

**A sample of
CITY OF GOLD
by Carolyn Arnold**

CITY OF GOLD

**CAROLYN
ARNOLD**



Excerpt from *City of Gold* (Book 1 in the Matthew Connor Adventure series)
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2015 Hibbert & Stiles Publishing Inc. Edition

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ISBN (e-book): 978-1-988064-65-9

ISBN (print): 978-1-988064-35-2

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PROLOGUE

REPUBLIC OF INDIA

THE SOUND OF HIS THUMPING heartbeat was only dulled by the screeching monkeys that were performing aerial acrobatics in the tree canopy overhead. Their rhythmic swinging from one vine to the next urged his steps forward but not with the same convincing nature as did the bullets whizzing by his head.

Matthew glanced behind at his friends and was nearly met with a bullet between the eyes. He crouched low, an arm instinctively shooting up as if he'd drop faster with it atop his head. The round of shots hit a nearby tree, and splintering bark rained down on him.

"Hurry!" he called out, as he peered at his companions.

"What do you think we're—" Cal lost his footing, tripping over an extended root, his arms flailing as he tried to regain his balance.

Robyn, who was a few steps ahead of Cal, held out a hand, her pace slowing as she helped steady him.

"Pick it up, Garcia!" Matthew didn't miss her glare before he turned back around. He hurdled through the rainforest, leaping over some branches while dipping under others, parting dangling vines as he went, as if they were beaded curtains.

His lungs burned, and his muscles were on fire. One quick glance up, and the monkeys spurred him on again. Not that he needed more than the cries of the men who were chasing him. The voices were getting louder, too—growing closer.

Robyn caught up to Matthew. "What happened to natives with poison darts?"

“The modern-day savage packs an AK-47 and body armor.”

Several reports sounded. Another burst of ammunition splayed around them.

“If we get out of this alive, you owe me a drink.” Her smile oddly contrasted their situation.

“I’ll buy you each two,” Matthew promised.

Cal ran, holding the GPS out in front of him, his arm swaying up and down, and Matthew wasn’t sure how he read it with the motion.

“Where do you expect to take us, Cal? We’re in the middle of a damn jungle,” Robyn said.

“Round here. Go right,” Cal shouted.

Another deafening shot rang out and came close to hitting Matthew.

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Matthew ramped up his speed, self-preservation at the top of his list while the idol secured in his backpack slipped down in priority.

Most of their pursuers were yelling in Hindi, but one voice came through in English. He was clearly the one giving directions, and from his accent, Matthew guessed he was American, possibly from one of the northern states.

“I have to stop...and...breathe.” Robyn held a hand to her chest.

“We stop and we’re dead. Keep moving.” Cal reached for her arm and yanked.

Matthew slowed his pace slightly. “Robyn, you could always get on Cal’s back.”

“What?” Cal lowered the arm that was holding the GPS.

She angled her head toward Matthew. “If you think I’m going to get up there like some child, you are sorely mistaken.”

Matthew laughed but stopped abruptly, his body following suit and coming to a quick halt. He was teetering on the edge of a cliff that was several stories high, looking straight down into a violent pool of rushing water. He lifted his gaze to an upstream waterfall that fed into the basin.

Cal caught Matthew’s backpack just in time and pulled him back to solid ground.

The rush of adrenaline made Matthew dizzy. He bent over, braced his hands on his knees, and tucked his head between his legs. He'd just come way too close to never reaching his twenty-ninth birthday.

Robyn punched Cal in the shoulder. "Go right, eh? Good directions, wiseass. Maybe next time we'll just keep going straight."

"Sure, blame the black guy," Cal said.

More bullets fired over the empty space of the gorge.

"What do we do now?" Cal asked.

Matthew forced himself to straighten to a stand. He hadn't brought them all the way here to die. He'd come to retrieve a priceless artifact, and by all means, it was going to get back to Canada. He pulled off his sack, quickly assessed the condition of the zippers, and shrugged it back on. He tightened the straps, looking quickly at Cal and then at Robyn. One stood to each side of him. He had to act before he lost the courage. He put his arms out behind them.

Robyn's eyes widened. "What are you doing, Matt? You can't honestly be thinking of—"

Matthew wasn't a religious man, but he was praying for them on the way down.

CHAPTER 1

TORONTO, CANADA

ONE MONTH LATER...

DRENCHED IN SWEAT, CAL MYERS gripped the sheets and bolted upright, his body heaving, his lungs hungry for oxygen. The scream that had woken him was his own.

“Cal?” Sophie’s hand touched his shoulder, and he sprang out of the bed. She rolled over to face him. “Another nightmare?”

That was one way of putting it. He’d been running and dodging bullets one minute, and the next thing he knew, the ground had disappeared from under him and he was falling, falling, falling. Just when it had seemed bottomless, there was the raging river with its white caps and jagged rocks dotting its surface.

“Maybe you should take a break from all these adventures.” Her words were soft, thoughtful.

His gaze met hers. Sophie Jones was his girlfriend of five years. Given their similar personalities and restless natures, it was hard to believe they’d managed to stay monogamous for that long. They had yet to commit to living together or the big M-word, but she grounded him—her words, not his—and she was the one who gave his life any semblance of normalcy. Besides their long-term relationship, nothing else fit within the confines of an ordinary existence. He blamed—and thanked—Matthew Connor for that.

Sophie patted the mattress. “Come back to bed, baby.”

The alarm clock on the dresser read 5:15. He had no reason to be up this early, but getting back to sleep was going to be impossible. His imagination would only continue to replay the dream.

“You went through a lot in India,” she said. “I’m sure that Matthew would understand if you took some time off.”

He refused to acknowledge her line of reasoning. Before Matthew, his life had been anything but exciting. While it was true that Cal had explored the world, writing travel pieces and photographing some of the most popular landmarks didn’t hold a flame to treasure hunting and being shot at and— What was wrong with him? Why did he crave the element of danger? It wasn’t healthy. If anything, his recurring nightmare confirmed that. Some time off might do him good.

He slipped back into bed, and Sophie snuggled against him. She traced her fingertips over his chest, her touch working to dull the flashbacks.

“Was it the same dream you’ve been having lately?”

He swallowed, trying to keep the calm she was compelling him toward. “Yeah, the one where the ground just disappears.”

“I didn’t think the ground disappeared from under you in India,” she teased gently.

She was trying to make him smile, even for a second, and he loved her for that, but he didn’t want to remember what had truly happened. Was it possible he had a touch of PTSD?

“Close enough,” he said. “I still can’t believe he pushed us over the edge like that.”

She reached for his hand and gave it a small squeeze. “But all of you survived and you’re fine.”

“If you consider constantly having vivid flashbacks and nightmares *fine*.”

“They will pass in time.”

He exhaled loudly. “It’s almost been a month.”

“Hardly enough time to recoup from an experience like that.”

“You make it all sound so positive.”

Sophie laughed and flicked his nipple.

“Hey!” He squeezed her hand and then rubbed where her nimble fingertip had grazed.

“It’s your life, you know,” she said, becoming serious again. “It’s up to you what you do with it.”

Cal thought back on his life before Matthew. He had survived on a paycheck-to-paycheck basis and was deep in debt with student loans. He couldn't afford a car and he'd lived in a low-rent building where the landlord tracked the comings and goings of any visitors he had.

In addition to material freedom, Matthew provided Cal with adventure and satisfied his lust for action. It was more stimulating not knowing what each day had in store. If given the option between a calm and peaceful existence and a fight for survival laced with adrenaline, his choice would easily be the latter.

He glanced at the clock again: 5:20.

"I'm getting up, babe." He kissed her forehead and maneuvered his arm out from under her.

Sophie let out a moan. "It's so early."

"Yes, but *you* can go back to sleep."

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about me."

Sophie sat up, putting her back against the headboard. "That's the problem. I do." Her face contorted in a way he was very familiar with. Her left eyebrow was jacked up, and her eyes held a deep intensity. If that wasn't enough to give away her agitation, she tousled her short, dark dreads before crossing her arms.

"There's nothing to worry about. You just said I'm fine."

"I was trying to make you feel better, but people were shooting at you and you jumped off a cliff—"

"I was actually push—"

"There you go," she interrupted as she unfolded her arms and kneaded the comforter. "Either way, things are out of your control when you..." She rolled her hand, searching for the right words.

He knew what she was doing because she didn't like the term *treasure hunting* and did her best to avoid it. Even the Indiana Jones movies were not her thing, and while she supported Cal in his "outings" or "adventures," she far from encouraged them.

"Gather historic objects," she finally said. "I know it makes you happy, for the most part anyway. I just don't like seeing you having nightmares and waking up in the wee hours."

It was his turn to laugh. “Wee hours? I would think that applies to two or three or—”

“You’re missing the point.” She threw the comforter off her and got out of bed, then gathered her clothes from the floor and tossed them onto the mattress.

“And what point is that?” They rarely fought, but when they did, they tended to revolve around his expeditions and treasure hunting.

She pulled her sweater over her head. “You might be in danger, you know. What if the men from India tracked you back to Toronto? They could know where you live.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Now you sound like you’ve been watching too many movies.”

“Do I?” She plucked her skirt from the bed and pulled it on.

Faced with the direct, two-worded question, his inclination was to back down. It was packed with fervor, and paired with her tone, it had the potential to set the room ablaze.

“Even Matthew operates under an alias,” she continued. “If it’s not because of risk, then why would he do that?”

“You know why.”

“Uh-huh. His father, the mayor? You’re still buying that? He’s a twenty-eight-year-old man who can’t be straightforward enough with his own father to let him know what he does for a living. Although I’m not sure how much of a living it provides when you put your lives at stake to do it.”

“Why are you being like this?” It wasn’t like they were married, or even living together for that matter. She had no right to tell him how to live his life. No one had permission to do that.

“Are you sure you want to know?” she snapped.

“I asked, didn’t I?” He put his hands on his hips and realized he was standing there in his boxers. The lack of clothing somehow seemed to take away his power. He put on the pair of jeans that had been lying at his feet.

“All right, well, here it is. And so help me God, if you snicker or make fun of what I’m about to say, it’s over, Cal. Do you hear me?”

And they were back to this. While he liked to believe that what

they had was the real deal, whenever it came to verbal blows, her strike was always an uppercut to the jaw. She always pulled out the “I guess we’re over” and “We had a good run” crap. At least they didn’t fight often.

“Do you promise?” Her question was accompanied by a glare.

“I promise.”

“I feel like someone’s watching us.”

He had made a promise not to jest about what she had to say. Hearing her voice her fear made him want to scoff, though. Was she serious?

He cleared his throat. “Why do you think that?”

“Don’t patronize me, Cal Myers.” She pointed a finger at him. “I see it written all over your face.”

“Come on, baby. I just didn’t expect you to say that, that’s all.” He found his legs taking him to her now. He reached for her arm, but she pulled it out of reach.

“Have you been listening to me at all? And you promised not to make fun of what I was going to say.”

He held up his hands. “I’m not making fun. I swear.”

She tilted her head to the left and studied his face. “Fine. You gonna listen?”

He nodded. The option was either that or hitting up a florist at some point during the day. Hell, he might end up doing that anyway.

“When we were out last night, I kept seeing this one guy. Whenever I’d look in his direction, he’d turn away really quickly.”

Cal sensed her energy and saw it in the softness her features took on and in the way her eyes changed. She was afraid.

“You have nothing to worry about.” He attempted to touch her again. This time she allowed it.

“Can you promise that? Because I don’t think you can. I didn’t like the way this guy looked.”

“And how was that?”

She gazed into his eyes. “Like Liam Neeson.”

“Liam Neeson?”

“Yeah, you know, the actor? *Taken*, *Clash of the Titans*, *The*

A-Team?”

He dismissed her with a wave. “I know who he is. I would like to know what you have against him.” Her face fell, and he felt like a heel for causing that reaction. “I’m sorry. It’s just I’ve been hunting treasure for two years now. I’m still alive. I’m not going to lie and say that it’s the safest profession.”

“If you did, I wouldn’t buy it anyway.”

“So? Liam? What made you suspicious of him?”

“You said that when you were in India, the person commanding all those men who were chasing you spoke English and was likely from North America.”

Now he regretted having said anything to her about the trip. “Yeah, but that could describe a lot of people, Sophie.”

“I’ll give you that. It’s just... What if he tracked you down? I don’t want you to go tonight.”

Tonight was the exhibit opening and gala to celebrate the Pandu statue they had recovered in India. He wanted to be there. He couldn’t believe she was asking him to sit it out. “You what?”

“It’s just that... I don’t think you should go. Something’s going to happen.”

“And you’re psychic now?” He put up with her feelings, her hunches, her suspicions, but if she was starting to foresee the future, it might be time to give her the “We had a good run” speech himself. And mean it.

She shook her head. “Of course not.”

He let out the breath he had been holding. He’d grown accustomed to having her around.

“I just *know* that he was watching us and trying to act as if he wasn’t,” she went on. “I can feel it. He left the restaurant at the same time we did. When we were waiting at the curb for the valet to bring your car around, he was standing there and he lit up a cigarette.” She stopped talking, but he sensed there was more.

“And?” he prodded.

“When we were pulling away, I saw him get into a black SUV.”

The laugh erupted on its own.

She narrowed her eyes at him, and he could almost feel the

daggers landing in his skin. "That's it, I'm outta here," she clipped. "I have a busy day ahead of me. Houses don't sell themselves."

He reached for her hand, but she swatted him away and kept moving.

"Babe, are you sure you haven't watched too many movies?" he called after her.

"Shove it, Cal."

The door slammed behind her.

Cal wanted to punch a wall. His fist was balled and ready, but somehow, he had mustered the control not to go through with it. Self-preservation, maybe. Instead, he drew back the blind and watched her drive off. He was about to retreat from the window when he saw a dark-colored Escalade parked on the other side of the street. And a man was silhouetted behind the wheel.

CHAPTER 2

THE GALA WAS A BLACK-TIE affair, and according to his father, *anybody who's anybody* was going to be there. Matthew recognized it for what it was: an opportunity for the prestigious to measure and compare their financial portfolios and charitable donations. Growing up with his father, he was well acquainted with the subject matter, but he refused to let that sort of thing define him.

The event tonight was, in actuality, meant to celebrate a relic acquired by the Royal Ontario Museum—a certain artifact that Matthew had taken part in obtaining. While the statue would remain in the museum, encased behind bulletproof glass and security systems, his father, William Connor, had insisted that the banquet take place in the family home. Not that the house fell within the regular classification of a “family home.” It was a 26,000-square-foot castle located in Toronto’s affluent Bridle Path neighborhood and was capable of accommodating a few hundred people.

Matthew often thought that his grandparents would roll in their graves if they knew what their son had done with his inheritance. They had been salt-of-the-earth people who put more stake in humanity than the almighty dollar. His grandmother’s mentality was that she had grown up with little and it hadn’t hurt her. As a result, instilling culture in her children trumped materialism. Matthew’s father had failed to grasp the lesson, though. He flaunted the palace any time he had the opportunity. When he didn’t have a reason, he invented one.

While Matthew may have hunted treasure, it wasn’t to line

his own pockets; it was to give back to humanity. He subscribed to a utilitarian mindset, so whatever he found was donated to museums for the world to enjoy. His finder's fees were sufficient to cover any expenses involved, but not much more. He assigned a larger portion to Cal and Robyn than he did to himself. It was Daddy's money that funded his expeditions, but it wasn't as if the family accounts were going to dry up anytime soon. Interest on his investments alone could fund many families.

Matthew believed his mother would be proud of his dignity and worldview, but he'd have to take that on faith. She'd lost the battle to breast cancer ten years ago. Where was Daddy's precious money then? It had been powerless against the malignant growth. In fact, that was probably why Matthew recognized the limitations of wealth. It didn't have the ability to breathe life into a soul. Cash was a tool—nothing more, nothing less.

Matthew finished tying his Windsor knot and gave himself one last look in the mirror. A strand of dark hair shifted, revealing the scar on his forehead, a souvenir from his most recent expedition dodging bullets through the jungle of India. He brushed his hair back to inspect the wound more closely. It was barely noticeable.

Dressed in a fitted Ralph Lauren tuxedo and black Hugo Boss high-polished shoes, he'd still fall short of his father's expectations. His face was cloaked in a five-o'clock shadow, which suited him more than a clean shave. If that wasn't enough to wind up his old man, the necktie would finish the job.

Matthew caught his own arctic-blue eyes reflecting back at him. "Well, Gideon, you're looking pretty dapper."

Gideon Barnes was the fake name he used to give credit to his finds. It was a secret among less than a handful of people—people he trusted with his life. If his father found out what he really did to keep busy, he'd likely be cut out of the will. If that happened, he'd lose the necessary backing to support his passion. No, it was best that his father believe that he was an archaeologist, not a treasure hunter. And he had the necessary schooling to back that story.

He had majored in archeology and had even obtained his doctorate. His knowledge of history had proved useful out in

the field on many occasions. Even with his esteemed education, his father had preferred that he become a doctor or a corporate manager of some sort. It would've been ideal for William if Matthew followed in his father's footsteps and entered the political arena one day, but witnessing William's stressful climb up the proverbial ladder was enough to squash any drive for power and dominance. William had barely survived two heart attacks and he was turning fifty-three this November.

Yet, his father's Achilles' heel was his unquenchable lust for wealth, so he kept pushing. There would never be enough. It didn't matter that the family home had been paid for in cash at the sum of thirty million dollars and that their worth was well into the billions.

Matthew sighed, straightened his spine, and sprang down the winding staircase, his steps light. When he was a child, he used to slide down the walnut banister whenever his father wasn't around. Lucky for his younger self, that was often. A mischievous part of him wondered how people would react if he did so tonight. It was tempting to see how worked up William would get over it, but he resisted.

The main level was filled with the droning hum of multiple conversations converging. His father's associates, who were mostly strangers to Matthew, flitted about in their designer suits and gowns. The women were all a little too perfect to be natural. Their foreheads had clearly been peeled back and tightened, and their skin stretched, appearing almost painful when they smiled. Their lips were full and their breasts plump and too large for their slender frames. The majority were blondes. The lot of them could have come off an assembly line.

Most were trophy wives who entered on the arms of men old enough to be their fathers, and in some cases, grandfathers. Most of the men in his father's circles were on their second, third, or fourth marriages. To them, nuptials were an arrangement of convenience and manipulation, to provide the appearance of stability.

As Matthew wove through the crowd, the guests' myriad colognes tickled his nose, creating a heady elixir. He put on a

pleasant front, offering gentle nods of greeting and subtle smiles to anyone who caught his eye.

“Matthew, sir?” Lauren Hale, his father’s head housekeeper, held out a tray of champagne. She served along with a hired wait staff.

“I think I’m going to need one.” He took a flute. “Thank you.”

“You always talk like that, but you still have a good time.” She gave a small curtsy before leaving to serve the guests.

Matthew watched her move through the crowd. Maybe one day, his father would get over himself enough to acknowledge the feelings that existed between them. But even if his father did come around, Lauren was too nice a person for his father anyway.

Speaking of the old man...

Matthew let instinct guide him into the grand room. With its coffered ceilings, glass chandeliers, marble floors, and tall pillars, it resembled the lobby of a ritzy hotel more than a place of residence.

He heard his father before he saw him. His timbre always boomed over the crowd. William was conversing with a couple that passed Matthew polite smiles as he approached. His father was what most would consider handsome. He had a head of silver hair and electric blue eyes, and he kept himself in shape with regular exercise and a proper diet. Despite living most of his life in a suit, he never quite filled them out, even though they were always designer and specifically tailored for his body.

“Son, how nice of you to finally join us.”

His father said *finally* as if forever had come and gone. It was a jab at the fact that Matthew had bowed out of attending the official event at the museum. The surrounding guests carried on with their conversations as if they hadn’t heard him, but Matthew knew they had. No one could *not hear* that bellow.

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather—”

His father gripped Matthew’s shoulder tight, cutting off his words, and leaned in, bringing with him the smell of whiskey and cigar smoke, the latter being strictly a social vice. “It would have been nice if you cleaned yourself up a little. And no bowtie?”

If William wanted to embarrass him, he’d have to try harder. Matthew cut a glance to the couple, and they excused themselves.

“Why did you have to do that?” William’s voice was only slightly lower than before.

“You know I don’t like bowties.” And so began another painful attempt at conversation with his father. Why he even tried was beyond him. Except for their genetic similarities and the fact they had both loved Matthew’s mother, the two of them had nothing in common. It was what made it easier to think of his father as *William* as opposed to *Dad*.

“It’s not about what you like, or don’t like, it’s about—”

“Yes, I know. Appearance.” Matthew drained the rest of his champagne. “But like you said, at least I showed up.”

William’s jaw tightened, and his lips pressed into a straight line. “As long as you—”

“Yes, Father, as long as I live under your roof.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“I don’t know, William, what do you think?”

“I’ve told you to call me Dad,” he ground out.

The ensuing eye contact simmered. It wasn’t as though Matthew needed to live in this place. So why did he still bother? Did he actually believe he might develop a bond with the man? It hadn’t happened in twenty-eight years, so why would one form now?

Lauren came by then, and without taking his gaze off his old man, Matthew exchanged his empty flute for a fresh one. He took a swallow of the bubbly liquid, and his mind cautioned his ego to slow down and not allow his father to have such control over him.

William waved Lauren away and gestured to Matthew’s temple. “What happened to your face? How do you manage to always cut yourself up? You’re an archaeologist for crying out loud.”

“For your information, that happened a month ago. It’s great to know that you are paying attention, *Dad*.”

“I’ve always taken care of you.”

Matthew glanced around. This wasn’t the time or the place. While it was true that William had taken care of him materially, Matthew would have preferred his company to a guilt offering. It was just one reason why their relationship had always been strained.

“You really want to get into this right—” He turned back to his father only to realize the man had left and was now positioned behind a microphone.

This night couldn’t end fast enough. He downed the champagne, his mind on the next adventure, knowing that whatever and wherever it would be, it would take him away from *William*.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank you all for coming to celebrate this monumental find.” William paused to soak in the enviable applause. He definitely had a way of extorting the response he wanted.

After the clapping died down, he continued. “The Pandu statue is unquestionably one of the greatest discoveries of the twenty-first century. We are indebted to those who brought the Pandu here for us to appreciate.”

The statue was suddenly projected behind him on a large screen, the introduction to a slideshow presentation.

Matthew ran his hand along his jawline as he scanned the room. For the most part, everyone’s eyes were on William. All except for a few wandering and lustful gazes that traveled over him. A brunette, who appeared to have reached drinking age last week, sucked on her finger, the implication obvious.

Matthew returned his attention to the podium, even though it made him nauseated to listen to William speak about his discovery. If the man had any idea that it was because of his son—and his son’s two best friends—that this celebration was even possible, it might give him his third heart attack.

“If you have any questions about the Pandu, I am certain that the museum curator, Miss Robyn Garcia, would be happy to answer them. You can also ask my son, Matthew Connor”—he extended his hand toward Matthew—“who is an archaeologist.”

Despite the twist in his gut, Matthew lifted his glass in response, purely out of etiquette.

“Yes, well, without further pomp and circumstance, Miss Robyn Garcia.” William stepped to the side, clapping, and Robyn joined him on the podium.

It was the first time this evening that Matthew saw her. How he

had missed her, even in a crowd, was remarkable. Matthew let out a deep breath at the sight of her.

She wore a black evening gown that complemented her tanned complexion. Her long, dark hair was straightened and slicked behind her shoulders and left to drape over her bare upper back. The dress was floor length with a slit on the left side that reached midthigh. Beads that sparkled like diamonds covered the bodice, and the fabric was attractively gathered where it cupped her breasts. She'd paired the gown with diamond earrings and bangles.

Robyn positioned herself behind the microphone and let her eyes trace over the crowd. If she was nervous about public speaking, it wasn't evident. They met each other's eyes, and her lips curved upward slightly. He was certain his mouth was gaping open and his expression resembled that of a goofy teenaged boy with a crush. It was a lot easier to see her as an equal when she was wearing khakis and boots, her shirt stained with sweat and her hair pulled back into a loose ponytail.

Robyn gestured to the screen behind her. "It truly is a remarkable gift we've been given. Thank you to William Connor for extending this celebration to his home." She clapped, encouraging everyone to follow suit. Even Matthew found himself putting his hands together.

William dipped his head in silent acknowledgment and then waved, implying that it was no big deal.

And really, it wasn't. Lauren and Daniel did all the hard work. Lauren's primary charge was keeping the house tidy, and Daniel was the butler and property manager. At the end of the day, everything was their responsibility.

Speaking of Daniel, there was no sign of him. That was strange because he was the one who had led them to India in the first place. He was Matthew's aid when it came to researching and picking expeditions. Maybe Daniel working for both father and son wasn't the ideal situation, but it was what it was.

Robyn continued. "The Pandu is believed to date back to the third century. If you joined us at the museum earlier, this isn't news to you, but the sacrifices that Gideon Barnes made to bring

this to us are significant.”

“Is that why he’s not here tonight?” a man in the crowd called out. If Matthew remembered right, his name was Jacob.

No one was looking at him, yet Matthew felt under a microscope. Where was Lauren with more champagne? He always felt uncomfortable in these situations and was impressed by Robyn’s restraint in not letting her eyes drift back to him. She was a pro.

“Mr. Barnes regrets that he was unable to be here tonight, but he sends his love and appreciation.”

A man standing next to Matthew bumped his elbow. “The guy never shows up for his own contributions. If it weren’t for the artifacts and some pictures, I’d doubt his existence.”

“He might value his privacy,” Matthew said. And that statement wasn’t far from the truth. As for the pictures, Matthew had hired a man to be the face of Gideon Barnes, but it was to get his father’s backing, nothing more.

Robyn went on, providing more background on the Pandu. His mind wandered as she spoke. He was ready for the next mission. Time was too precious to sit around basking in past accomplishments. Life was about seizing the moment.

Matthew looked to the doorway and noticed Daniel standing off to the right. Daniel’s Norwegian gray eyes were locked on him.

“Excuse me,” Matthew whispered as he weaved through the mass of people to Daniel. Matthew handed his empty glass to the man.

“Refill, sir?”

Matthew directed Daniel to move down the hall and out of sight of their guests. “That’s not why I’m here, and you know it. You have something. What is it?”

Daniel considered their surroundings before responding. “One of the greatest legends, sir.”

Matthew’s heart palpitated, a natural and habitual occurrence when the prospect of a new adventure came calling.

The two men shuffled farther from the entrance to the grand room.

“And you think it’s worth checking out?” Matthew asked, his

voice low.

Daniel nodded. “Absolutely. You will change the world with a find like this one.”

The guests in the other room laughed and clapped. He then heard his father’s closing words encouraging everyone to drink and have fun. After a final round of applause, the music began, meant to inspire the guests to dance.

“In five minutes, make your way upstairs,” Matthew whispered to Daniel. “I’d like that refill after all.” Matthew rushed up the stairs, taking two steps at a time. It sounded like this quest had his name all over it. Daniel had said it was one of the greatest legends and capable of changing the world. What could it be? A precious object that would alter the way people viewed the world? Change what society knew about the beginning of time, maybe? Rock the foundation of established religion?

He entered through the double doors to his room. The space itself was large enough to be considered a luxurious apartment in Manhattan or even downtown Toronto for that matter. It was two levels, and a loft overlooked the sleeping and living areas. A studio apartment could fit inside his en suite alone, and his balcony had a view of the tennis court. A wall of windows extended along both levels on one side, and natural light streamed in during the day. With it being night now, the drapes had been drawn shut.

He looked around his room. The palette for his bedroom was geared toward neutrals, all shades of whites and brown. His bed was king-size, and he’d had one that large since he was ten. He had adjusted to the dimensions, and because of that, it was hard to share with someone else. He’d been accused of being a bed hog more than once.

He closed the doors behind him and jumped a foot. “What the—” Matthew flicked on the lights to find Cal sitting in the living area. Cal’s black skin had almost completely camouflaged him in the darkened room.

“Sorry, Matt,” Cal said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“What were you thinking?” Matthew loosened his tie, wondering why Daniel hadn’t mentioned Cal was up here. “What are you

doing here?” Cal wasn’t dressed for the gala by any stretch of the imagination in his faded T-shirt and tattered blue jeans.

“You know how Sophie gets feelings about things, right? Like her premonitions or whatever? Well, she’s freaking me out a bit.”

“Is that why you didn’t come to the banquet tonight? You know, just because she has a feeling doesn’t make it fact.”

“This time, though... I don’t know. Something is off.”

“Are you still having nightmares?”

Cal met his eyes. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“It’s not the first time we’ve been shot at—”

“It’s not the bullets that have me drenched in sweat at night. It’s going over that...that...cliff. Thanks to you.” Cal pointed a finger at Matthew.

“What are you complaining about? You’re still alive.” It was a play on a line from *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, which was one of Cal’s favorite movies.

“That’s easy for you to say.”

Matthew laughed and joined Cal on the sofa. “Tell me what happened.”

“It’s not so much as what has happened, but Sophie feels like we’re being watched.”

“She thinks you’re being watched?” He raised an eyebrow at his friend.

Cal narrowed his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that. Sophie does have a way with these things.”

“I’m going to need more than that.”

“Fine, you want more?”

Matthew splayed his hands and gave Cal an exasperated look.

“Sophie and I went out for dinner last night.”

“This story is starting off exciting already.”

“Would you cut it out? This is serious.”

Matthew forced his face to a blank expression. “Continue.”

“She says there was someone watching us. I never saw him.”

“You never saw him?” A smirk lightened his expression.

“Shut up, wiseass. Sophie did see him. She said he looked like—”
Cal hesitated.

“Like?”

“Oh no. If I say it, you’re going to laugh. I know that much.”

“Try me.”

“Fine. She said the guy looked like Liam Neeson.”

Matthew snickered.

Cal shook his head. “See? I knew you would laugh.”

“Are you sure Sophie hasn’t been watching too many movies?”

“That’s what I said. I wanted to believe that’s all it was, but...

What if those people from India followed us home or somehow found us?”

“Unlikely,” Matthew said, brushing it off.

“Yeah, unlikely but not impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible.”

“That’s reassuring.”

Matthew shrugged. “What do you want me to say?”

“Never mind. Anyway, Sophie and I had a huge fight. I watched her leave and—”

“Ah, how sweet.”

“Can you keep quiet long enough to let me tell my story?”

“Okay, okay.” Matthew loved how easy it was to tease his friend.

“The same vehicle she saw him getting into the night before... well, it was parked in front of my building.”

“Let me guess. A black SUV?”

“I’d say more of a charcoal gray. Wait. How did you know? Have you seen one lurking around?”

Did his friend really want his answer? He’d give it anyhow. “You say there’s a guy following you who looks menacing. A dark SUV completes the picture.”

“Ah, so we’re back to the too-many-movies theory.”

“I’m starting to wonder if you both have watched too many.”

“Sure, fine, laugh it up, funny boy, but when something happens...”

“Nothing’s going to happen.”

“You can’t promise that, man.”

They both fell silent for a moment, and then there was a soft rap on the door.

CHAPTER 3

ROBYN WAS HAPPY TO HAVE the speech behind her. Contrary to the praise she received for public speaking, it wasn't something she enjoyed. Her insides always jumbled into a mangle of nerves and she had to clasp her hands to calm herself. To others, she must appear as if she were cold in those situations, but in actuality, her palms were sweaty and all she could think about was stepping out of the limelight. Tonight, she'd had to address a crowd twice—one at the museum and now another one here. And she'd do this for William, or Bill, as he preferred she call him.

She had known him since she was a teenager and he'd always accepted her as if she were his daughter. For her, this was with reservations. There was a self-serving quality about him, but she wasn't sure if it was prejudice from all Matthew had told her over the years or her personal opinion. She never had much luck with her own parents. Her father had left before she was born and her mother had worked fifteen hours a day to keep food on the table, making Robyn a latchkey kid. As an adult, Robyn didn't speak to her mother.

Stepping back from the microphone, she let out a deep breath, the tension in her neck releasing with her exhale. Her body remained tender from the fall in India, even though it had happened about a month ago. She was thankful that was the worst of her symptoms. She'd pay Matthew back for pushing her over that cliff when he least expected it.

She stopped shy of rubbing her neck. With a level of professionalism to be maintained, she didn't need to look as if she

had a headache, even if one was already blooming behind her eyes.

The men in the room followed her every move with lascivious gazes. She smiled politely at a few with no intention or underlying implication. She was fantasizing about popping an Advil, truth be told. Her fingertips brushed the points of her earrings, and she let her arm fall to her side.

“Bravo.” William Connor clapped. “You were absolutely spectacular, my dear. You should be very proud of yourself.”

“Thank you. But really, it’s Mr. Barnes who made tonight possible.”

“Yes, and speaking of Mr. Barnes...” The flicker in his eyes revealed his ego was taking the hit for the archaeologist’s apparent no-show. If only he knew that the man behind the name lived under his own roof. Sometimes carrying the secret between father and son seemed too heavy a burden.

“He really is sorry he couldn’t make it tonight.”

“Yes, I am sure he is,” William said coolly.

The band played a classical waltz number, a piece of sheet music she ought to recognize by name as she’d heard it many times before. Fancy balls were a part of her chosen lifestyle. But her love, her passion, wasn’t for musical composition; it was for studying ancient civilizations and the relics they left behind.

“Miss Garcia?” A portly older gentleman extended his hand. “I would be honored if you would grant me this dance.”

His blue eyes no longer carried the spark and vitality of a man half his age, but they were soft and sincere. If she based her assessment of him on his greeting and appearance, she’d accept that his intentions were pure, but she knew better. It didn’t matter that he neglected taking care of his physical body, the man was worth billions and had his pick from any money-hungry bimbo from Toronto to Tokyo.

His name was Nicholas Hartman, and he came from old money. His large contributions to the museum made her somewhat obligated to grant him at least one dance. If his hand slid too low down her back, however, it would be over. She slipped her hand into his, and he smiled. He guided her to the floor with a cultured

grace and took the lead.

The song ended, and everyone applauded before the band carried on with the next melody.

“Thank you for the dance, Mr. Hartman,” she said with a slight bow of her head.

“Thank you, darling.” He kissed the back of her hand.

She sensed his hesitancy to let go but was pleased when he did. He might be used to getting his way in a courtroom—and with insecure women—but Robyn didn’t fit into either category. She wouldn’t be submitting to him anytime soon.

Now, where was Matthew? They had made eye contact during her speech, but she’d noticed him leaving part way through.

She scanned the room. It was bad enough he didn’t attend the exhibit opening, but for him to pull a disappearing act at this point was unacceptable. As it was, she never understood how he could risk his life to make such historic discoveries and then stand quietly at the back of the room. When Matthew had decided it best to hide this side of his life from his father, though, it affected more than just him. Robyn herself found it hard to keep quiet about her own role in the acquisition.

“Such a beautiful dedication speech.” Another man put his hand on her forearm as she worked her way through the crowd.

“Thank you.” She smiled pleasantly, but the second her back was to him the expression faded. She’d had enough of human interaction for one evening—at least with these types of people. She did have some choice words reserved for Matthew, however.

She headed for the staircase, certain he must be with Daniel and on the verge of another adventure. When she’d met Matthew’s eyes earlier, she’d seen that familiar spark. He could never stay put for long. His energy was only this electric when...

Her cheeks flamed with the acknowledgment that more than one thing had this effect on him. It was best she disregard the second and more personal reason.

Her fingertips brushed across her neckline, the light touch transporting her to a time when they were more than friends. She shook herself out of it. This was ridiculous. Their romantic

relationship hadn't worked for many reasons.

As she reached the base of the stairs, Daniel rounded the corner with a tray of champagne in hand, clearly intending to take it upstairs with him.

Something was definitely going on. He had two flutes and a bottle. Maybe she had jumped to conclusions about the purpose of Matthew's determined stride. It could be in regard to the more intimate reason and not work-related at all.

Daniel dipped his head toward her. "Miss Garcia."

"Good evening, Daniel. Do you know where I could find Matthew?"

"Certainly."

Awkwardness sparked in the air between them. No elaboration most likely meant Matthew really did have a woman in his room. She was probably the reason he had missed the dedication, too. It should have made her want to retreat and afford him his privacy, but a rush of anger surged through her. Of all the times for him to be distracted! It wasn't solely his hard work he was disrespecting; it was hers and Cal's, as well. With all they'd been through to retrieve the Pandu statue, she couldn't believe he was willing to sacrifice its celebration to an evening of cheap sex.

She planted her fisted hands on her hips. "Where is he?"

Daniel propped the tray in one hand and bobbed his head toward the second landing.

"He's in his bedroom?" she asked for confirmation.

"Yes, Miss Garcia."

It was in his tone. This wasn't about a woman. This was about Matthew trying to "protect" her from another adventure. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and she released a deep breath. "You have another mission for us? For him?" she whispered.

He remained silent and expressionless. He could've rivaled the Queen's Guard at Buckingham Palace. She studied him more closely as he stood there. To others, he was a manservant simply taking drinks to his master's suite. No one would think anything more of it, especially not William Connor. But Daniel was the hinge point from which all their excursions began. His unofficial

responsibilities included researching lost treasures and legends.

“I’m in.” She brushed past him, charging up the stairs. It would take more than a few body aches to keep her from another quest.

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