

Act of Love

One

[Manhattan, Wednesday, April 22nd, 1959]

Annie D'or knew she was being personally addressed when she heard a male voice say, "so you're name is Annie."

Her mind considered a clever response, because the bold print on her nametag left no doubt. She thought better of it when she raised her head and looked into the most intense blue eyes she had ever seen. The purse and the sweater she was carrying slipped from her arms and dropped to the floor.

"I, I," she stammered as the rhythm of her heart began to intensify, "fly," she blurted.

Annie's hands clenched and unclenched as she felt blood coursing up her face. She was beat red by the time she realized how ridiculous that sounded.

"Not like Peter Pan," she felt more words tumble out. Annie was now even more humiliated at her complete inability to form a logical sentence.

The smile on the man's face seemed kind and not contemptuous.

"Do you know what it means?" He asked.

Watching doubt cross Annie's face, intense-blue-eyes continued, "your first name, do you know what it means?"

"Annie, do I know what the name Annie means?"

Intense-Blue nodded.

[*This is surreal,*] Annie thought. The conversation, if you could call it that, made no

sense at all. On top of it, she felt like she'd been here before, right here in this spot that she'd never been in before. She fought to shake off the oddly dreamlike feeling before responding.

“Um, Annie is an English name. It means gracious and merciful,” she replied as she tottered on the brink of disorientation.

“And your last name, D’or, do you know it?”

“My mother says it means golden.”

“You are right!” Blue-eyes affirmed enthusiastically. “How perfect!” He held out his hand. “My name is Gianni, Gianni Conte.”

Annie accepted his hand as an automatic reflex.

“Gianni is Italian. It means merciful God.”

Annie finally found her voice and her sense of humor. “And Conte?” She asked.

“This means Count, as in a member of the King’s court.”

“You are right!” She emphasized, assuming he must be true to his own name.

“How long will you be in town?” She heard him ask. The solid pressure on her hand suddenly made her realize she was still in his grips.

“What?” She asked incredulously.

“You’re wearing a tag that looks like everyone else’s walking into that conference room,” he pointed towards the marked door, and you’re shoes are dry.”

“I don’t understand,” she said glancing down at her brown and white pumps.

“It’s been raining. If you lived in the area and your rain gear was checked, you’d still have some splatter on your heels. There isn’t any. This is a four-day conference. No question, you’re staying at the hotel.”

“What are you,” she asked, relieved that he finally let her hand go, “some kind of

detective?”

“Sure,” blue-eyes replied without guile. His smile was wide.

“So, Annie with the shimmering auburn hair, he moved in more closely, “um, it smells great, too.”

Annie felt a shiver run up her spine. She was shocked by the guy’s nerve.

“How about dinner tonight?”

“I, I don’t even know you.” [*Surrealistic, no other word for it.*]

Blue-eyes reached into his breast pocket, pulled out a wallet, and flipped it open. The badge, the name, the face were clearly revealed.

“Like I said earlier, my name is Gianni Conte, and I am very pleased to meet you, Annie D’or.” He bowed from the waist and held out his hand.

“I’m not going to do that again,” she said folding her arms together tightly.

“Then, in that case, you *must* join me for dinner. I won’t take no for an answer.”

Annie was stunned as she watched the strangest man she had ever met move away. At fifteen yards he turned back around.

“Meet you in the lobby at eight,” he waved. “Stay grounded in that conference,” he added. “You look mighty fine with your feet on the floor.”