

Money, Mercy and Misery.



The Biography of a Filthy Rich Bastard...

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## Prologue

David Jennings — a man whose life had been every bit as turbulent as the sea he was staring at — lounged on the sun-drenched terrace of his villa, perched high above the Tyrrhenian coastline.

The waves crashed against the rocks with the kind of enthusiasm that suggested they held a long-standing grudge against the stone.

The air was thick with the heady perfume of blooming oleanders — so overpowering this time of year that it felt equal parts intoxicating and mildly hallucinogenic.

On the horizon, the setting sun staged its final act, as if bidding farewell to an audience that never truly appreciated her performance.

It was a spectacular sight — a perfect molten orb, wrapped in an amber glow, sinking behind the volcano.

For a brief moment, it looked as though the fiery ball was being swallowed by the crater, an oddly fitting finale to a day steeped in existential brooding.

To his left, the ancient city of Tropea clung dramatically to its cliffside, its first evening lights flickering to life.

From somewhere within, the crack and bloom of fireworks marked the Feast of the Madonna, scattering bursts of light into the night air.

With a quiet warmth spreading through his chest, David turned his gaze to the beauty in the deckchair beside him — and, inevitably, to the state of his own life.

Particularly the past year, which had been a relentless parade of misunderstandings, missed chances, and one highly regrettable incident involving an inflatable doll.

He took a slow sip of ice-cold limoncello.

The syrupy lemon liqueur slid down his throat, and the alcohol's burn settled like a small furnace in his chest.

Since the divorce, things had been... less than smooth sailing.

He often felt like the lone captain of a ship that had sunk long ago, still manning the wheel out of sheer stubbornness.

But life has a way of taking strange turns.

He thought back to the day he met Henry — an undeniably charming man. Some might have called him eccentric.

David preferred to think of him as someone you had to take the time to know... and be very glad you did.

Although it had been more than a year since he'd first met the man, David could recall every detail of that extraordinary encounter.

He'd been having dinner at *Chez Michel*, a little bistro on the edge of Hyde Park where he was something of a regular

For David, *Chez Michel* was almost a second home.

He was always welcomed warmly by the owner himself, Monsieur Michel — a man just shy of two metres tall, with a comically thin moustache and a French accent so thick it could drive even the most accomplished linguist to despair

He was forever dressed in the same uniform: crisp white shirt, black waistcoat, and a long white waiter's apron

His hair — slicked back with enough pomade to stop a bullet — was parted dead centre in a style that hadn't been fashionable since the 1940s.

Every visit began with his trademark greeting: "*Bonjour, mon ami*" — which, in Michel's world, was about as high an honour as one could receive.

That day, David had started with a plate of grilled langoustines in garlic butter, so tender they all but dissolved on his tongue.

For the main course, he'd ordered a Highland fillet of beef with foie gras and a port sauce worth committing crimes for.

If not for its outdated interior, the place could easily have earned itself a Michelin star or two.

The terracotta walls were flaking in patches, the cane-backed chairs wobbled dangerously, and the tiny framed landscapes on the walls had yellowed so much that the subjects were barely discernible.

The oak bar had lost most of its varnish, and the porcelain beer taps were etched with hairline cracks.

Not that Monsieur Michel cared. His ambitions began and ended with delighting his small cadre of loyal patrons.

David was about to start his dessert — *Crêpes à la Monsieur Michel*, paper-thin pancakes in a sauce of peach compote and blue Curaçao — when a curious figure stepped inside.

It took David a moment to pinpoint what made the man seem so out of place. Of course — the outfit.

A long black raincoat and a felt hat gave him an oddly distinguished air, though the combination was laughably ill-suited to the sunny twenty-six-degree day outside.

After surveying the room with a look of approval, the man strode purposefully towards David's table.

He offered a slight, old-fashioned bow.

"Would you mind terribly if I joined you? I dislike dining alone, and you seem like excellent company."

David was mildly taken aback, though he'd experienced stranger things in life.

Eyeing the man's tall hat, he wondered — not entirely without sarcasm — if a live rabbit might make an appearance before the evening was over.

"Of course, sir. And if you are planning to dine, I can highly recommend the langoustines — wonderfully tender inside. I'd just avoid chewing the shells; a bit too crunchy for my taste."

The man laughed heartily at this.

"Forgive my lack of manners — I haven't introduced myself." A faint blush crept across his cheeks. "Henry Lasbech."

He extended his hand.

"David Jennings," David replied, giving him a firm handshake.

By now, Monsieur Michel had materialised at the table.

“I can recommend ze langoustines wiz beurre garlic,” he said, in that impeccable French-butler manner of his.

“That sounds delightful! And as for the main course — I’ll leave that entirely in your capable hands, Monsieur Michel.”

The chef agreed.

Knowing him, David thought, he’d already decided to unleash every culinary trick in his repertoire to impress this new guest.

With the grace of a stage magician exiting on a puff of smoke, Michel disappeared into the kitchen.

“So,” David asked, as Henry removed his coat and draped it neatly over the back of his chair, “where do you hail from — if you don’t mind my asking?”

Under the coat, Henry was also wearing a turtleneck and a wool blazer.

David was astonished the man wasn’t drenched in sweat and wondered if he might have some kind of built-in air-conditioning — an aristocratic heat resistance inherited along with a country estate and a two-man butler team.

Out of politeness, he kept this to himself, though the mere sight of a turtleneck in August made him want to weep.

“Where I come from, the temperatures are always tropical,” Henry announced, in the tone of a man who had just finished taming a pack of lions on his balcony.

“Ah, now you’ve made me curious. Where’s that?”

“Bombay, in India. My grandparents settled there during the British Raj.

They saw a gap in the market for British etiquette in a place where absolutely no one was asking for it.”

“Oh? And now you’ve moved back here? Or are you just visiting?”

Henry hesitated — the kind of pause that suggested he was making sure David wasn’t a journalist or a tax inspector.

“For the moment, I live here. I bought an estate just outside the city. It has a view of a golf course I never use, because I despise walking with a purpose.”

David’s curiosity was now well and truly piqued, but he kept his face neutral — the same carefully practised expression he’d used in job interviews that always ended in polite rejection.

“And what brings you to *Chez Michel* — the French culinary equivalent of a charity shop?”

“The lack of pretension, mainly. And the langoustines, of course,” Henry said, tying his napkin around his neck like a baby about to receive a five-star meal.

“But enough about me,” he went on suddenly, with a slightly theatrical flourish that wouldn’t have been out of place on an opera stage.

“What do you do for a living, David?”

“I’m a writer. Mostly columns. I’m working on a book, but it’s still in the ‘no publisher, no plan, no confidence’ stage.”

Henry looked at him with a mix of sympathy and intrigued delight.

“May I ask what it’s about?”

David shrugged.

“Mostly my own life. But I fear it’s too ordinary. No murders, no glamour. Except for that one time I accidentally ended up at a nudist campsite — but that’s a long story.”

“Every person has a story worth hearing!” Henry declared, with such sincerity that David almost hugged him — if Henry hadn’t just popped a shrimp leg into his mouth.

“Are you married?”

David nearly choked on his wine.

“Uh... no. Divorced. Recently.”

“Ha! Then we are brothers in failure! Santé!”

At that moment, Monsieur Michel appeared with a main course that could have made an entire roomful of vegans faint on sight.

“*Magret de canard à l’orange, avec pommes dauphinois et truffes*,” he announced, as if reading out the name of a French emperor.

Both David and Henry stared at the plate as if they’d just opened the Ark of the Covenant.

“Tell me, David,” Henry said, carving his duck with surgical precision, “do you enjoy white wine?”

“Eh... yes. Very much,” David replied, not entirely sure where this was heading.



But as with all conversations where a wealthy person said the words *business proposal*, he could feel his inner pauper already doing a little victory dance.

“Michel! What is the best white wine for this dish?”

“*Je preefer de fuity Chablis. ’t Will caress your tongue like a French mistress*,” Michel declared, without a hint of irony.

Henry took a sip.

His nose twitched, his lips pursed, his eyes narrowed — as if he’d just been granted a minor divine revelation.

“Perfect,” he whispered solemnly.

The glasses were filled.

David was beginning to wonder if he’d accidentally wandered onto the set of a cooking show when Henry, in an entirely casual tone, said:

“I want you to write my biography. And I will pay you — handsomely.”

David choked again.

The wine shot up through his nose.

“Me? But... why? You hardly know me!”

“Precisely!” Henry said. “You still look at the world with wonder. Cynicism kills a biography. And I have the money, but no heirs. My nephew married an influencer. That was the moment my family officially ceased to exist.”

David dabbed at his face with his napkin, all the while calculating how quickly he could borrow a laptop, get on a plane to India, and unravel this man’s life like a medieval monk with a grudge.

“Don’t say yes just yet,” Henry went on. “Think about it. But know this — I am deadly serious.”

And as if the universe felt the need to underline the gravity of the moment, the kitchen fire alarm went off right then and there.

Monsieur Michel burst out carrying a pan of flaming crêpes, shouting something about “*crêpes flambées surprise*”, pursued by a hysterical waitress wielding a fire extinguisher shaped like a champagne bottle.

David looked at Henry.

Henry looked at David.

“Well,” David said, raising his glass, “I think I’ve just started my second life.”

With the graceful determination of someone who had just found a winning scratch card but still feared the tax office, David walked back to his apartment.

His head was spinning with cognac and promise, his heart swelling with optimism.

Henry — the eccentric aristocrat with a wardrobe from 1930 and the social tact of a theatre director in crisis — had just invited him to move into his country estate.

“For the biography,” he’d said.

As if that were the most natural reason in the world to install a complete stranger with a weekly column into a villa.

David had agreed.

Of course he had.

He was a man of principle — provided those principles came with free breakfast and fresh sheets.

His apartment smelled like the inside of a forgotten lunchbox.

He looked around as if seeing it for the first time.

And perhaps he was.

Since his divorce and the ensuing financial implosion, he had barely set foot in it.

Mail was scattered across the floor like unsolicited autumn leaves, and in the fridge sat a Tupperware container holding a substance that could now legitimately claim the legal rights of an independent lifeform.

Friday morning, he woke with the weight of regret and a hangover that sounded like a brass band marching through his skull.

Cognac had seemed like an excellent idea at the time.

Cognac *always* seemed like an excellent idea — until the morning after, when your tongue feels like leather and your brain starts moving backwards.

He decided to call his ex.

A brave choice.

Every conversation with her ended with the sensation of having stepped onto a rug she then yanked out from under him with the elegance of a circus performer.

"I'm moving," he announced, trying for bravado.

She replied with something that sounded suspiciously like laughter, followed by a remark about castles in the air and professional psychiatric help.

He hung up feeling as though he'd just failed a job interview with his old school principal.

Saturday morning.

Eight a.m.

His phone buzzed like a nerve-wracking promise. Henry.

"Ready for the adventure?" came the cheerful voice.

David mumbled something vaguely affirmative as he wrestled himself out of the duvet and staggered toward the shower.

He smelled of sweat, fear, and hope.

The holy trinity of the modern man.

Exactly an hour later, a limousine pulled up outside his door.

Not just any car, but a rolling luxury boudoir with calfskin seats and more buttons than a space capsule.

The driver — who looked like he moonlighted chauffeuring the Queen to bingo on weekends — greeted him with a bow.

When they arrived at the estate, David's eyes widened.

It was a villa so ostentatious even the garden statues seemed to blush.

Henry stood on the lawn, wearing a dressing gown with a history of its own, puffing on a Havana cigar thick enough to double as central heating.

"Welcome home," he said with a grin balanced somewhere between genuine warmth and theatrical grandeur.

After a breakfast that could easily have doubled for a wedding banquet, David was released onto the grounds like a recently reintroduced pheasant.

The gardener — who looked emotionally allergic to small talk — gave him a silent nod.

The flowers seemed to give off fragrance as though they were being paid for it.

By the pool, David settled down with his laptop and began rereading what he had written so far.

He froze.

What utter rubbish.

His earlier writings had all the lightness of a book about tooth decay.

He decided to leave it at that.

It was his past.

And you simply can't paint a rainbow using only grey.

Suddenly, he heard a voice behind him—warm, feminine, and dangerously melodic.

"Good morning, you must be David?"

He turned around.

Time stood still.

Bathed in the golden morning sun stood a woman who looked as if she had just stepped out of a perfume commercial.

She introduced herself as Natascha Del Marina, and David—who could normally deliver a fifteen-minute monologue on geopolitics without blinking—managed only, "Nice nails."

She turned out to be involved in the project as well, to his surprise and mild annoyance.

"Oh," she said, "I thought I'd be providing professional support."

David felt his inner anger bubble up like milk on a stove that's too hot.

He would not be treated like an amateur.

Not today.

Not with coffee strong enough to make his hair grow.

That evening they sat at a dining table so large it probably had its own postal code.

Henry admitted he had tracked David down after reading his column.

The meeting at Chez Michel hadn't been a coincidence but a carefully staged encounter.

David felt both flattered and spied upon—like a cat that finds a mouse and decides to interview it.

The next day, the real work would begin.

But tonight, he sat with Natascha on the terrace.

Cognac in hand.

A silent respect began to form, disguised as hostility.

When she suggested she dictate and he type, he agreed—not out of weakness, but pragmatism.

His memory had the consistency of a colander.

And as the moon rose above the estate and the crickets prepared for their night concert, David knew: life was strange.

But strange with a view of a swimming pool was suddenly much better than ordinary with a view of garbage bins.

David woke as if he'd just been booted out of a coma.

It was seven in the morning — that sacred hour when normal people only wake to rip the alarm clock from the wall and fling it off the balcony.

But David was on holiday.

And nothing is quite as invigorating as waking in a villa with more rooms than the IQ of your average reality TV contestant.

With the wide-eyed wonder of an explorer stepping onto Antarctica for the first time — minus the penguins, ice, or any sense of direction — he wandered the maze of corridors.

Everywhere hung paintings of old men who looked as though they were on the brink of death, but had somehow been failing to achieve it for centuries.

Eventually — after a brief detour into a broom cupboard where he nearly formed a spiritual bond with a mop — he found the kitchen.

And there, sitting like a statue of morning misery, was Natascha.

She looked up at him as if he'd just sneezed into her breakfast.

"Well, you're an early bird," David said, with the kind of dry irony usually reserved for the funerals of people you never liked.

"That," she snapped, "we have in common," as if he'd just accused her of poisoning his goldfish.

David studied her in silence and concluded she had either been attacked by bedbugs during the night or her soul had died before sunrise.

Either way, silence seemed the safest option.

"Good morning, young ones!"

David nearly leapt into the pan cupboard.

In the doorway stood a short, rosy-cheeked woman in an apron with the aura of a post-menopausal angel.

Imelda — as Natascha introduced her, in the tone of someone presenting a prize pig at the county fair.

"She baked us these delicious croissants," Natascha said, already devouring one with the urgency of a wasp at an open jam jar.

“Oh, they’re just a few rolls,” Imelda blushed, modest as a monk in a lingerie shop.

“They’re the finest croissants I’ve ever tasted,” David said, with the charm of a man who’d realised Imelda was also the one who washed the dishes, changed the sheets, and — with his luck — assigned the bedrooms.

“Why don’t you two sit out on the terrace,” Imelda cooed, “and I’ll bring you a nice cup of coffee.”

David had never seen the terrace, but in that moment he knew he wanted to live, marry, and die there.

A little later Henry strolled in — the master of the house — with the easy gait of an aristocrat who had just remembered he’d forgotten to shave yesterday.

“I see you’ve met Imelda. She’s been with me since I got my first pimple. She’s like a mother to me!”

“How can I be your mother, Mr. Henry? I’m far younger than you!” Imelda giggled.

They laughed together in a way that suggested Imelda might know the exact wording of his will.

“This afternoon, we’ll retire to my cosy library to begin the biography,” Henry said. “I’ve cancelled all my appointments — even lunch with the mayor and his dubious wife.”

That afternoon, they gathered in the library — a room that looked as if an antique shop had exploded in a bookshop.

Henry sat in a leather armchair large enough to comfortably house a small Italian family.

He held a cigar with the confidence of a man who might once have parked a baby on it.

Natascha looked around as though she had stumbled into a treasure vault, and David had the distinct feeling the books were judging him on his reading level — which wasn’t hard, considering his favourite book to date had been a lasagne cookbook.

“Have you read all of these?!” Natascha asked, as if she wasn’t entirely convinced about the alphabet.

“Yes,” Henry replied, “in my day, we had no television, no internet, and the chief pastime was listening to your grandmother tell — for the fiftieth time — the story of how she once accidentally kidnapped a goat.”

David, meanwhile, was impressed by the shelves.