who would replace him.

One afternoon I got a call to go to the HR manager's office and I went with my heart in my throat. What could they possibly want to ask me? I was worried enough that I didn't mention the call to any team members.

Holy macaroni! I hope they're not firing me, too!

And if they aren't firing me? Are they transferring me somewhere else?

I don't wanna work anywhere else in the company! I like where I'm at.

I fretted from the moment I got the summons, and until I walked to the Human Resource Director's office. His assistant whisked me in.

Aww, fudge! Frickin' fudge! I'm in trouble now!

The DoP, the Director of Projects, the man that we had been gossiping about not very long ago, was sitting there, too.

Neither one of them wasted any time. “Good afternoon, Miss Wills. I’m sure you’ve heard our announcement that your current supervisor is leaving the company.”

Well. That answers one of my questions.

“Roberts here is well aware that your team is a key player in his project management efforts, and we are actively recruiting a replacement for Jeff. Both of us have done our research and conducted a few formal and many informal interviews with staff. We would like to place you on the short list of serious contenders for the position.”

I walked back to my desk fifteen minutes later in a haze and a daze.

As Hendrik predicts, I am nominated alongside three other candidates to take on the team supervisory position when Jeff leaves.

I text Hendrik right away with the news. But I’m feeling kind of flat. I go over to Joseph and tell him to get the whole team together for lunch. Whatever plans they have, put them on hold. They all have to come to lunch with me.

Once we’re outside the building, all standing on the Plaza, I break the news to everyone.

The two harebrained juniors jump up and down and do a *Yippie Kay-Yay*. Joseph is all smiles and the others are full of

congratulations. I hold up my hand, “Hey, guys. Cool your jets, fa’ Pete’s sake! I just wanted you to be the first to know that I’m on the shortlist. I am *not* the new team leader. I’m just being considered. Calm down! Enough of your *folderol*.”

At which they broke out in gleeful laughter at me.

We had rather a raucous lunch together.

At least they were raucous. I can’t remember a lunch hour with friends when I never said a single word.

Compared to that news and the prospects for the team, the afternoon passed fairly quietly. Before I left the office, I called mom with the news. Like my teammates, she whooped and hollered at the end of the line with congratulations for me. And like with my teammates, I had to calm her down and remind her, “Mom, Jeevers! It’s just gonna be more interviews, you know? It’s not a done deal at all. I’m just one person they’re interviewing and considering for the job.”

Then she asked, “I get it, sweetie. Now, did they talk to you about pay? You’ve got to assume that the position pays more than what you’re getting, right?” Well, I have to admit she stumped me with that question! Not only had HR not talked about it, I hadn’t asked.

And thinking about it now? I would have been jumping the gun to ask that question.

I say as much to mom. She insisted that we go out for a celebratory meal before the week was out.

I know what I have to do before even considering taking the job from my side of things. It is something I not managed to see through yet.

Been trying. But life's been getting in the way.

I have to see this through or I'll never sleep easy.

I texted Hendrik again. *Free for dinner?* Yes, he was. We arranged to meet at our now-favorite Asian joint. I hadn't eaten very well at lunchtime and let the boys clean my plate for me.

I was that worried.

What if Hendrik is the founder of this company I work for? Is it gonna be a conflict of interest for me to be even a junior manager in a company that my boyfriend founded?

I don't need anyone gossiping about me like we all did about Jeff!

What is the conflict of interest anyway? It's not like I'm sleeping with my boss.

Too true.

But am I sleeping with a secret, mystery billionaire?

All relationships have secrets. What really worries me is that he's been lying to me.

Is he keeping a secret? I just don't know!

Okay. Suppose he does have some deep dark secrets.

Are his secrets really lies? Oh, please, no, don't let him be lying to me!

Billionaire or not, liar or not, I've got to get my head on straight about how I feel about Hendrik.

Secrets and lies already killed one relationship I valued. I'm not letting it happen again.

And that means I have to ask him about this Hank Enders thing that Craig put in my head. I will never ever rest easy until I get the answer.

Has my trust in Hendrik been misplaced?

Chapter 41

Hendrik

I certainly knew this moment might come, and I guess it was none too soon. While I had nothing to hide, I did!

Old habits die hard. I've been keeping secrets a secret for so long that it doesn't even feel like a secret anymore. It feels like the truth.

I arrive at the restaurant thanks to one of Trey's drivers, and it looks like I'm there before Beatrice.

I should have sent one of the men for her. Well, I will be doing so from now on. She shouldn't have to take the subway any time of day. I certainly don't!

Beatrice walked in, looking gorgeous.

And looking fierce. Yes indeed. The time has come.

I stood and pulled out her chair for her and as she sat I gave her a kiss on the cheek right in front of her ear. "You look gorgeous," I whispered to her, "And I have some news for you."

I sat down. Looked at her. She was about to open her mouth. I held up my hand.

“I think I’m the one who knows more about Hank Enders than anyone else on the planet.” Beatrice’s jaw dropped, but she remained silent.

“When he was in college, he started a company that at first had no name, no employees, and for the first six months not a single client. But he was a ferocious kind of geek, like a dog with a bone about his product idea, and he kept at it until he got his first big client. That big name brought some other clients in. He started having a lot of money and no time. He was just barely getting to class and he did okay on his exams. He kept at his coursework so that he didn’t flunk out, but the business consumed him.”

By this point in my story our favorite waitress came over and we chatted amicably with her and placed our usual gigantic food order. I poured out some Jasmine tea for us and carried on my story.

“So this digital dude decided to hire, the way it was done then and now, some remote workers. He was pretty good at what he did and he got more and more clients signed on who paid good money for his products. Because by now he didn’t have just one product. He had expanded it out into a whole package of services. He was a technology guy like us. A digital dude.”

“And finally, one day about three years into the business, his advisors told him that, first of all, he had to start hiring

some permanent staff and slow down with the remote freelancers. He'd have to rent some space for them to work in. They told him, second of all, that it was high time—given the tremendous sales revenue the company was earning—for him to step up and be the public figurehead of the company. The company needed a face to its name. He declined.”

I saw that Beatrice was ready to ask me some more questions, so I held up my hand and shook my head once again.

“He declined, and he asked his attorneys to figure out a way that the company could get the good publicity it needed without his name or image appearing anywhere. And they did it. As you probably have already guessed, the digital dude was Hank Enders and his company got named MetriCooks. He felt like there were a lot of “cooks” in the “metric” kitchen by then, so he just put the two words together into MetriCooks.”

Beatrice again opened her mouth and raised her finger in the air but I stopped her one more time.

Just one last thing, my beauty.

“Hank Enders only met a very small handful of the thousands of employees the company came to employ. Of course, he had started with remote employees who never met him or saw his image anyway. And as he got more and more staff to do the work, he didn't need to come into the office to do his job anymore, either. He kept on working remotely, as he'd done from the beginning. He never met clients. The only ones he interacted with face-to-face were his attorneys and a

couple of other advisors. So the new staff at the company never met him. Never saw his face. Never spoke with him.”

I stopped at that point.

I think it's the most I've spoken at one time, even with Beatrice!

But she deserves to know this.

I want her to know it.

I dove into my dinner as I waited for her inevitable questions.

She finally asked me, “So where is Hank Enders now?”

I thought she would faint when I responded, “Hank Enders has never existed.”

Chapter 42

Beatrice

I protest, “But Hank Enders founded MetriCooks!”

Hendrik responded quietly, “No, my Lady Fair. He does not exist. Except in the minds of the media and on a couple of pieces of paper locked away in a vault, there is no such human as Hank Enders.”

I am mind-boggled. “But when Craig said that ‘*Hendrik*,’ the ‘*founder of MetriCooks*’ (I made air quotes), and then choked it back to say, ‘*Hank Enders would never have allowed this problem to linger*’ ... who was he talking about?”

I thought I knew. I know I knew. But he had to say it. I needed him to say it.

I was on the edge of suspense. The edge of despair.

Oh, please, please don't be lying to me!

He put his chopsticks down and wiped his mouth, taking his sweet time as I was on the very edge of sanity!

“I founded MetriCooks. I am Hendrik Johannes Endersson, and I founded, built and sold the company you now work for.”

I sat for probably three whole minutes in silence. I realized that he almost whispered these words, and that I still heard them with crystal clarity, nonetheless.

Well. That shut you up for a change, you brash loud-mouth!

I know him as a shy (compared to loud me) introverted nerd. It makes sense that the press doesn't even have a photo of him.

I take a deep breath. I haven't swooned, but I was close! “So, finish the story, please. There has to be more.”

He looked at me with such ... love ... that I did almost swoon after all.

“I am Hendrik Endersson. You met my father and his real name is also Endersson. In my youngest years—and I think it was to protect myself from the bullies that were after me—I was just very withdrawn. Very shy. Not social at all. I was the nerd the jocks could hassle and get away with it. That sort of changed when I met Carly, but she would also tease me about how shy I was as well. When MetriCooks grew and had some success that looked like it could last, my attorneys and the financial team I had hired couldn't convince me to put myself out in the public eye. It didn't matter to me back then that the so-called public eye wasn't every person on the planet. I was camera shy. Just ... basically so shy that the sight of a camera or threat of an interview was pure hell. I didn't think I could ever survive it with any kind of grace. So I told them to figure

out how to handle the public figure thing. And they invented Hank Enders.”

Hendrik paused with a chuckle, and I took his hand. He looked me square in the eye and said, “Hank Enders does not exist except to keep my life as Hendrik Endersson private.”

I am still silent.

Wow, I never thought of a straw man at the head of the company.

Oh! But that still means that ... !

“Yes, I am stinkin’ rich.” He must’ve seen the realization on my face before I could say a word.

“And,” he said, moving his chair right next to mine and sliding his arm around my waist, “I think it’s time for you to see where I live.”

Chapter 43

Hendrik

I insist that we have our dinner heated up by the chef and finish eating.

I for one am starving!

And I say as much. It turns out that the chef made some fresh dishes for us. “No charge, Mister!” says our waitress.

I’m not quite sure if Beatrice is at ease with me after my story. I keep my eyes glued to her face and to her hands.

She doesn’t seem nervous. She’s not avoiding my gaze.

Then it occurs to me that she might not believe me! Oh, man oh man, now what?

Seeing me serve her a plate seems to reassure her. “My Lady Fair, you need your strength. I won’t have you turning up your nose at this delicious vegan food!” and she reaches out and squeezes my hand. Then she dives in.

I can see her brain almost clicking to put it all together.

Get a grip. Help her out. This is all your fault.

Don't lose her because you held out on your secret identity this long.

You know she's been itching to ask you about the Hank and Hendrik story that Craig let slip to her. You know it.

“I had already been considering selling the company before Carly revealed to me that she had stage four cancer. My Vader and those advisors I mentioned are the only people who know that I promoted the company under an alias. Carly called Hank Enders my pen name. She said all that was missing was for me to write a book and use the name on the cover. Papa says that Hank Enders is my stage name. We don't talk about it much anymore since, of course, I've sold the company. He always thought it was sort of amusing for the shy founder of a multi-billion dollar company to use a stage name. I only let the name get out so that the press and the financial community would just let me be. I had no use for them. My attorneys were the go-between but could not possibly arrange an appointment with Mr. Enders for anyone at all. Hank Enders doesn't exist.”

I looked long and hard at Beatrice. I could see that she was torn between tears and smiles. She kept looking up at the ceiling so she wouldn't cry. Then she would cover her mouth with her napkin to hide her smile.

“All right, my Lady Fair. Tell me everything that's on your mind. Empty your brain into my lap.”

I remember like it was this morning that she used those very words to me in the hospital.

And she finally pulled herself together to speak to me. “When Craig let slip the name Hendrik without using the name Endersson with it, and then reverted to the name Hank, well ... I had a lot of confusing and conflicting emotions about it. I mean the first thought that I had was how many people in technology even in a city this big are called Hendrik?”

I smiled ruefully at her. She went on, “Then my mind went back to my college breakup with a guy who couldn’t tell me the truth if his life depended on it. I was betrayed by him and I thought ... that I would have to swear off men for the rest of my life if *you* had betrayed me too by not telling me the truth about who you really were.”

I took her hand. I kissed her palm. I looked her in the eye. “I have never lied to you. But now you know there are simply some things I didn’t tell you. I have spent over fifteen years not telling people lots of things. Even Jared and his men don’t know this about me.”

But I held up a finger before continuing because I had to think about that.

Did Jared or any members of his crew know that I had been the founder of the multi-billion-dollar company MetriCooks?

I’m not sure they’d even heard of the company when it comes to that.

“Let me just say I don’t *believe* any of them know who I really am or what I have done in the business world. I love them like brothers, as you have seen. But I love you too, and I

never told you my secret identity until just now.” I looked closely at Beatrice’s reaction.

She just responded, “Jared and Trey seemed very grateful for the education you were able to provide to them or encouraged them to get. I guess I don’t know much about your relationship with them, either!”

“Well, my beauty, you now know how secretive I have been. And this is the big secret that I hope you will help me perpetuate. I have had a very good life as the unknown, uncelebrated, underestimated Hendrik Endersson!”

I looked at her quizzically. She gave me the same look back. And we both cracked up with laughter.

Thank goodness. It has never felt so good to laugh as with this wonderful, gorgeous, sexy woman!

Chapter 44

Beatrice

After we've eaten, Hendrik decides that it's time I came with him to his home of over fifteen years. He's not saying a word about it. But all these weeks since Craig's slip of the tongue, I have had a new picture—and new doubts—about Hendrik.

“You really have been a Mystery Man to me in many ways, Hendrik. I did wonder—before Craig's blunder—if you maybe didn't live alone, that you had a woman in your house that I couldn't been seen by. Or worse! A wife! Then I thought, oh no, not another Jimmy who has a different girl every night.”

Hendrik responds by shaking his head. But he's not smiling.

“But after Craig's slip of the tongue, I thought okay, I'm just not Uptown enough for you to take home—that you lived in a penthouse suite, or in a 20-bedroom mansion on five acres of land. Or you were living at the grandest hotel of the city since (*Gah-ahh-ah-ly!*) you could afford to do so.”

I cut myself off as I saw, to my surprise, we were headed back toward my former neighborhood.

To my further surprise, we passed the club where I picked Hendrik up a couple of years ago.

And where you went to try to uncover more information about your mystery man.

To my continuing surprise, Trey's driver pulls up in front of a dilapidated-looking building and parks.

And what a brazen hussy you were that night! While it certainly wasn't the first time you initiated sex with a man, it certainly was the first time it was with a total, absolute stranger!

And thank goodness I did, too ...

I look at the building next to us. It's in worse external condition than the one I moved out of a couple of years earlier.

Well. He's certainly not living like a "stinkin' rich" guy!

I look at Hendrik with raised eyebrows. "Yes," he said, "Here is where I've lived for all these years. Come on up with me. It's totally safe now."

And how does Hendrik know this? How does he know that it's safe?

I look across the street and up and down the block and have my answer. I see Hendrik's—Jared's, I assume—sentinels. Hendrik must have seen my searching eyes. "Have no fear, Jared and his crew are here!" He handed me out of the car and

put his arm around my waist and we walked up the four steps to the building's entrance.

Hendrik keyed us in. Then, I felt transported. “*Wah-oo-Wah-Weee!* Hendrik, this is like a time warp!” We'd entered the building and once the door had closed behind us, I saw we were in a marble-floored, fresh-looking, modern foyer—with ... *art* hanging on the walls!

We walked up to the first floor on brilliantly polished dark wood stair steps, holding onto a sculpted wrought-iron banner.

To get into his first-floor studio apartment, he punched in a code, got a blink, opened a steel exterior door, then keyed us through the inner door.

We entered a high-ceilinged, bright room—sunlit from the full-length front window—on a deep-pile carpet. An efficiently-sized work desk looked built into the length of one whole wall with sturdy shelves above it. The desk and shelves were loaded with computer equipment. There was an oversized sofa the likes of which I'd never seen and just the right type of modern furniture in the rest of the space for comfort. I spied out a galley kitchen, neat as a pin, expertly tucked in a corner.

The whole place looked newly designed, impeccably clean, and as comfortable as all get-out! It was muted, quiet, serene.

I can't hold back, “*Sufferin' succotash*, Hendrik! Here we are, in a run-down-looking building in the cheapest and most dangerous part of town—and I know this because I lived in

this neighborhood myself, you know!” He laughed at me, “Yes. Ahem. I do recall.”

I went on, “And the whole interior is like ... last year’s Architectural Digest feature?!” And I paused a beat, “Hendrikkkk ...?”

“Yesssss, my beautyyyy?” he gave me my own hesitation right back with a little grin at one corner of his mouth.

“How much money is ‘*stinkin’ rich*’? And please tell me to sit down if you think I’ll faint.” He laughed and wrapped himself around me and walked me backward to the cushy-looking sofa. Sat me down. Sat next to me. And took me into him.

“As of last Friday, about five billion, three hundred million dollars American. Give or take a nickel.”

I focused on breathing in and out without getting any more light-headed.

“And you are really the guy who founded and built MetriCooks? Where I work now? Really and truly *that* guy?”

He made sure he held my gaze, “I really am *that* guy. Yes, I founded that company, built it, and sold it for a shit-ton of money. Yes. Yes.”

I collapsed in his arms in great sobbing tears. He just held me.

When I came up for air and looked at him, he was all concern and anxiety. “My sweet, your secret is safe with me. I mean, *Great Guns!* It’s already been safe with me for a couple

of months. After all, if you want to keep a secret, don't tell anyone, right?"

He dried my tears with his fingertips, "I get it. I still find the sheer amount of money I now have quite daunting. That's another reason to maintain my 'secret identity' in relation to MetriCooks and the media. Not even anyone in Jared's crew knows about it. Like I just said to you, I told them I'm a 'tech consultant.' But ..."

I sniffled, suspicious again, "But you aren't a tech consultant, are you? I mean, if you were one, who are your clients and what do you do for them?"

He nodded, "I do consult. Remotely. I never do a video call. Audio only. And I do it to keep my hand in the game. Obviously, I no longer 'need' the money. But I'm sort of like you and your own All-Seeing-Eye. I have tech solutions to so many problems. So I love it. It has been amazingly easy to have a secret identity. Hendrik is unknown to the public, and Hank is invisible and silent to the public. My local identity is not so secret, because all the guys call me Professor. And if that were not enough, my online consultant persona, I guess you and I'd call it my handle, is Henry Higson."

I was thunderstruck for three beats. Then I burst into raucous laughter. I couldn't stop. I nearly rolled onto the floor, and by that point, the contagion overtook Hendrik who was also in peals of laughter.

He vainly protested my glee, "Hey, that name is *groovy*! I have a five-star tech reputation as Higson. Don't knock it,

please!”

And we both fell into each other unable to control the giggles, then the gales, then the guffaws of laughter.

By the time I settled down, my ribs ached, my nose was snotty, and tears tracked down my face and neck. Hendrik was in the same state.

When I looked around me at Hendrik’s ... what ... maybe three hundred square feet of space (*about like my place, when I think about it*) ... I still don’t believe it’s actually his home.

Then someone knocked on the door.

Chapter 45

Hendrik

Beatrice and I have blown our noses and washed our faces, still grinning at each other.

It's Jared. He's here to report in on the crew's classes and business successes of the week.

I, under my newly-revealed *other* secret identity, *The Professor*, was very attentive to Beatrice as I introduced her again to Jared. I made a point of telling Beatrice that Jared and I had been great friends for many years now and that he and I were business partners in two prosperous and growing businesses. As I did so, I noticed that Jared stood taller.

Jared used more words than I'd have given him credit for to ask after Beatrice's health, to remind Beatrice of the times they had met ("that hospital emergency"), and to say he would be very pleased to give her best regards to his wife, Luz. Jared made sure that Beatrice knew that if ever she was ever coming to or staying in this neighborhood on her own, he and the men would watch out for her.

Jared looked over at me, “Professor, does she have the emergency numbers?”

Jared is no fool. He knew that I was going to be with Beatrice for a very long time.

“No, not yet,” I responded, “But we can do that before you leave.” Jared nodded.

I didn't know why I thought my “confession” to my Lady Fair was going to be so hard. This woman makes me feel so at ease!

Jared wasn't with us very long, and when he left I explained more about my relationship to Jared, the two business ventures, and the rest of Jared's crew.

As I did so, I moved to the kitchen and beckoned her over. “How about a smoothie? Look in the fridge and in the fruit bowl over there to see what you would like in a smoothie. How does that sound right now?”

Beatrice got really quiet. Stepped over to me. “Smoothie. I've been all yours from the moment you asked me, “Wanna get a smoothie?” that day at the tech convention.”

I'm going to cry. Or shout with joy.

Can't decide. Don't wanna.

I move into Beatrice and take her face in my hands. We just gaze at each other for the longest time.

I look at her and can't feel my body anymore. It's floating somewhere in the outer stratosphere. Her words are so

emotional for me, that in a whisper I'm not sure she can hear, I tell her, "You had a Very Berry Cherry smoothie. You've been in my heart ever since."

We held each other close, in our cozy lips-to-legs embrace.

She didn't pull away but asked me, "Does your father know exactly what you've been up to and how stinkin' rich you are and all about your secret identities? *Gee Willikers!* You're Hendrik Endersson, The Professor, Henry Higson. Not to mention the elusive, media-shy Hank Enders ..."

I nodded, "Besides the advisors I told you about who are paid to keep secrets, Papa and Carly are really the only ones who ever knew the whole story. As you know, Craig really was one of MetriCooks' first employees and certainly knew of me in those early days as 'company founder Hendrik Endersson.' But I have to say it: Honestly, even though I know his name, and he mine, I never met the man!"

Chapter 46

Beatrice

As the two men wrapped up their conversation earlier, my eyes roamed over Hendrik's studio. Very high ceiling. A compact, well-designed bathroom. My eyes roam across his galley kitchen. I look up and the art from the building foyer is somehow painted into the ceiling and lots of crown molding makes the whole thing look very chic, indeed!

One thing I notice is that Hendrik's place is pristinely clean and the whole place looks cozy, efficient, and fresh.

One thing I don't notice is ... a bed! Unless he sleeps on his sofa. I look closely at the sofa but can't see how it is a pull-out sofa bed.

On the floor, then?

Ah-Hah! That's why we're always at my place!

You've wondered enough about him. All will be revealed ... someday.

I chuckle at myself.

When Jared was ready to leave, he'd made a point of coming to me with his hand out. We shake hands. He reminds me that I now have the so-called emergency number.

Now I have to ask, "Hendrik, what in *Tarnation* is this emergency number deal? *Jumpin' Jehoshaphat*, Hendrik! Do you have that many emergencies that you need a special number? Please empty your brain to me about this!" and I wave my hands in my usual woo-woo, brain-emptying manner in front of me.

Hendrik laughs at my attempts at magic. "It dates from our earliest years of friendship. Jared and most of his crew were born in this neighborhood. There are loads of first- and second-generation families here, like me. But when he realized I had actually *chosen* to live in this neighborhood, he wondered if I was oblivious to the dangers or what. So I just explained that it was a cheap place to live while I finished college. When after college I also didn't move out, I had to explain to him that I was starting up a small business and saving money by living here."

I'm still pretty clueless and he can see it on my face, so he continues, "When the mugging occurred and I was knifed is when he and I met, as I told you." He looked at me with questioning eyes, "I did tell you, right?"

I nodded.

Hendrik smiles, "Well, Jared was in despair when he found out that I was in the hospital for two days with no one

knowing about it. It took that long for the hospital to find out who I was and who they could call.”

This is confusing to me. So I ask Hendrik, “What do you mean? Don’t you have your father in your phone as an emergency contact?”

“Of course I do,” he responded ruefully. “But geek that I am, and security-oriented that I have always been, no one could unlock my phone to look him up! And since I didn’t have any other ID on me at the time because I was just going and coming from the gym that day, it took them until I could open my phone for them myself to do anything for me. And that wasn’t until the next afternoon of my hospitalization.”

I was aghast! “My sweet! Your father must have been shocked and worried sick by the time he got to the hospital!”

“Oh yes, and he hasn’t let me forget about that. But the fact that he was recently hospitalized, and our emergency procedure worked instantly has since comforted my Papa. He knows that we have a system in case of emergency now that really works. I think he’s very happy Jared came up with it! But also quite shocked that I did not!” And Hendrik gave me a belly laugh.

I nod with a mock accusation on my face, “Oh yes, my son the billionaire geek. Ach!” and I try to imitate his father’s lingering Dutch accent, “How disappointed am I in his security measures!”

That made Hendrik laugh even harder. But I won’t be deterred, “So what about Jared and that crew then?” I smile.

“You seem to mean a lot to Jared. He seems to take your friendship very, very seriously.”

Hendrik nodded, “And so do I. It was from those days forward that they knew how to contact my father. I knew how to contact them for an immediate response and vice versa. And Jared made sure that Vader, my Papa, also had that emergency number. Jared and my father know each other pretty well by now, too. I sometimes hear from my Papa, long after the fact,” and he chuckled, “that Jared and he have gone out for a meal together. I think, although my Papa has never said so, that Papa has sort of adopted many of them as his other sons.”

I nod in recognition of the phenomenon! “My uncle has mostly treated me like his troublemaking, youngest kid. Other times I’m his damsel-in-distress daughter. My mom would scold my two cousins like they were her own, too, and does so even today. So yeah,” I laughed, “I get that!”

Chapter 47

Hendrik

Well, here we are. That wasn't so hard, bringing Beatrice to my place, now was it?

Yes. It was!

Thank goodness my place is always pristinely clean And presentable.

And for whom? Just me?

If I have my way, it won't be just me anymore.

I pull Beatrice to me, and ask her with a grin, "Do you want the 10-cent tour? Or have you seen everything?"

She looks me right in the eyes with a bigger grin, and teases, "I've had my inspection tour, Mister! I've looked under the sink. But there is a hitch in the inspection tour."

Well, well, well. She's perhaps noticed after all.

"Don't tell me that you're so stinkin' rich that you don't sleep in your own apartment? Maybe this is just where you work? Where do you go at night ... the Ritz-Carleton Hotel?"

Nope! She hasn't noticed. I see that I have got her!

I can't help but break out into a belly laugh as I hold her close to me around her waist. "Ah Hah! My Lady Fair is not as observant as I thought she was!" The delight is too much and I give her a big deep kiss. I press her upper back into me with one hand and pull her hips into me with the other.

But I'm so happy that I start to chuckle right in the middle of this amazing kiss. Without letting her go, I look her right in the eyes ... only to see that she is staring at me with amusement as well!

Still locked in this warm kiss, I duck-walk her over to the corner of my work desk where I pick up a remote control. I duck-walk her back over to the sofa and make her sit and get comfortable beside her.

"Observe carefully, my beauty!" I say dramatically as I wave the remote control in front of her. "Do you like art?" I ask.

Beatrice looks at me questioningly and shrugs with both arms up-raised.

I grin and with one finger of the other hand I show her quite clearly which button on the remote I am pressing. I look up at the art, saying "Behold, my beauty! I bring you art."

And since I knew what would happen, I fix my eyes on her gorgeous face and watch the transformation as she sees my ceiling descend toward the center of my studio.

I have always left the center of my space vacant. And if ever any piece of furniture makes its way there, at night I just move it back against a wall. My bed descends into the heart of my studio and Beatrice gasps.

I have very rarely heard her whisper or even moan except during sex. She just naturally has one of these big Broadway stage voices that would never need a microphone. But now? She whispers, “*Gadzooks*, Hendrik! The bed is on a *pulley* system?! Did you do this yourself? I *never* suspected anything was there except a ceiling that looks like Michelangelo painted it!”

As the bed settles squarely on the floor, bedding intact, I laugh and laugh at Beatrice’s flummoxed expression.

I don’t think even Jared has seen this bed come down from the ceiling. Interesting that he, in all these years, has never asked me how I sleep.

He must assume that I sleep on the sofa.

I stand up with a flourish and wave an arm toward the bed. “Welcome, my Lady Fair, to *our* very own Ritz Carlton suite.”

Then to my surprise, she stands up, turns to face me with her arms crossed across her voluptuous chest. With a stern, scolding look on her face, she demands, “Okay, Hendrik, Henry, Hank, Professor! How long did you think you were gonna wait for us to properly inspect and test out your Ritz Carlton bed? Empty your brain onto my lap with that answer, all right?!”

Then as she often did, she jumped me, roaring with her trademark guffaw.

“*Gah-ahh-ah-ly!*” I exclaim.

She locked lips with me and groaned, as she held my eyes in hers.

I saw the first tears pop out of her eyes.

I pull away from our kiss to ask, “What is it? What’s wrong, my beauty?”

“I just never thought you lived like this. When Craig put all sorts of ideas in my head about you maybe being the elusive billionaire Hank Enders, I imagined you lived across the river on a big estate of your own. And that was why we never went to your home. I imagined that you had a house full of Playboy girlfriends fawning over you. I imagined you never brought me home because you were married with eight kids roaming around.”

That really tugged my heartstrings.

Don't feel guilty. Just come clean.

“I have only had two women in my life. Carly was the first, and I’ve told you about her.”

She asked me, “And who was the second?”

Why do I have a lump in my throat? Have I been that secretive? Is she messing with me?

I study her face.

Nope. She's dead serious.

“My beauty, there’s no ‘was’ about the second one. She’s a woman named Beatrice Wills. I’m not sure you’ve ever met her even though she works in the same company you do. I know it’s a big company, but still and all ... *Jeevers!* You must have run into her in the hallways at least once, right? She’s tall and luxuriously curvy. And if you haven’t seen her, maybe you’ve heard her. She has this gigantic infectious, contagious laugh—you just want to laugh with her even though you don’t know what the joke is. And certainly, she’s got a nerdy reputation at the company that you’ve heard about. Heck! Even I know she’s got a reputation among those hundreds of geeks as the All-Seeing Eye ...”

Please laugh. Please.

In one of her oh-so-rare whispers, “And what else? Maybe I have heard of her ...”

Ah, whew.

“Well, let me see what you might have heard. I know that she picks up strangers at clubs. I’m not sure if she’s still doing it, because quite frankly? I hesitate to ask. I also know that she can put away mountains of food if it’s just the right kind. I know that she can talk for hours about tech without giving any secrets away. I know that she has a heart as big as her voice—I saw that when Papa was in the hospital.”

So smart guy, figure this out: Why are tears still rolling down her cheeks?

“So, my love, have you ever heard of her?” I look at her but I realize I’m holding my breath.

“Yeah, she does sound like someone I know,” and she breaks that grin of hers that fills me up with happiness every time I see it.

“And how many men are there in your life right now?” I dare to ask. “Are you like my lady fair who picks up men in clubs?”

I really do want to know this. I want to hear it from her lips.

I have kept a serious expression on my face at the question and look at her searchingly. She gets it and responds, “Well, I too have only loved two men. I’ve had sex with two or three others that I never loved or saw more than once. That old one-night stand to scratch the itch. The man I thought I loved betrayed me, by sleeping with a different woman every night he wasn’t with me. That was in college and the breakup hit me hard. I swore that I would just sleep with guys with no promises after that. Then I was wandering around my neighborhood looking for a karaoke bar, and I saw this guy playing guitar in the corner of that club. I invited him home thinking it would be another one-night stand. And here I am, years later, reunited with him, hoping like *H.-E.-Double-Toothpicks* that I’m His One and Only. Because he is mine.”

Holy guacamole! Now I’m going to cry.

And so I just let go. With tears in my eyes I scoop her up and take her to my bed.

“Now that we have settled that, my Lady Fair, are you ever going to finish inspecting my place for boogeymen?”

And we roll around on the bed giddy with laughter and love, until she finally gets up and takes me by the hand. She makes a big show of looking under the kitchen sink, draws me with her into the bathroom and peers behind the toilet and in the shower stall, and then pulls me with her back out into the main room and gets onto her hands and knees, and looks under the bed. As she's down there, she exclaims things like, "Uh-Huh! Ach so! That's the way it is, huh?"

She gets back up and makes a show of dusting herself off. "Inspection complete, Mr. Mystery Man! You're safe!" and knocks me back onto the bed and jumps me.

After a long deep kiss, with our hands gingerly drying the last of each other's tears, I take off her shirt and she takes off mine. I roam over her breasts with my hands and my lips, then bury my face in her bosom. Her hands explore my chest and roam down into my dockers, finally undoing them and sliding them off my hips with my briefs in one easy move as I lift my hips to help her. My shaft has been on alert for a minute and now I press its hard length against her soft belly.

"Someone still has too many clothes on," I say into her ear, as I mess around trying to get her out of the rest of them. But she turns the tables on me and starts breathing quietly into my ear, licking it gently and ...

"Oh no you don't. You don't get to make me come before you do." And in spite of my arousal, I flip her so I can pull her clothes off once and for all.

And go down to her heat. Her pussy is always protected with those intoxicating tight dark curls, and I part them away from her clit with my tongue. I lap up the fragrant wetness that is right there, getting ready to welcome my cock.

Between licks and gentle pulls with my lips on her clit, I urge her, “Come for me, my beauty. Come all over my mouth and lips. Come all over my face. Come all over my heart.”

And when I say this last, I hear a big, deep, long moan and she arches her hips slowly into my mouth and groans in that sexy, raspy voice of hers she gets when she’s on the edge, “Now! Now, Hendrik. Now. Oh my. Oh my,” she continues to moan and grind my lips into hers.

“Again, my Lady. More! You need more. Take it.”

I know now from weeks of experience that Beatrice is quite the orgasmic lover. I’ve never told her what a turn-on that is for me.

Time to change that, and looking up at her as my lips and tongue heat her lips and clit, I say, “Every time you come, I ache for you! You’ve got me hot and hard, my beauty.” She groaned and pressed into me again with another deep orgasm.

“You’ve got my cock begging for your pussy,” I whisper into that heat between her thighs, and she arches up into me for more pleasure.

“I’m going to explode right onto your legs with desire,” I admit to her. And with one more deep press of her pussy into my mouth, she rolls into an eye-crossing look down at me.

And then, when her pleasure subsides, she pulls me up by my shoulders, fully onto her soft, hot body. On the way up, I bury myself yet again in her voluptuous, firm breasts.

I come up to her mouth and take it in. She is breathless and pushes me gently away to look at me.

Those eyes!

“You *must* give me your heat. Massage my pussy vault from the inside out. Massage that hot shaft of yours till you explode. I. Can’t. Wait. I want *you!*” She guides my cock head between her wet pussy lips and begs with her eyes.

And I dive into this luscious, sexy, soft woman I now know that I love with every piece of who I am. Giving and receiving a massage that love deepens with every thrust.

And with every one of my secret identities.

Chapter 48

Beatrice

I got it: It's the insecurity of the neighborhood. That is why he never had me over to his place before—for my own safety.

He started his company on a shoestring and cheap living is one way he did it.

Yeah, that makes sense.

He keeps doing it. He's made no change ... because? Well, he didn't socialize anyway. Not since his Carly died.

Gee willikers, he's so hot. So sexy. So ... quiet.

Even that first night years ago he was so quiet. Sure I did all the talking in my loud-mouthed way. I guess I was a little nervous about bringing him home. Like any guy I don't know.

It just seemed like he was the total opposite of me. Maybe what they say about opposites attracting each other is true. He was the flip side of my brash loudness. And he still is. But deep within us, we have so much in common. Opposites in appearance only.

And jumpin' Jehosaphat! Is he full of secrets or what?!

My life, at least in my own mind, is an open book.

I shake myself loose of my thoughts. It is only a couple of days later, a couple of days after discovering where Hendrik lives and how. It's mid-morning at the office, and here I am daydreaming instead of working.

Yesterday Joseph and the two juniors cornered me on a break. Joseph stage-whispered conspiratorially, "Well... are you gonna take it? If they offer you the position, are you gonna take it? Inquiring minds wanna know!"

I noticed that the two younger coders were just as curious about my answer as Joseph was. "Guys! Bless your little hearts! I just don't know. No one has spoken to me again about it. For all I know they've already made an offer to two of the other people on their shortlist. *Great Guns!* I don't know, guys!"

I threw up my hands and tried to look comical as I shook my head.

But they were right.

You are wondering what the status is. And you really haven't heard anything else from them about it.

I decided that evening I would talk to Hendrik about it.

After all, he's a billionaire tech consultant, right?!

Even though from the moment of Craig's slip-up I *suspected* that Hendrik would be that Hank Enders mystery man, I'm not

sure I ever believed it.

But there you go. Operating on little to no facts made you miserable.

Hendrik and I had a date for dinner and had agreed that one of Trey's drivers would pick me up at work. Hendrik was less and less willing to have me take our big-city subway.

I think Jared had something to do with that decision.

It was actually Trey standing outside the driver's side door and waving me down outside my office building. He came around and opened the sidewalk side passenger door for me.

And who do I see but Hendrik's father!

I had never seen him outside the hospital. But I remembered him and knew exactly who was sharing the passenger seat with me.

A tall, powerfully built man like his son.

He pulled me in and made sure I got settled as Trey set off for the restaurant.

"I hope you don't mind that I have invited myself to dinner with you and Hendrik. He tried to tell me he had a date with you, but I said it's just dinner, and I want to speak to your lady."

Well! Hendrik's father is certainly much more straightforward than Hendrik! I like it.

I ask, "Are you truly back to your healthy self, Mr. Endersson?"

“Ach! Call me Papa! Please. Everyone else does. As to your question, no. I think I am *better* than I was before. When Hendrik was growing up, I was so careful to feed us real food. We were vegetarians from the start. Hendrik kept it up I guess, but when he moved out I started eating standard American food. I guess I like your junk food far too much!” We both laughed.

“But Hendrik brought me back to our old healthy ways. He’s got me eating vegetarian again. I feel much better than before my incident and my doctor agrees that I’m healthier, too.” He reached over and patted my hand as if to say thank you for asking.

He continued chatting, “Why I wanted to speak to you was to say thank you for being close to my son during my hospitalization. He told me that you know about his stabbing. I have to say I was devastated when I found him in the hospital. So I can only imagine what he was feeling when he had to come see me all hooked up to machines.”

He looked at me searchingly. I met his gaze. He said, gravely, “Thank you for your support then. He appreciates it more than he probably knows how to say. So let me speak for both of us. You kept him sane until I could start scolding him again! Thanks for that!” His eyes twinkled at his comment and he grinned at me.

We both laughed then and saw that we were pulling up to the restaurant.

We had a wonderful dinner together. As it happened, Hendrik got his quiet sense of humor from his father. Not only what Papa said, but stating it with his ever-so-slight Dutch accent, made much of what Papa said very amusing.

I felt really good during that whole meal, even though Papa was sort of a surprise to me.

Chapter 49

Hendrik

I guess this is a week for revelations.

That was my thought when Vader invited himself to dinner with me and Beatrice. She had already been in Papa's hospital room when he was very ill, so I figured meeting in a public place like a restaurant to see him healthy and fit again was only natural.

Papa made Beatrice laugh her belly laugh more than once. He tried to embarrass me by telling her childhood stories about me ...

Do all parents do this to their adult children? Really!

And Beatrice is just looking at me with affection.

She's the one. She's the one for me.

During dinner, we agreed that one car would take Papa home, while I took Beatrice back to her place.

Or to mine... We'll see...

I have to give Papa credit. He made no reference to Carly. He made no reference to my grief or my broken heart when she died. He also made no reference to my wealth.

Well, our shared wealth.

I had long since made sure my father was financially set, not just right now and during the remaining working years, but also for his retirement. I needed to make sure that he had plenty of money to spend even though he protested that he had a perfectly fine pension and was eligible for Social Security, too. "I am a naturalized American citizen and I have worked every month since I moved here, I will have you know! I have earned my way and I will continue to do so!" And with a fatherly *harrumph*, he thought he had set me straight.

I just went ahead and set up some accounts for him. No way he can protest now. Done is done. He has worked so hard. He has worked smart, too, and I think I got that from him as well as my numbers sense.

Looking back, it's almost as though my Papa never made a wrong move since we arrived here. I freely admit to myself that I have no idea what his struggles might have really been during my youth or how Papa actually managed on any front.

He never complained. Not once. Not overtly. And never in a backhanded way, either.

My Papa is one big optimist!

Beatrice seems like she likes my father. Interesting that I don't remember Papa ever dating. Not once. Hmmm ...

Next morning, my Papa phoned me. If I didn't know better I would have accused my father of having fallen in love. Vader has apparently become very quietly enamored with Beatrice!

He goes on and on, "She has quite a European type of beauty. But she also has quite an American type of intelligence! She's witty and sassy, son. Your Beatrice has *chutzpah!*"

Chutzpah, huh? Well, she is pretty bold, come to think of it.

I drift back to the club and how she just slid right in and took me home, assuming I'd come along.

Chutzpah! Oh, yeah.

When I call Beatrice at the end of that afternoon, knowing she's almost done with work, I'm floored again. This time she's the one gushing ... about my Papa!

I tease her, "Well, then! I guess I'd better step aside. My father is gushing over you. For him, you are full of chutzpah. You are gushing over him. For you, he's full of humor, vim, and vigor. I guess you two are squeezing me out of this relationship!" and I laughed warmly at this woman my father had fully accepted as very important to me.

And don't fool yourself, he's probably got you both married by now in his mind.

Then Beatrice surprises me again. "My sweet, I've met your father. He's wonderful! It's time you meet my mother. I talked to her at noon on my break and made her promise to make our

all-time favorite meal tonight. I told her I was bringing a Plus One as a surprise. Sorry, I just haven't had a minute to warn you before now. I also told her just the three of us. No pesky cousins. Not yet. I don't think you could handle all of us at once the first time!"

More laughter.

This woman makes me melt with happiness!

"Ahh... So am I a *Plus One* now? Should I be insulted and charge you a Luxury Escort Fee for the evening, or be flattered?" We laughed some more.

I arrange to pick Beatrice up at her office shortly and we will go straight to her mother's place. It turns out her mother lives in a working-class neighborhood full of small cottage homes on postage-stamp lots of land. Trey has the address and we pull up to the curb in front of a very well-maintained small home with an equally small front porch.

Before I can even help Beatrice out of the car, a whirlwind has burst from the cottage, across the porch, down the three front steps, and out to the sidewalk to meet us.

Beatrice's mother is as petite as Beatrice is tall. Their coloring is much different from each other's, but I can easily see Beatrice imprinted in her mother's eyes, the shape of her lips, and her exuberant strong voice.

As articulate and as confident (*full ofchutzpah!*) as I find Beatrice, the resemblance to her mother ends there. Her mom babbles with a huge smile on her face the whole while I'm

there. She fumbles around and plays with silverware and glasses as we eat and talk, and keeps filling our plates.

Just being there with her makes me want to quietly comfort her and settle her down!

And I like her!

When I say, “Beatrice tells me this is your favorite meal. I have to say it is absolutely delicious!” I never saw a woman beam with such a wide smile literally to her ears before!

Yes indeed. I do like Beatrice’s mother.

Not to mention she’s a great vegan cook!

Although I mostly let the two women talk, and contented myself to answering her mother’s many questions, things seemed to go very well.

Unless I’m mistaken, her mother is in fact relaxing more and more as the meal nears its end. Good. A good sign.

Beatrice and I have agreed in advance about how long we will stay. So when Beatrice gives me the nod, as agreed, I discretely text Trey. We get up and go out to the tiny porch, which is furnished with very comfortable chairs. We make small talk and promise to come back soon while waiting for Trey. As he pulls up, Beatrice and I take our leave, and it is a much quieter event than our arrival!

On the drive to her place, she says, “You did it.”

I look at her. She explains, “Hendrik, you have completely and overwhelmingly charmed my mom.” I notice Trey

smirking into the rear-view mirror at me.

“I have not seen my mom that flustered since the last time we went to a wedding and three men her age in a row asked her to dance! She *likes* you, my sweet!”

I just pull her closer to me. I kiss her near her ear.

She tells me that I blew her mom away with some of their century-old cuss words.

“What? No way I cussed in front of your mom. Uh-uh. I. Did. *Not!*”

And there again is Trey, barely able to stifle a burst of laughter.

She insists, “But you did. You said *Jumpin’ Jehosaphat, Gah-ahh-ah-ly*, and *Great Guns*.”

That made my jaw drop. I was unaware of this!

“My sweet, I’ve converted you. What can I say? She has *already* made you an honorary member of our tiny family. You had me at *Wanna get a smoothie?* You had her at *Jehosaphat*, actually!”

And she giggled.

That felt good. Honorary family member, huh? Wow.

I saw Trey smirk again at me.

Then she says, “Gotta change the subject. As much as you wowed my mother, I thought I’d get to talk about this with both you and mom. But she got carried away. What do you think about me accepting the promotion if they offer it to me?”

If they offer it to me, what do I have to do? I mean, I'm not a negotiator. I don't know what kind of raise might be involved. I don't even know if the job description will change. What do you think, Professor?"

I saw Trey smirk again in the rear view mirror.

I'll get him back. Oh, yeah. I know he's dating that sweet girl from the Korean grocery store. I'll get him!

Beatrice and I discussed the possibilities all the way to her place. Trey waited for me while I walked her up to her place and saw her safely home.

When I got back in the car, all I said to Trey was, "You just wait till Carmen's mom decides to cook *you* her favorite meal, Trey!" And I gave him my best evil eye. He shrunk down in the driver's seat at the very thought.

Gotcha!

Chapter 50

Beatrice

It was a good thing that I decided to call Hendrik before turning in that night.

He had a few more good ideas about what I should ask for if offered the position. He also suggested another couple of questions to ask to get the information I would need and didn't have now.

Yup, good thing Hendrik talked me through it—the next afternoon, HR called me in again.

I tried not to project. I tried not to imagine that they were withdrawing or offering the job to me. All the way to the office, I'm coaching myself.

Just breathe. Keep on breathing.

Roberts was there again. He was the one who spoke. “Wills, we'd like to offer you the position of not just team manager but manager of that entire department. Your team is, what? Seven people. The department is nineteen people, and they

came to us, as you know, at vastly different ages and training levels. Take a few days to think it over.”

He nodded to the HR manager, “I’ve learned your current rate of pay, and want to offer you twice the amount, and a small signing bonus in the case you accept the position.” He paused. “What do you think?”

And for once, I didn’t blurt. I sat back in my seat and remembered Hendrik’s advice. I didn’t commit at all. I didn’t say thanks (yet). I calmly asked first for the information I didn’t yet have but would need to come to a decision. I went through my mental checklist and ticked off everything I asked.

Hendrik had advised me, “Just think of your questions like a punch list to check out some coding. You’ll be fine.”

Then we chatted a little longer. As I stood I said, “Roberts, I’ll let you both know by the end of the week as requested. Thanks for this opportunity!”

And, as I had a couple of weeks earlier, I returned to my work area in a daze.

Unable to put a clear thought together in my mind.

I detoured to take the elevator down and out of the building. I walked for a couple of blocks then turned left, and left for a couple more blocks, and left again. Returning to my building a little more “aired out” but still ... I sat in the main floor coffee shop for half an hour, staring out the big picture windows to the street.

I'd always been the one to ask for a job, so this offer was tables-turned on me. I needed to talk to Hendrik.

I called. He instantly picked up. As we chatted, I saw a limo pull up, he got out and flagged me down even as we continued to talk on our phones. He hugged me in our cozy lips-to-legs closeness and handed me into the back seat.

We talked, as a driver I didn't recognize from past rides silently followed a route Hendrik must have decided on before picking me up.

He didn't say much, just asked a few prompting questions. He just let me talk it out and when I had, I knew what to do.

He dropped me back at work, I went up to my team and told them, "Roberts has offered me the position of manager for this whole nineteen-body department. I have spent time thinking about it, and I have decided to decline the offer. I love what I do too much to change things just yet."

Maybe in a few years.

After my small team's initial loud protestations, Joseph, Red, and the others came around to shake my hand and (more quietly!) express their regrets about not having me as their manager, but relief that I'd still be part of their team.

Now to call Roberts and get this over with.

Chapter 51

Hendrik

Things were suddenly different between Beatrice and me.
In a very good way!

First, our relationship was no longer one of those mysterious secrets she accused me of.

And rightly so!

Second, I had just had Papa all this time. My family suddenly expanded. Not that my lady's family was huge, but suddenly and soon, they were going to be mine, too.

Third, now Jared's whole crew had to know who Beatrice was. My Lady Fair had been a mystery of her own to Jared's extended "family," and that wasn't going to last long at all. The women (*thanks mostly to Trey, I think*) have been chomping at the bit about meeting her.

And last but not least, after a brief and totally relaxed conversation about it, Beatrice understood and agreed with my desire to keep my wealth under wraps.

She teased me shortly after rejecting the company's promotion offer. She said with a devilish look on her face, "Good thing I didn't know you were a billionaire that night I picked you up at Ralph's club. I might have moved in and never let you go. Then you would never know if I was a gold digger or the real deal!"

I laughed and laughed. I'd never worried about gold diggers—mainly because no one knew there was gold to dig—and I wasn't going to start now.

But then? What? "Ralph? You knew it's *Ralph's* club?"

She looked a little sheepish. I didn't let up, "Ah-Hah! What did Winston Churchill say? 'A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.' I detect a mystery wrapped in a riddle surrounded by an enigma! Empty your brain in my lap!"

She told me how full of doubt she was after Craig's slip-up. That she didn't have many resources to find out who I really might be, and if I was really telling her the truth. She told me how she went to the bar found out the owner's name was Ralph (which as I thought unlikely, she didn't know till then), and sort of interrogated him about me.

And when she said she left the place none the wiser about me, I laughed and laughed as I drew her in. "I'm sorry, my Lady Fair. But I have to say, now you know all my secrets. There is nothing left to reveal that you don't already know."

She laughed right back at me, "Oh, don't be so quick. I have come to understand that people are full of mystery and secrets, even if they themselves don't believe it's so."

I kiss her square on the lips. “Well, my feelings for you are no secret to my Papa. My Vader is convinced that it is your chutzpah that seduced me. He was all about how opposites attract and that since I didn’t have any chutzpah of my own, I was drawn to yours!”

As Beatrice and I inevitably expected, her mother couldn’t keep our relationship a secret from her big brother or her nephews. So in very short order, “mom” as she urged me to call her, organized a backyard BBQ at her place.

After a short chat about it, during which there was no doubt we’d be accepting the invitation, Beatrice and I decided that we’d better do a double BBQ weekend. The day after her mother’s event, I would host an event and invite every last person in Jared’s crew.

Beatrice looked skeptical at the two of us taking care of BBQ food. “Are you sure the women and Jared’s guys agree to that? Shouldn’t we make it so everyone brings something thing? That way, everyone gets something they love to eat.”

“Enough said. Let me call Jared right now.” I chatted with Jared as Beatrice held my hand. When I hung up, “Done deal! His wife will mastermind the food list and make sure that there is enough of everything and a big variety on top of that.”

Then it was my turn to have some skepticism, “Beatriiiiice?? My beautyyyy?” I think she saw my consternation and put her hand on my cheek and looked me right in the eye. “What is it, my sweet? You sound worried.”

“Barbecue. Your family knows that you and I are vegans, right? Barbecue means roasting *vegetables*, right?” That made Beatrice laugh and she reassured me. “Don’t forget—my mom is also vegan. How do you think I got to be one? My cousins and my uncle, however, definitely are not. She will have something for everyone. She always does. And when it’s my uncle’s turn for the BBQ, he returns the favor. Have. No. Fear!”

Chapter 52

Beatrice

I discussed with mom if I should invite Papa, Hendrik's father. She agreed wholeheartedly that if Hendrik senior was his only family, he absolutely must come.

Hendrik blows my cousins away with his demeanor and his physicality and his quiet humor—lots of which he has adopted from my century-old cuss words!

Hendrik senior (since it turns out my Hendrik is a Junior), AKA Papa, wowed my mother and even my uncle in different ways. First, I think mom was charmed by his old-world manners and his accent. My uncle was impressed with his industrial career and his immigration as a single father.

Papa was no fool, and teased my uncle that it must be hard to be surrounded by hardheaded single parents! That is when my uncle revealed that he was “almost” a single parent as he had been divorced for over fifteen years. Long story short, the two men had lots to talk about.

Mom bragged that Hendrik *Great Gun*-ned and *Jehoshaphat*-ed her the first time they met, and that just tickled my two cousins to no end.

We eat a mountain of quinoa pilaf, corn on the cob, baked yams, three types of raw salads, and more and more. On top of that, my uncle, as he always has at our house, reserved half of the grill for his meats. Everyone filled themselves to the gills!

Mom was even more impressed when Hendrik not only volunteered to help clean up but didn't wait for her answer and just dove right in. I couldn't find him until I walked into the kitchen to see him up to his elbows in soapsuds at the sink!

"You absolutely need an apron. That would complete the picture!" I tease him as I pick up a dish towel and start drying the overflowing drain rack. He teases back as he lifts a handful of suds from the sink and dots my cheeks with them.

The afternoon was ending and my cousins wouldn't be upstaged. They convinced Hendrik, as I stood by with a smirk on my face, to come with us to our favorite karaoke club.

Since mom and my uncle were not letting go of Papa, and it was about the right time of evening, Hendrik relented, asking me, "I know you wanted me to go there before with you. What have I got myself into now?" He comically rolled his eyes at me.

Hendrik is no longer rolling his eyes as we walk into the karaoke bar. My favorite bartender shouts out "BB! It's about time! Markie! Where you been, bud? Jimmy! Where have you been, you guys? Get in here and give us some *song!*"

I lean over to Hendrik, “I told you it was our favorite joint.”

Chapter 53

Hendrik

After a very satisfying BBQ at her mom's house, here we are at the karaoke club.

I should have known what kind of singing voice my Lady Fair would have just from the way she speaks! However, I wasn't expecting her to have perfect pitch and a wide, wide vocal range! Wow!

She prepared me on our way to the club. *By subway—been a long time since I took one!*

She warned me that the music she is used to singing is quite different from what I play on my 12-string guitar. She does in fact belt out old-school heavy metal songs and some Hank Williams-style honky tonk songs.

She really could be in Carnegie Hall. Wow! The mics could stop working and she would still dominate the stage with her voice and enthusiasm.

To my delight, I love it!

Now, be honest. No more mysteries or secrets. Do you love the music and those styles ... or her?

She is gonna end up converting me to those styles on the force of my love, I think!

I protested somewhat when she wanted me to try out some songs that are more comfortable for me. She and Mark and Jim listed a whole mess of singers with a sort of baritone range like mine.

Or actually, as Beatrice believes my singing voice must be. I've never sung for her.

We collectively decide on the Welshman Tom Jones. Luckily! It's about the only name I recognized in their lists.

Jim lined up "She's a Lady" and showed me how I could follow along on the lyrics on the screen if I needed to. Beatrice actually requested "It's Not Unusual," so that was next.

By the end of song number two, I'd had as much attention on the stage as I could handle. Beatrice saw me getting a little nervous and she stepped up, gave me a big sloppy kiss in front of everyone, and although I hesitated, I saw she was getting ready to talk to the crowd. She said, "Give our very own American Tom Jones a big hand, ladies and gentlemen!"

Whew! I thought she was going to say my name there for a minute. I pulled her off that stage more than walked off!

Mark comes up to me and pounds me on the back saying, "Ricky! Dude! You brought the house down!"

One more secret identity!

Beatrice has to be cringing. If she isn't, I sure am!

At the end of the evening, I promised Beatrice, on the head of the Vader I love unconditionally, that I will never, *ever* call her BB if she promises never *ever* to call me Ricky!

We laugh all the way home.

Much to the annoyance of the other passengers on the subway.

Chapter 54

Beatrice

Well, turnaround is fair play.

Hendrik's neighborhood picnic was scheduled for the very next afternoon. He sent a car for me at noon. Again, Papa was in the back seat to greet me.

But so was my mom! She was rosy-cheeked and smiling.

Looks like mom is excited. About the picnic?

Or about being with Hendrik Senior?

I had to chuckle.

After greetings and getting settled, the driver (another one I didn't know by sight) took off. Papa patted my hand, "Don't worry, Beatrice, my dear! I know all of these young people and they are upright, outstanding, smart kids! What am I saying? Some of them are your age! And you're no kid!"

He chatted calmly and fairly quietly about yesterday's event at mom's house. We were headed, as I already knew, toward a major city park that rented pavilions for private picnics.

Earlier this morning, Hendrik assured me they had done this before with Jared's crew. They had rented space where there were two BBQ grills and plenty of picnic tables and lots of lawn to spread blankets.

Hendrik did warn me though, "Some of the couples have very young kids. Hopefully, that won't bother you. And also, be prepared for some culinary delights. The men and women of Jared's crew are first- and second-generation Americans, as I've told you, and they've kept their various culinary heritages alive! My mouth is watering just in anticipation of what some of them are going to be preparing! I hope!"

We arrive at the park. Jared's crew take me over right away. I know Trey and Jared and, by sight, I know two men whose names turn out to be Davy and Jeffrey. Luz reintroduces herself and Jared proudly lets me hold their three-year-old. Had to! He was clutching my hair!

The crew invited some of their parents who were off work. It's mainly the moms who take over my mom. I notice the wives and women of Jared's generation (my age, most of them) call all the older-generation women "Auntie," and they call my mom Auntie right away, too.

Mom is eating this up!

I notice the men cluck all around Papa, and he seems totally at ease.

I get a little desperate and Hendrik must have noticed because he comes right over to me and pulls me into him by the waist. "A little overwhelming?" He asks it quietly in that

deep baritone voice of his that excites me you-know-where and you-know-how-much.

I admit it, “Yes, a little bit, I think. No, a lot. I’m sure!” He gives me another hug.

He doesn’t let me down. “Stick with me. I will protect my Lady Fair from the onslaught of strange individuals!” I giggle and we hold hands as he quietly leads me from one tiny group to the next to introduce me. I have no hope of remembering everyone’s name!

He’s read my mind. “Don’t worry. They realize that they are a huge army and you’ll never remember their names today.”

I laugh as I nod, “I’ve already admitted to some of them that I won’t remember names right away!”

The women keep serving Auntie—aka my mom—mountains of different ethnicities of food.

Mom has brought this on herself! By oohing and ahing and saying Yum-Yum to every single thing they serve her!

That will teach her!

I also notice with pleasure that, with the other “aunties,” mom seems to be exchanging recipes! Maybe there will be some new fragrances coming from her kitchen in the next few days.

The day goes by quickly. I too have eaten mountains of delicious, indescribably exotic food. Hendrik must see that I am fading fast, and he quietly talks to one of the men. Then

comes over to me. “Time to leave? Can I take you to my place for the night?” he whispers.

“Only if you roll me up the stairs and onto your bed. I have eaten that much!” I admit.



That evening, as we chatted about this and that, Hendrik expressed his need to do more for Jared and Jared’s crew. For a whole population of people in his neighborhood, in fact.

This surprises me as it’s coming somewhat out of the blue, but I say, “This sounds like it’s been on your mind for a while.” He nods.

I guess now that I have met his crew, their girlfriends and wives, and their families, he was ready to open up about his connection to them all.

“Empty your brain in my lap about this,” I prod him.

He shared that there was a piece of property that he purchased as a joint venture with four of Jared’s crew members. It was a standalone building three stories tall and about 100 feet by 100 feet square with very little land around it.

“Whoa, whoa! Hold yer horses, pardner! Go back to the beginning. Tell me more about how this all started,” I urge him.

And I listened, enthralled with the wide range of people in his neighborhood, first of all. People speak several hundred

languages in our vast metro area; I already knew that. But when Hendrik listed all the languages his crew and their families spoke, I was floored!

“Hendrik, that alone boggles the mind. How is it we manage to communicate with each other? It’s amazing when you think about it!”

One-third of the city’s residents don’t speak English at home. Schools were overwhelmed; families were overwhelmed. Education sort of passed a lot of them by.

That’s why he knew an initial effort of literacy and numeracy for Jared’s crew was the way to go. The crew’s personal education improvements, the successful employment in careers of some, and the business ventures of others—all that was a huge success story for them all. I could see Hendrik’s pride.

We spend a few quiet minutes while I think things over, and Hendrik just sits, looking at me.

“Well, you want to do more? How about you use some of your stinkin’ money,” and Hendrik gives me a belly laugh and kisses me, “to open a non-profit thing in that joint-venture building? With the non-profit thing, you can create something like an after-school or day-and-night community education program. You know—add something for the first- and second-generation immigrant adults of the neighborhood. Not just their children.”

I give him a questioning look, “After all, you came from a European country with a strong history of learning foreign

languages, especially English. Your dad was favored by that, right?”

Hendrik admitted, “Yes, Vader spoke pretty good English when we arrived according to him. And I hardly spoke at all at age three. He taught me Dutch which we speak together to this day. But we always agreed to speak English everywhere else. So I learned easily.”

He got thoughtful again, “Papa’s big effort was learning how people actually *talked* because he had mostly book learning by that time. And also he wanted to get rid of his accent as much as he could. But you are right. He had the advantage that other first- and second-generation Americans don’t.”

So we added a bunch of ideas to our growing list of possibilities.

Hendrik is more and more excited about the whole idea.

Now that I’m “in,” he urges me to text Luz for an evening get-together next week to discuss it all with the three men who are his partners in the building ownership.

And, of course, to make sure it’s an evening I can come, with his partners’ two spouses and one fiancé.

I guess I really am “in” now.

Chapter 55

Epilogue Hendrik: Six Months Later

I wanted to spend every day and every night with Beatrice. But the way we were both housed, in studios, wasn't going to make it that easy on us.

For a while, we got in the habit of her coming from work to my place three evenings in a row. Then we'd reverse it and I'd spend the following three or four nights at her place.

We didn't eat out as much, preferring to use her mom's new recipes that she was collecting from all the Aunties. Staying in most evenings, cooking together, sharing our day (not to mention seducing each other in creative ways!), helped us feel more intimately ... one.

But what Beatrice did not know was that I had, not one more secret *identity*, but one more secret nonetheless!

She's gonna Thundering Tarnation me for this!

I sat her down and admitted to her, "It's getting really hard on us to live in two places. And I'm thinking of my mistakes with Carly."

When I mentioned Carly (and I had not in many, many weeks), Beatrice perked up and stared me down. She knew something was on my mind.

She asked, “What are you thinking, my sweetness? Are you feeling more grief about Carly?”

“No, my Lady Fair, not since I have been with you,” I told her the truth. “Why I mentioned Carly is that, as I told you, she refused to marry me.”

Beatrice nodded and took my hands in hers.

“We also never lived together in the several years we were together. I don’t want to make that mistake again. If Carly’s death taught me anything—and believe me, my father’s heart attack reinforced that lesson—it’s that the only day we have is *today*.”

I looked at Beatrice tear up. “Oh no, my beauty! No tears. This is not a sad statement. I’m simply saying I want to spend every minute with you that you’re not at work, that I’m not working. I’m getting impatient. I want a solution to achieve that right now. What do you think?”

She looked at me with tears glistening. “You mean you want us to live together? Somewhere else?”

I nodded. “I, uhhmm, I didn’t tell you this other thing yet. I know how you hate a mystery. But there is one thing I haven’t mentioned ...”

She had a moment of panic. “What? *Great Guns*, Hendrik?! You don’t have *another* secret identity, do you?”

Well, at least it wasn't Thundering Tarnation!

I take a deep breath. “Well, yes and no.” I look her in the eyes.

Oh, I'd better get this out fast.

“Well, you know how the foyer of this building is pretty recently remodeled? And you've seen my own studio of course, and I've upgraded a lot in there. Well, there's only one way I could have done that, and that was by purchasing the building. There are four other residents in the building with me. All elderly. When I bought the building some years ago, I never raised the rents on them like other landlords in the neighborhood would have done.”

Beatrice seems to like that move.

“My dad encouraged me on this. In fact, he said it might be a nice retirement plan for me. That's before I sold the company ...”

And Beatrice interrupted me with a grin saying, “... and became a stinkin' billionaire!”

Jeevers! Maybe she's taking this okay after all.

I finish my story, “So the lady in the rear studio on my floor has just contacted me through her children to say that she's moving into a long-term care facility. She's having more and more trouble getting by on her own and is moving out.”

I search Beatrice's gorgeous face. “Sooooo, my beautyyyyyy ...”

“Yeeeees, my sweeeeeeeet?” She gives me back my hesitation and I’m pretty sure she knows where I’m going with this.

“Empty your brain on my lap about this, my sweetness,” she urges me.

“Well. I own the building and that other studio apartment is slightly bigger than mine so it would more than double my space. That is, only if I tore down the wall between the two studios and did some other stuff. But I’d have to go live at the Ritz or tour Europe while it’s being done since I can’t live here.”

She had that panicky look again but I plod ahead, “What do you think, my beauty?”

I’m stunned when she wails, “Noooo! Don’t leave me!” and she fell into my arms sobbing.

Awww, *fiddlesticks!* Maybe my Lady Fair *doesn’t* know where I’m going with this!

Chapter 56

Epilogue Beatrice: One Year Later

I have to laugh. My *Mystery Music Man Professor Billionaire Geek Apartment Building Owner* and all his secrets can really stir me up!

I'm thinking back to when I thought he was breaking up with me. He was only proposing to *take me with him* to Europe for six weeks on a vacation! We'd be gone while a construction crew overseen by one of Jared's very own men renovated the first floor of Hendrik's building.

Part of our trip was on vacation time with pay that I had coming, and my brand new department head granted me the extra time off on my own dime.

Hendrik reminded me that I didn't need to worry about getting my paycheck. I'd given up my studio, for one thing, and was able to save all the rent I used to pay. He looked at me with mock despair, "You know I've got all this stinkin' money. Holy Guacamole, Beatrice! You're not to have any worries about money, all right? *Not. Ever. Again.* Besides ..." and he

got a devilish look in his eyes, “This trip and the rest of our lives is on MetriCooks’ tab, but not the way they think!”

That made me laugh. MetriCooks was the source of his billions and my paycheck, so ‘*Metri-Cooks was On-The-Hooks*’ became how we joked our trip would be paid. We laughed and laughed about that irony.

Mom was really excited for me to go to Europe since I’d had a passport since college and had only used it to go to Montreal. “BB, take lots of pictures!” I promised a phlog (an emailed *photo log*, as I had to explain to my “no speakie the geekie” mom) every evening.

When we got back from biking all over Holland (“My, my, BB! Holland is so ... flat!”), hiking all over Ireland (“Ohhh, BB, I’ve *never* seen that shade of green!”), trying out the double-decker buses (Great Guns, BB! Did you feel it sway around the corners?”), the cabs (“Almost like a city limo!”), and the Underground in London (“It’s *how far* underground??!”), and gawking at the architecture in Glasgow (“Old, old, old!”), the studio expansion work was complete.

When we pulled up (driven by Trey who couldn’t wait to be the one to show off the work that was done to the place), Hendrik’s place was move-in ready. “*Not my place*, my Lady. *Ours. Our* place, my beauty!”

I told Hendrik (and as always when speaking of his wealth, out of earshot of anyone), “It has to be a miracle, bought and paid for with some of that money you seem to have sitting

around stinkin' up the place!" I was joking but still curious, "How did they do this so quickly?"

"They worked 'round the clock is how."

We have lived here for nearly six months with great enjoyment. Then the mysteries were back to haunt me.

And I know how to investigate this particular one!

One evening, with my mystery solved, I pulled myself onto Hendrik's lap after he put his acoustic guitar down. He had serenaded me for almost an hour. I snuggled up to his ear and whispered, "My sweet, you know how I hate a mystery, wrapped in a secret, drenched in an enigma, right?"

He looked at me with anxiety. I could see clearly written on his face that he didn't have any more mysteries ... or ... secrets ... or enigmas of his own!

I laughed and laughed in his neck.

Then I looked him right in the eye and gave him a deep, deep close kiss. Eyes wide open with love.

"We're going to need to spend some more of your stinkin' money, my sweet. Our newly-remodeled place won't be big enough ..." and I put his hand on my belly, "... for the three of us."

There's More from Taylor Friste!

If you are new to Taylor's steamy romances, go download ***Billionaire On Fire: An Enemies to Lovers Romance of Redemption.***

It is part of your Kindle Unlimited subscription! (But you still need a copy, so get yours now!)

Join Taylor's Newsletter and get her ***FREE*** novella, ***Stuck with a Billionaire, An Enemies to Lovers Romance***