

# Chapter One

The old Chevy Silverado choked and rattled with every gear change. It was a wonder it was still rolling on the winding black ribbon of asphalt that was the road between Clarenville and Bonavista in the Island of Newfoundland. The approach of the evening and the light fog settling in were not helping the matter. Nor was the fact that the old pickup truck was thirsty for gasoline and the serpentine through the hilly forest were increasing the chances of running out of fuel.

The late winter afternoon was uncharacteristically dark, gloomy and cold, as unfriendly as three days before Christmas could ever be. Not a light in sight, not a star to guide the traveler, not a carol on the on-off radio reception of the damn truck. It looked like a journey to the end of the world and quite to nowhere, a scene taken from a horror movie.

The light, or rather the lack of it, made driving a big challenge even for an adventurous and tough guy like Harry Bonhomme. He was alone by choice and fate, and, on that winter day, he was wondering what to do with his life. He could not afford to look back into his past, and was not supposed to make plans for the future either. He knew his existence was to be lived in the present without much hope.

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, he was a dead man.

The miracle of still being alive was the only force that kept him going, but in which direction... he had no idea. He was living on borrowed time and did not care what tomorrow would bring. All his belongings consisted of a minimum of clothing and a few electronic gadgets he very seldom used, reminding him of who he once was, of a lifestyle left behind.

He had purchased the truck for a couple hundred dollars and had worked on it for almost two months to make it drivable. It was a project that captivated him. That broken sound of the engine when he turned it over for the first time after many days of hard work was music to his ears. It had, in fact, prompted this trip to Bonavista as a Christmas present to himself, from himself.

He had picked the town from the map at random, drawn to it by the positive-sounding Latin-originating name of the place. He thought that based on its history, something good would wait for him there. What that was, he had no idea, nor did it matter. He knew by now that the destination was not as important as the journey. He had learned that lesson in his fifty-two years of life. He learned a lot of good lessons the hard way, but nevertheless he became wiser over time.

Recent events had made him trade his wealth for his life. He was still asking himself if God had saved him only to make him return to innocence and strip him of all the glitter of gold and silver he once possessed. As a matter of fact, there were times in his past when he had longed for this kind of freedom and simple living, and it looked like he finally had gotten that wish. As his father used to say, "be careful what you wish for, 'cause you might get it one day".

Harry Bonhomme shook his head as if to send away the memory of his late father and his words of wisdom.

Of all the mistakes he'd made in his life, he only hoped that this trip to Bonavista was not yet another one. At that thought, he focused his eyes on the road, which had become more daring

and challenging. The darkness had mixed with the milky fog, and the headlights hardly revealed any visibility. He was grateful for the median white marking of the road which offered a slight guidance. The forest flanked the road and the old truck was rolling between walls of pine trees.

For the last ten kilometers he had not encountered any other car, and it looked like he was alone cutting his way through the darkness.

The radio came on again, first with static and then turning into a folkloric song with alert rhythm and funny lyrics. Harry smiled to himself and relaxed a bit. He loved that music. He had gotten used to it in the last four months. He liked the island people also: friendly and unpretentious with a gift of surviving in remote areas by themselves. They were self-sufficient, courageous, tough and tenacious, braving the weather, the ocean, and the salvaged land.

The spirit of the Newfoundlanders was contagious; they infected him with their resourcefulness and contentment. Life was laid back, and time was plentiful in that corner of North America. Nobody rushed to anything. After being used to the rat race for so many years, Harry had to learn to slow down and let the days pass by in a lazy, repetitive way.

At the beginning, in September, he really enjoyed and welcomed the change of pace. Then he began to miss waking up each morning with a purpose. The old broken truck ignited his desire to accomplish something for his own benefit, which was why he had fixed it. It took far longer than he expected to finish that job, and when everybody settled in for the winter, he decided to take off. But again, he was a man to whom adventure was the only way of feeling alive and right now he really had nothing to lose.

The music on the radio eased his concentration and blocked whatever daring thoughts would have clouded his mind. There were times in the past when Harry would look for this type of remote roads on which to test-drive his beloved Ferrari, just to feel the thrill through his veins. A far cry from the vehicle he was driving now. Simple life was a novelty to him, and he accepted it, or so he thought.

He felt quite comfortable behind the steering wheel, daydreaming of sport cars and other times, when a light appeared in the rearview mirror. First it looked faded like a ball of cotton forgotten in a cobalt bowl, but then it grew into two diffused light bulbs. There was another vehicle behind him.

‘Another lost soul! Well good luck to you too...’ Harry whispered into his short beard. He would be overtaken soon, judging by the way the headlights were growing bigger and bigger. The curvy road came to a straight stretch. The Silverado moved from the median white line gradually toward the right edge, making room for the passing. In a few seconds, a small sedan took the lead in the darkness and Harry focused on its red tail lights.

‘All right! Now I feel like Santa following Rudolph’s red nose!’ he murmured with a chuckle, and tried to keep up the speed. The other car was driving quite fast for the foggy weather condition. The driver must be one of the locals who knows these roads like the backs of their hands, Harry thought.

He soon realized that speed was not a characteristic of his truck, and the regret of not having one of his fast cars, brought a bitter taste in his mouth.

‘Hold that thought man, you are not supposed to make any comparisons, remember? Shut up and drive!’

After the next curve what he saw shook him out of his reverie. Red tail lights were dancing in the middle of the road, erratically like flickering Christmas tree lights. It seemed as if the driver had lost control of the car, or was trying to avoid something.

‘What the hell is he doing?’ Harry Bonhomme stepped on the brakes and looked in horror at the scene unfolding ahead of him.

The sedan, the same one that passed him minutes before, skidded and shrieked, the noise taking over the radio and filling the cabin with the screech of danger. Suddenly it was plowing the wet black shoulder of the road with deep tracks of uncontrolled tires, and then it was in the ditch. Silverado’s headlights revealed a huge creature planted in the middle of the road and frozen still. It was a majestic male moose with big antlers and a body that blocked more than three quarters of the road’s width.

A beautiful animal.

Deadly on impact.

Harry hit the horn a few times with full force while getting closer and closer. The worn-out tires must have lost their grip. The truck continued forward, despite Harry flooring the brakes.

‘God damned it,’ he muttered. He was getting closer and closer to the animal and could see its large-antlered head turning toward him. Its eyes sparkled.

When he thought that there was no way out of this situation other than to slam into the moose, or to avoid it and hit the other car already in the ditch, when he almost closed his eyes not to see his imminent impact, the moose leaped from the road and ran into the forest. The truck skidded sideways but remained on the asphalt and stopped twenty meters past the disabled car.

Once he regained control and pulled over, Harry jumped out and ran to check on the other driver. The Ford Focus had one of the front wheels at an odd angle, and smoke smell filled Harry’s nose. The brake pads were toasted. He didn’t know what to expect and was prepared to see the worst. He pulled the driver’s door open and saw a young man slumped over the steering wheel. No other occupants.

‘Hey man! Are you all right? Can you move? .... Talk to me!’ he almost shouted, catching his breath.

A slight movement of his torso indicated that the man was conscious, and Harry let out a sigh of relief. He touched the man’s shoulder to make his presence known. The driver raised his head, he looked no older than a teenager, and his eyes were brimmed with tears. The accident had frightened him and he was most likely still in shock.

‘Easy man, do you think you can move out of this car, or are you injured?’ Harry asked carefully.

Without warning, the young man started to hit the dashboard. Cussing and swearing filled the night, and Harry’s ears.

‘Man, take it easy! Be glad that you’re all right. The car’s only metal. It can be fixed. Let’s get out of it, and I’ll give you a lift. No need to cry over spilled milk! Come on, let’s see if you can move and walk to my truck.’ Offering his hand he continued, ‘If you ask me, you are extremely lucky that you did not collide with that monster. It would have killed you.’

Reluctantly the young man turned towards the back seat and retrieved his backpack from the floor. Then he got out of the car. He slammed the door furiously and took two shaky steps in the black mud. His equilibrium was not serving him well, and Harry had to grab his elbow to steady and sustain him.

He noticed the young man’s six foot frame, as tall as Harry himself, and even through his parka the arm felt vigorous and fit. Without further words, they walked toward the Chevy. The darkness around them was frightening and desolate.

The truck cabin welcomed them with a sad ballad playing on the radio, and warmth. Once both of the occupants were secured with the seatbelts, Harry began to drive not knowing what else to say, given that the passenger hadn't said a word to him thus far.

Maybe he was a troubled soul mad at the world and not willing to communicate, or he was drugged and pissed off, or only ashamed of the situation he had suddenly found himself in. Whatever it was, Harry knew enough to give the man time and space and to drive carefully to the end of the road, hopefully to Bonavista. He was glad there were no visible injuries. He would have been helpless in offering first aid, but he was much better at dealing with a bad mood. After all, he was relieved that the incident had no disastrous consequences for any of the parties involved, including the poor stupid animal. Even the car abandoned beside the road could be fixed once out of the mud.

The only fear Harry had at that moment was that he would run out of gas. By the look of the gauge, he needed a miracle, and was afraid he was short of one after having escaped the moose.

The night was dense with patches of fog, not offering any indication of how far the town could be. The only change in scenery was an opening in the forest which he had been driving past for miles and miles.

Indeed, without any foreseeing, the "Welcome to Bonavista" sign shone in the headlights.

'I understand that you're upset and not willing to talk, but I need to know if you live in this town and whereabouts to drop you off.'

'Just drive to the Ryan House and I'll walk from there.'

'Ryan's house? I wish I knew that guy and where his home is, but I'm not a local. I could use some guidance here.'

Suddenly, the young man began to laugh. Harry was puzzled and concerned. The erratic behavior at his expense was not welcome, but he tried to be polite.

'I'm glad you find this funny! I would laugh too, but I haven't met Ryan yet.'

'Ryan House is a historic landmark in this town and everybody in Newfoundland knows it. You must be coming from the moon. Never mind. Just drive. I'll tell you where to stop.'

Harry's bruised ego and ignorance made him clench his hand on the steering wheel, but could not make him shut-up.

'I'm not coming from the moon. Looks to me that maybe I've rather just landed on it. This town is hanging from the end of the world ready to fall off into the dark. Not a very good first impression, I must say.'

There were already houses on either side of the road and a few street lights revealed the town in the darkness. The truck's engine started to choke. Then it went silent. Harry wished he had not slapped his palm against the dashboard the same way his passenger did back in that ditch, but he was too frustrated not to.

'Any gas station around here?' he asked.

'At the other end of town,' the answer came flat, while the truck rolled slowly to a halt.

Around them silence fell. Not a soul in sight. Not a movement. The lack of lit windows made the town look deserted. His passenger was not a friendly soul, and Harry felt the hostility of the place as a cold frisson along his spine when they disembarked and started to walk along the main road. Both of them were carrying backpacks and were braving the wet, cold air. It hit Harry that as responsible as he felt to see the young man safely to his home, the task was getting on his nerves. He should have rather walked to the gas station and got his truck rolling again, than attended to a man that didn't appreciate his help.

A few hundred meters later the young man let out a moan of pain, almost tripped over a stone on the side of the road, and lost his balance. Harry grabbed him quickly, saving him from falling down. Their eyes locked for a few moments before Harry took charge of the situation and spoke firmly:

‘I’m about to run out of patience, and I’ve been told that I possess a large dose of it, but you not talking to me and being mad at God knows what, will take us nowhere. Right now I need to know where your home is. Following the accident you may be in shock, but I’m new in Bonavista and need your help. This place looks almost spooky, if you ask me. So how about you tell me your name so I can address you properly?’

‘John. John McLean.’ The young man spit out that bit of information, but nothing more.

‘Thank you John for sharing that much with me. My name is Harry Bonhomme. Now let’s go to your house.’

Without another word, John walked a step in front of Harry. It was an uneven walk, and by the way John’s shoulders caved in forward, Harry understood that he must have been tired. What John’s life was like and what family he belonged to, were questions jumping into Harry’s mind as he followed the man. The sidewalk became larger and they passed a couple of larger buildings before turning on a side street flanked by residential houses all sizes and shapes. Some were two stories high, some bungalows, but all of them seemed “closed for the winter”. Not the way he expected the “nice view” suggested by the name of the town would be. The wind intensified and a salty smell reminded Harry that somewhere close, was the Atlantic Ocean.

By the time they were frozen to the bones they arrived in front of a Victorian-looking house with a smoked light bulb hanging in the front porch. The blinds on each window concealed any trace of light.

John wiped his boots on the door mat, looked back at Harry, tilted his head signaling to him to come in, and walked through the unlocked door. Harry took a deep breath and followed him inside.