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Only In Key West  
(The Nick & Norm Gay Detective Series)

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FOR

Artists struggling to make  
their dreams a reality.

All who seek respect, equality,  
and acceptance.

My parents, Felix and Violet,  
sister, Susanna,  
and brother, Patrick.”

“We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.  
— MAYA ANGELOU”

## PROLOGUE

Since it was New Year's Day, Anna knew she could take her time, which was good because she was still getting over a bad head cold. She had been working as a cleaning lady in Key West's city hall for two years and took her job seriously. If she played her cards right, she could stay in America. Anna had her cousin, Vladimir, to thank. Otherwise, she would still be in Moscow. He had political connections and pulled some strings to get her hired. She had already learned to speak a little English but was a long way from fluent.

To help pass the time, she put on her earphones and listened to her English lessons, practicing the words. Then she stocked her cleaning trolley and pushed it down the hall to begin her work in the commissioners' area.

First, she unlocked the door of Commissioner Tom Moss's office, then grabbed the handle of the trolley, and backed her way in. She noticed the envelope on the commissioner's mahogany desk, along with a family picture right next to it. The photo had been moved from its usual spot.

Then she turned and saw Commissioner Tom Moss, hanging from the chandelier. She screamed so loud that even the roosters outside the building paused, and it took a lot to get a rooster to stop midstrut.”

# 1

## New Year's Eve

**Norm and I arrived in Key West on New Year's Eve at 2:30 p.m.** Leaving a twelve-degree, blustery Chicago and landing in a tropical climate of eighty-two degrees made me feel like I had walked into a 3-D version of *Avatar*. The sun was bright and the palm trees danced a tango rhythm to the shifting winds. I could actually smell fresh air.

As we crossed the street to catch a cab, a hen and her brood of six chicks ran ahead of us, while rooster crowed in the background, warning everyone to step aside for his family.

“What’s with the chickens?” Norm asked the cab driver.

“They’re our island treasure. Don’t hesitate to take some with you when you leave. We’ve got quite a few to spare.” Ten minutes later, he dropped us at our destination, the Hidden Sands Resort.

A picket fence surrounded the two-story, large white mansion that had wild orchids nestled in

the trees. The house had two bedrooms, one upstairs and one down, each with two beds and its own en suite bathroom, along with a half bath down the hall. We decided I would take the room on the top floor and Norm would stay downstairs, allowing us both privacy and together time if we wanted.

The house had once belonged to a prominent plastic surgeon, Dr. Harris, who left a lucrative practice in Beverly Hills to become a Parrot Head. I soon learned that every year thousands of Jimmy Buffett fans converged on the island to celebrate the artist and his songs. Dr. Harris didn't bother waiting for the convention. Instead, he spent nearly every night drinking and singing at Jimmy Buffett's bar, Margaritaville.

Since Harris's death, a few years back, his family rented out the mansion to the snowbirds who flocked to Key West for the season. The price was three thousand dollars a week. Hefty by most standards, but the City of Chicago was picking up the tab, our reward for catching The Reaper, a serial killer in Chicago. We had been given a week but decided to stay two, using some of our vacation time.

I had been to Key West before with my late partner, Darren Connor. In the fifteen years Darren and I were together, we visited Key West seven times. It was one of our favorite vacation spots. We always enjoyed watching Sho Yu's descent in the Big Red Shoe, an event as popular as New Year's Eve in Times Square, and one that attracted major TV coverage. She was one of the most renowned drag queens on the island and directed a company of girls in nightly shows at the 801 bar.

Since I had my own TV show, *The Gay Detective*, where I interviewed gay stars, I understood the power of the media. Aside from being a talk-show host, I also worked as a detective in the Chicago Police Department with my partner, Norm Malone. It was difficult to believe that in the

past year I had premiered my show, lost my lover, Darren, to a senseless murder, and caught the killer. Not only that: Norm and I nearly lost our lives capturing The Reaper.

What a year! But that was in the past. This vacation would be turning the page—even if it could never make up for the senseless deaths. Memories of former times in Key West were bittersweet.

Once we were settled into our rooms and unpacked, I told Norm about my plans to watch Sho Yu and hoped he'd join me.

“Do I have to spend my New Year's watching a drag queen waving from a red shoe?” he said. The local weeklies said they'd been told that Sho had a big surprise for everyone this year. This mildly intrigued Norm, but he wasn't completely sold on it.

“It's not just for gay people, Norm,” I said. “It's an event that everyone goes to.” The phone rang. It was Norm's daughter, Patti.

“Hi, sweetheart. Nick is trying to persuade me to go with him to see this queen named after some kind of Japanese seasoning.”

“Oh, Sho Yu! She's famous, Dad,” I heard Patti say. “Be sure to take some pictures.” The deal was done. Norm would do anything for his only daughter.

Sho was indeed famous. The son of an American soldier and a Japanese mother, Sho had lived in Japan until she was fourteen. She came to the States and over the years established herself as the most legendary drag queen in Key West. Much of this was due to the coverage of her popular New Year's Eve event, but she was also known for her kindness and for staging numerous charitable events.

**THE COUNTDOWN** began at ten seconds to midnight. I'd heard from the taxi driver that

Sho Yu planned on appearing with her partner of thirteen years, Matt, and making a big announcement once the shoe dropped.

The event had been moved from the main drag of Duval Street to the Outer Mole Pier near Fort Zachary Park to allow for more space, and the area was as packed as an overstuffed blue-cheese martini olive. It was so cramped we couldn't move an inch in any direction, but Norm and I had managed to get there early enough to get a good view. Anticipating the large crowd, the city had allowed Bourbon Street Pub to rent a crane to lower Sho, since the height would make her more visible. There was no doubt that she had staged the whole thing for maximum drama.

"You know I hate crowds," Norm said gruffly, biting his lower lip and puffing out his chest, daring me to defy him. "I'm out of here as soon as this is over and you're buying drinks, kid."

"Sure," I said. *Small price to pay*, I thought. –

**SHO, DRESSED IN A LOW-CUT** white chiffon dress, and Matt, in a black-and-gold lamé tuxedo, waved from the Big Red Shoe. It began a slow descent and then swung over the crowd. Multicolored fireworks brightened and accentuated the night's celebration. The crowd oohed and aahed as the event progressed. Everyone was waiting for Sho to formally announce her marriage to Matt. Close friends knew they had been married at city hall earlier that day.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven," the TV announcer counted. The tension rose along with the roar of

the crowd, as the huge sequined shoe descended gradually in midair.

“Six, ve, four, three, two...” A slight pause.

But then I heard the grinding sound of metal on metal and the intermittent *SCREECH* of the cable screaming its SOS. Sparks flew off the cable, causing parts of the shoe to catch re. At first it looked like a dramatic spectacle, but the line had frayed. The shoe wobbled from side to side and picked up speed in its rapid descent. Sho batted away the sparks to avoid becoming a human torch, Matt tried to protect her by covering her with his body.

Silence blanketed the crowd for a brief moment.

The winch snapped, and the shoe careened uncontrollably, jerking and twisting like a derailed roller coaster until it crashed into the branches of a tree. People screamed and pushed each other wanting to flee the area, but it was too packed. I could smell the fear of the crowd as the hysteria heightened.

Sho was thrown out of the shoe and fell into the arms of by-standers, including Norm and me. Matt, trapped inside, was not so lucky. When he finally dropped out of the huge shoe stuck in the tree, he looked like a discarded Raggedy Andy doll, his legs twisted awkwardly, with one pointed back at a nearly ninety-degree angle. He was unresponsive and had numerous cuts and gashes, a few bleeding badly. I stayed with Sho, who was dazed and mumbling something I couldn't understand, as Norm tried to clear a path to Matt.

“Police, coming through. Make way,” Norm shouted, but his voice was lost in the chaos of the crowd. Then he put his fingers in his mouth and gave a loud whistle, catching the group's attention.

Norm and I started to create a corridor for the local police force managing crowd control. They were doing everything they could to keep the event from turning into more of a disaster. I spotted a tall, handsome cop in a khaki uniform coming toward us.

“Move the crowd back. Set up a perimeter for the ambulance to get to the scene,” commanded

the large man, who seemed to be in charge. Then he turned and looked in my direction and made eye contact. In that brief moment his eyes searched my soul as if testing the waters. Then he smiled. I was embarrassed to feel a powerful shot of testosterone charge through me as intense as a Taser jolt. Then he walked over and introduced himself.

“Chief Perez,” he said, as he shook my hand with a warm but forceful grip. He held my hand for a nanosecond after shaking it.

“Nice to meet you. I’m—”

“Nick Scott, of course, the Gay Detective.”

Norm quickly came to my rescue. “Norm Malone, Nick’s partner. We came here for a little R and R—”

“And got caught up in the festivities.”

“If that’s what you call this,” Norm said.

“Only in Key West.”

“What?” Norm asked, puzzled.

“It’s what we locals say. You’ll see. After a while, you realize certain things can only happen here.”

“Nick, maybe we made the wrong choice.”

Chief Perez looked me up and down. “I don’t think so. In fact, I’m sure you didn’t.”

**WITHIN MINUTES**, we heard the sirens wailing from the re station, which was only a short distance away. Sho was trembling and still speaking incoherently as I cradled her in my arms. Her once-perfect makeup was streaked by blood trickling from the cuts she sustained. Norm joined the police in keeping the crowd of rubbernecks from pushing in for cell-phone snapshots of the

scene.

The EMTs put Sho and Matt on stretchers and hoisted them into the back of two separate ambulances. I saw a slim guy, wearing tight jeans and a rainbow-colored tutu, slip into the back of Sho's ambulance and wondered who he was. The ambulances took off as fast as they could, their sirens screaming as they raced to the Lower Keys Medical Center emergency room.

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