

ONE TRUE LOVE

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PROLOGUE

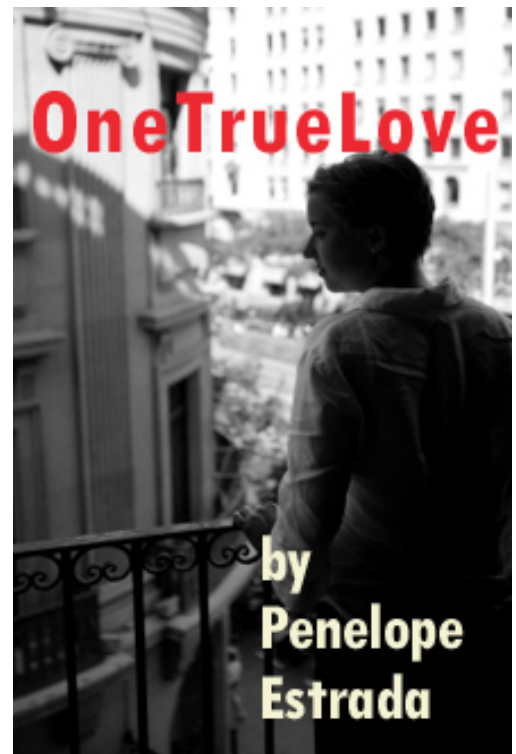
New York City, February 2006

I settled into my favorite armchair, hoping to savor a few minutes of peace before the evening news. I made myself comfortable while watching the softly falling snow through the frosted windows across from me. I had just taken a sip of red wine from my slightly overfilled glass and marveled at the lovely sight, when, suddenly, my youngest daughter, Juliet, burst into the den,

shattering my peace. One look at her face and I knew that my quiet moment had come to an abrupt end. With Juliet, everything was high drama.

She faced me in the den, her body shaking with rage and shouted, “You’re so overprotective! You never let me do anything!”

I shouldn’t have been surprised by her delayed reaction, as knowing my daughter the way I did, I had been sure that Juliet wouldn’t take the news



without an argument. After much discussion, Peter and I had decided not to allow her to go backpacking through Europe with her best friend, Angela, for the summer after graduation. My husband and I hadn't let her three older sisters travel by themselves at seventeen either, so our decision should not have been unexpected. But Juliet had always liked to push the envelope and this time was turning out to be no different. Early on, Juliet had come to the conclusion that, because she was the youngest of four children – and there were seven years between her and her older sisters – Peter and I were old and tired and less likely to fight her.

I had delivered the unhappy news when she returned home from school that afternoon. Juliet didn't say anything, had just gone into her room and sulked, but I knew she would not let me off the hook so easily. Taking one look at Juliet's face, it appeared that, less than a half hour later, her rage had boiled over.

"That's not true. We let you do lots of things," I replied, calmly taking a sip from my wineglass. "Your father and I just think you're too young to be going off with Angela, the two of you alone, especially the way things are right now in the world."

I wished Peter were there. He had a calming way about him that diffused volatile situations, especially those having to do with our daughters. He was particularly adept at managing Juliet, who had a fierce temper – and was not afraid to show it. My youngest daughter and I were so similar in that manner that it was frightening, only I had learned to control it.

Peter had left New York that morning and would be out of town the rest of the week, leaving me alone to deal with the Juliet crisis. Being away for so long was rare for Peter (he disliked working cases that required him to leave home), but, in this instance, his presence was required. As a successful attorney specializing in commercial litigation, Peter was much in demand, and extremely well paid for his efforts and expertise. I had been looking forward to spending a few solitary days catching up on chores around the apartment. However, facing our furious teenager standing a few feet away, I desperately missed my husband.

“You never let me to do anything! Nothing! I’m the only girl in my class with a midnight curfew! You’re the reason everyone thinks I’m a nerd. It’s all your fault,” Juliet went on, citing the sins Peter and I had committed against her personal freedom. From Juliet’s perspective, our rules had turned her into a social outcast, a nerdy, total loser.

I knew better than to contradict her; it was best to let Juliet blow off steam while lamenting on her sad fate in life. Her protests would be over soon, and eventually, she would come to accept our decision. I discretely picked up the remote and switched the television on mute. I was a news junkie and hoped to catch at least a part of the broadcast. I watched the news even though it usually left me upset – nothing good ever happened – or, if something good had happened, it was never reported. But, in true masochistic fashion, I continued tuning in: the twenty-four hour cable news channels only fed my addiction.

I listened to Juliet's litany of complaints for a few more minutes until I had finally heard enough about my failures as a parent and how abused she had been. She could employ a good therapist, and keep him or her on retainer for the rest of her life with all the injustices we had heaped upon her. I was willing to give my daughter an opportunity to state her opinions – I encouraged my children to speak their minds – but Juliet was being borderline disrespectful – something which I would not tolerate.

"That's enough!" I announced loudly, managing to control my temper even as I shut off the television. I wanted Juliet to know that I meant it when I said, "You are not going to Europe, and that's final."

Juliet glared at me, white anger radiating from her body. Out of all of my daughters, Juliet and I were the most alike – both physically and mentally. I sat back and watched Juliet furiously contemplate her next move, knowing that, invariably, she would choose the route that I would have taken, had I been her age. She would change directions and take a more civil route, correctly concluding that escalating the argument with me would get her nowhere.

"Mother, I realize that maybe I'm being unrealistic about going to Europe without you and Daddy," she said in a conciliatory tone. My daughter didn't fool me for a second – I knew that Juliet was a fighter – not one to give up so easily. This was just a break in the battle; a way to buy time until Peter returned home. Peter was a softer touch and Juliet would concentrate her efforts on breaking him

down. I couldn't blame her – that strategy had worked in the past. I secretly suspected that Juliet was Peter's favorite child.

I smiled, relieved that the unpleasant scene appeared to be over. "I'm pleased that you've accepted our decision," I replied, knowing she had done no such thing. "Europe will still be there when you're a little bit older." Peter could deal with her next. He was smooth enough to convince her that we were actually doing her a favor by not letting her go. He wasn't considered one of the top litigators in New York's legal circles for nothing.

Juliet walked towards the hallway door, then turned and said, "After all, why should *you* understand anything about being adventurous? When was the last time you did something fun and crazy? You're so conservative. Even when you were young, you never did anything brave, nothing daring." She began to walk out of the room with her head held high. Before she left, she couldn't resist throwing out a final zinger. "You're such a conformist, always safe." Then, Juliet stuck in the knife. "I can't believe you grew up in the sixties. What a waste!" She shook her head at the pity of it all and how pathetic my life had been.

Juliet's words hurt; especially the part about being safe. I knew she was angry, but Juliet had done everything but come straight out and call me boring. Is that how she saw me? As an old, fifty-five-year-old, married woman whose entire life consisted of pleasing her husband and daughters? Someone who never had a life, whose entire existence was defined by her family? Someone who had a respectable and boring professional life? I even owned a store that sold antiques,

for God's sake! Clearly, in Juliet's eyes, I did not know how to have fun – and, worse still, that I'd never had any. It was as if I had been born boring and middle-aged.

The thought that Juliet, my daughter, saw me this way was almost unbearable. I had to remind myself that I was not necessarily the person that Juliet thought I was, but when had I become boring, safe? Was it when I had to become a good role model for my daughters? Or, had I really made the choice to suppress my wild side? I was fifty-five years old, married thirty-five years to the same man, with four children. I wondered if I had any wildness left. Was I destined to die of boredom, or worst, would I bore others to death? And, if so, what would come first?

I needed to remind myself of who I was on the inside. And, if not who I was, then, at least, *whom I had been*. I needed to do to bring back the old Charlotte, to remind myself of the Charlotte who *had* lived, the Charlotte who had once, long ago, been daring, full of adventure.

I swallowed the rest of my wine, and quickly, before I lost my resolve, walked towards the dark red leather couch by the wall. I kicked off my shoes and stepped onto the cushions. Balancing myself against the wall and carefully, inches at a time, I unhinged the heavy oil painting from the wall. I had purchased the painting, which depicted a pastoral scene, at an auction of Latin American art at Sotheby's a decade ago, but now I cursed the weight of the heavy gold frame. I

leaned the painting against the side of the coffee table and then turned my attention to the safe.

The safe was large and primarily contained some family papers, passports, Peter's work documents and the like. However, I kept my jewelry on the top right-hand shelf – the uninsured pieces that I seldom wore. My hands shook as I twirled the black plastic dial backwards and forwards. It had been a while since I had last opened it, so I had to fiddle around with the combination. It felt like an eternity for the door to finally swing out.

I stood for a minute, not moving a muscle, just staring into the safe. Even though it was pitch black inside it, I knew exactly where to reach for the small, gray, Harry Winston box I had reverently placed years before on the back of the top shelf. My right hand shook as I took out the box. I held it out in front of me like fragile crystal, and sat cross-legged on the couch. At that point, my heart was beating so loud that I feared Juliet could hear it in the other room. I held the box in a life-or-death grip, as if someone might try to pry it from my fingers.

I couldn't for the life of me tell how much time had passed before I was able to lower my hands and place the box in the middle of my lap. I felt so paralyzed that even just doing that took a huge effort. I stayed sitting that way for a few minutes, staring at the box. My heart raced so fast that I feared I might go into cardiac arrest. But even a heart attack could not prevent me from doing what I had set out to do. I composed myself, and told myself that I had to do this

quickly. I took a deep breath and picked up the box, then took another deep breath and opened it.

The ring was nestled in rich black velvet. It was not just an ordinary ring, but a beautiful ten-carat, canary yellow diamond set on a simple platinum band. My hands stopped trembling as I tugged at the diamond wedding band from my ring finger to get it off, and placed it on the coffee table. It was the first time in thirty-five years that I had taken my wedding ring off, so no wonder it had been a struggle. I was surprised to see, not only pale white skin underneath, but also the indentation left on the flesh after all that time.

I took the diamond ring out of the box and slid it onto my ring finger, where my wedding band had been. It had been over thirty-five years since I had last worn the ring – and much to my surprise, it still fit perfectly.

If Juliet had known how I had come to acquire that ring, she would have never accused me of being conservative or boring. However, I could never tell her about that wild, crazy, passionate – ‘unsafe’ – time in my life. Even if I had, in spite of the ring as proof – she probably wouldn’t believe it.

And, had I not been wearing the ring on that early evening in February, probably neither would I.

Chapter One

JUNE, 1966

I was unprepared for the transformation that I had just undergone. I lived in New York City – not exactly a hick town – so I should have recognized earlier the magic a professional hair and make-up stylist could perform on a human being. In just a few hours I had morphed from an ordinary high school girl to the sleek, sophisticated young lady who appeared in the mirror before me. The designer dress didn't hurt either.

The change in my style wasn't as dramatic of a "before-and-after" effect as Professor Henry Higgins accomplished with Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, but, it wasn't far off. No question about it, my mother and sister deserved credit for what they had accomplished in a short period of time. They had wanted me to look special – sophisticated – for the dinner that night and, boy, had they succeeded! Unlike my classmates who had thrown blowout affairs as their coming out parties, I had never had a debutante party. This never bothered me, but I suppose it bothered Mama as she always tried to make up for it by dressing me up any chance she had.

I remained in awe, looking at myself in the long mirror at the end of the hallway. I still couldn't believe that the image reflected back was me. I felt so strange that I could dissect myself dispassionately, as if I was studying a painting

at a museum. Looking at my reflections, I could not believe that I was the same Charlotte Cruz from the morning. Mentally, I slowly and carefully retraced every long and arduous step that had been taken in order to achieve my look. The hard work of a half-dozen individuals – and a lot of cash – had clearly paid off.

My hair had been the first problem area tackled. My older sister, Marisa, had managed to wrangle an appointment to have my hair washed, styled and set at Kenneth's Salon Townhouse, the most popular hair salon in New York. And, amazingly enough, had even succeeded in getting my hair styled by the great man himself. I sat in Kenneth's chair, well aware that his hands had helped turn celebrities into superstars, society ladies into beauties, and models into icons. What was he going to do with me?

Kenneth had taken one look at me and immediately decided to pin my long, wavy black hair up into a Jackie Kennedy style French Twist. My hair often had a life of its own, so that had been quite a challenge.

As Kenneth twisted and pinned, he explained that wearing my hair up was the best way to avoid frizzing in those New York City summer nights. I had never worn my hair up and I liked the results so much that I didn't think I'd ever wear it down again. After witnessing the miracle he had performed on my wild hair, I finally understood why Kenneth's clients had such a slavish devotion to him. I fully intended to take a number and stand in line after them all.