CELEBRITY AUTOGRAPH

SHOW

from a novel in progress

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CHAPTER 20

     Niall’s reservations about the Celebrity Autograph Show grew as the day approached. Claire countered all of his reasons to withdraw with better ones to follow through. Eventually, they compromised. Niall cancelled his appearance on Saturday but agreed to fulfill his obligation on Sunday, which is how he and Claire found themselves at the Marriott Convention Center on a scorching Burbank morning.

     As instructed, they arrived an hour before the doors opened to the public. The parking lots were nearly full, so at least he and Claire weren’t the only two people there. Once inside, Niall located his assigned table, #64, on the map that all attendees received upon payment of their ten dollar admission fee.

     The surrounding tables in the brightly lit Exhibition Hall filled rapidly. Niall avoided eye contact with fellow semi-celebrities. As long as they didn’t say hello, they could pretend they weren’t here. A steady stream of whispered rumors about other scheduled signers created an undertow of apprehension. Barbara Hale, Della Street from ’57 to ’66, was a no show due to a last minute scheduling conflict.  The organizers were concerned that her replacement, F Troop’s Melody Patterson, would not generate the same enthusiasm.   Mr. Mister, a direct descendant of the terrier mix who briefly challenged Lassie’s reign as TV’s top dog, perched on an aqua satin pillow and panted in the center of the table at the end of Niall’s aisle. It was far more comfortable to focus on Mr. Mister and avoid the angst and ego issues that plagued formerly famous humans.

     Vintage memorabilia vendors manned the tables not occupied by fading stars. A woman with black lipstick and a missing front tooth stood behind unwieldy stacks of old albums. Niall spotted *Roy Orbison at the Rock House* on the Sun label and crossed the aisle to investigate. When he slid the vinyl record out of its cardboard cover to check for cuts or gouges, it smelled like Roquefort dipped in insect repellent.

     “A little mold, not a problem. A steal for a quarter,” the woman said.

     As Niall replaced it, he saw a mono copy of *ARCADE* on top of the box the woman was about to hoist to the table. What was protocol when she asked him to sign it? Did vendors sign each other’s junk for free as a professional courtesy? Did even asking this question mean he was now a professional vendor?  Apparently, that’s all Ms. Meth-mouth saw. She made no connection between the face gracing the *ARCADE* cover and the man in front of her.

     After scrubbing up, Niall returned to table 64. His chest felt tight and the rancid scent of mold returned like acid reflux. Claire didn’t smell anything and told Niall to stop being ridiculous.

     “Seriously? It doesn’t worry you when a woman who sells sixties albums for a living can’t tell me from…” his eyes landed on a middle-aged dude with a buzz cut who played bass with a hardcore LA punk band - “Brandon Cruz?”

     “Brandon Cruz is a superstar. *Everyone* knows who he is,” Claire said.  She laughed at Niall’s stricken expression and squeezed his shoulder. “Deep breaths. Help me set up here.”

     On Claire’s advice, Niall was selling something tangible with his autograph on the theory that people parted with cash more readily if they got something more than a signature.  To this end, Niall brought a Bekins box of head shots to sign and sell for $20 and two boxes of unsold *NIALL CARMICHAEL: ONE* cassettes and albums to sign for thirty dollars. The fact that albums and cassettes were obsolete was a drawback, but since the album had never been released on CD, it was not unreasonable to call it a hard-to-find collectible.

     When the doors opened, the Marriott cranked the air conditioning up to full blast but it couldn’t mask the acrid aroma of perspiration, deodorant and perfume. Niall was sweating like everyone else. What if no one approached his table? Was there anything worse than selling out and discovering he had no takers?

     The suspense ended soon. Half a dozen fans raced for table 64 and a small but steady stream kept him occupied for the next few hours. It never became a stampede, like it would have in the Dragons heyday, but he held his own, unlike several tables nearby. Niall empathized with the humiliation of celebrities without fans. He wanted to lend support but he wasn’t sure if a greeting would make them feel better or worse.

     While Niall signed albums and posed for photos, Claire collected payment, made change and issued receipts. Some fans assumed she was Mrs. Carmichael but she corrected them. “I’m just a close friend,” she said. They looked at her with envy.

     As morning became afternoon, Niall’s contact with fans grew warmer and more genuine. His admirers energized him. A gray-haired man with a face like a cartoon duck asked Niall to sign a program from the *LAIRS* tour. Niall assumed they were contemporaries or the fan was a little older. “Who should I make it out to?”

     “Brian. I can’t believe I’m really talking to you, man. That was the greatest concert ever,” Brian said.

     “Yeah? Why?” Niall tapped his pen to make the ink flow.

     “I was going with three friends, but Jeff got grounded, so we had an extra ticket. My Dad was driving us and picking us up, we were only twelve.”

     Niall took a closer look. This guy was ten years *younger*?

     “My dad didn’t know the Dragons from the 1910 Fruitgum Company but he said he’d use the ticket himself. Bummer and a half, right? What’s grosser than a rock show with *Dad*? I was wondering what lame stunt he’d pull but instead he’s totally into the music, *really* into it. He cried when you did *It Wasn’t That Way At All*. For a little while, my Dad was actually almost close to cool.”

     Niall tried to imagine his own Naval Captain father weeping over a song he’d written. Not in this lifetime. “You’re lucky. Lots of sons never connect with their dads,” he said.

     “I hardly saw him after that. He left my mom for a chick he worked with and moved to Georgia. He’s been dead eight years now. The thing I remember was how broken up he got over that song. He wasn’t much into his feelings, but leaving me and my brothers just about killed him – which was fine with me, man. Shit like that shouldn’t be easy.”

     Instead of writing the usual “*Rock on”* or *“Nothing changes,”* Niall wrote, “*Thanks for helping me hear an old song in a new way, Brian”* and signed his name.

     Brian looked disappointed. “I should’ve told you, Bryan with a *y*.”

     A woman with a platinum wedge of Dorothy Hamill hair handed Niall a Dragons lunchbox to sign. “To Judith. No, to Judy, everyone called me Judy then. *Winter Roads* saved my life.”

     “Why *Winter Roads*?” It was a bitter song of revenge, not particularly life-affirming or optimistic. Claire handed him a sharpie when his pen failed against the metal lunchbox.

     “*And I’m better off for dying then, in terms of living now,*” Judy sang, then broke off, embarrassed. “What am I, thirteen? Ignore me while I die of embarrassment.”

     “Don’t. I’m flattered you still know the words.”

     “Ohmygod, I know every word of every one of your songs.”

     “Even these?” Niall pointed at *NIALL CARMICHAEL:  ONE*.

     “Oh god, I could die of embarrassment. That was sophomore year, I was into Three Dog Night and I didn’t buy it.”

     “Neither did anyone else,” Niall said.

     “I hardly ever play Three Dog Night anymore but I play the Dragons all the time.”

     Had he sunk so low his fans felt compelled to lie to lift his confidence? “It’s okay, really,” he said.

     “In eighth grade, when I used to think my life was over – which happened pretty much every day - I’d play *Winter Roads* maybe thirty times, until I believed even if I never got what I wanted, I’d be okay. You understood me better than my family or friends. You knew things I couldn’t tell anyone else.”

     Part of Niall wanted to say, *we’re strangers, lady. Find a therapist if you can’t talk to your family or friends.* She looked at him with such gratitude it seemed cruel to snatch back the solace she thought he gave her. “Thanks,” he said. On her lunchbox he wrote, *“Judy, Winter Roads aren’t that bad. You’re not alone.”*

     Later he wondered if he was asking for trouble. Leslie always warned them not to get too close to fans. Don’t promise anything that can be converted to false hope. From disillusion, it’s easy walking distance to psychotic rage. Maybe he was naïve, but he wasn’t picking up dangerous vibes here today. The event’s ambiance was acceptance. No one was too weird or pathetic or too much of a misfit here. Come and be with family.

     If his customer lines weren’t backed up, he asked his fans if their lives today were anything close to what they imagined growing up. Invariably, the answer was no. None of them asked Niall the same question; the answer was all too apparent. In 1969 it was as inconceivable to imagine superstar Niall Carmichael in a Burbank hotel hawking his signature as Paul McCartney or Mick Jagger doing the same thing. Strangely, this didn’t dampen Niall’s pleasure when people looked at him and saw a god, the superstar he used to be.

     “I’ve got to pet that adorable Mr. Mister. Do you mind?” Claire said during a lull.

     “Go for it.”  The next time he glanced her way, she was arguing with a pudgy man wearing a Captain Kirk uniform instead of hurrying back. He didn’t like manning the table alone; he felt like the eighth grader that the other kids refused to eat with, alone at a table for twelve. He felt exactly like he imagined those pitiful washed up stars with no fans felt a few hours earlier. In the year 2000, the Flavor of the Day changed moment to moment.

     The skin at the nape of his neck prickled, due to a tiny adrenalin surge. Somebody’s eyes were on him and had been for a while. It hurt to swallow, his throat felt so dry. What was he

thinking, letting himself get dangerously dehydrated? He ducked under the table to retrieve the bottled water Claire stashed in a cooler. He wasn’t avoiding anything, he was just thirsty.

     The cooler was unexpectedly tricky to open. At most he’d been out of sight for a few minutes before Claire’s forced cough erupted behind him. When she spoke, her voice was high and tense. “Uh, Niall. You need to get up here. Now.”

     “Just a sec, I need to hydrate.” The cooler latch released and he grabbed a Crystal Geyser. When he surfaced, he saw a female hand holding a vinyl copy of the Dragons *LAIR* album.

     “Can you make it out to Rachel?”

     When he could breathe again, he raised his eyes and there she was, his former wife, now Rachel Holland, standing across table 64.  It had to be a hallucination; as reality it was inconceivable. Why would Rachel be at an autograph show? The only plausible reason was to humiliate him, to remind him how far he’d fallen.

     “Why are you here?” he said.

     “To see you.”

     In her tentative smile, Niall saw the girl he loved long ago. Her hair was the same mahogany shade with glints of gold and rust. If it was silver underneath, it didn’t show. He had to look hard to find a few lines near her eyes and the corners of her mouth.  She looked more athletic and toned than he remembered. She wore a silk turquoise short-sleeved shirt tucked into belted linen trousers and a turquoise necklace and bracelet. Niall was riveted by the wedding band and ostentatious diamond on her left hand.

     “You’ve had your laugh. Move along.”

     “Can we talk?”

     “See the line behind you?”

     “After this is over.”

     “Claire and I have plans,” Niall said.

     Claire, looking dazed, nodded confirmation.

     “Claire, I’m Niall’s ex-wife, Rachel. Would you mind giving me a few minutes after the show?” Rachel turned her eyes on Claire.  They were greener than Niall remembered; tinted contacts? Or did her turquoise shirt only make them appear greener? Her eyes killed him.

     Uncertain, Claire looked at Niall.

     “Give me one good reason,” Niall said to Rachel.

     “We might not get another chance,” she said.

     “Really? You’re playing the *what if I die tomorrow* card this early? That’s worth a few minutes of my time.”

     “I’ll meet you in the lobby.”  She turned and walked to the entrance. Niall tried not to watch.

     “They wanted twenty bucks to pet the damn dog, do you believe it?” Claire glared at Mr. Mister who panted happily.

     “You’re kidding me. Do people pay it?”

     “That mutt’s made three times what you did today and he’s probably not even a distant relation of Mr. Mister. How does his manager sleep at night?”

     Niall stopped listening and hummed a verse of *It Wasn’t that Way At All.* Two middle-aged women, wearing sweatshirts silkscreened with photos of their children, stopped to listen, turned around, and bought a CD and an autograph. Five more fans followed.

     “Rachel looked good,” Claire said when the last of them left.

     “That’s what she lived for,” Niall said.

     “What do you think she wants?”

     Niall struggled to process the question. “Nothing good.”

     Four more fans lined up as the loudspeaker declared the event officially over. As the crowd thinned, Claire and Niall boxed up the unsold albums and cassettes, photos, receipts, cash box and cooler. It had taken two of them to carry everything inside. They had moved enough merchandise for Claire to carry out what remained by herself.

     “Sure you can manage?” Niall asked the question obviously rhetorical.

     “I guess. Should I drag you away after ten or fifteen minutes?”

     “I’ll be okay,” Niall said.

     Claire didn’t hide her struggle to lug the load to the car but Niall was looking in the other direction, scanning for Rachel.

     Five minutes flew past. She didn’t appear.  Maybe his rude reception made her reconsider. Maybe she never intended to meet him and it was a Holland practical joke. Niall’s throat constricted and his heart raced. He’d wait two minutes, no more, and then he’d walk.

     As if she could hear him, Rachel emerged from the bathroom and crossed to Niall. She looked nervous, more like the insecure but ambitious girl he used to know than the sophisticated wife of a megastar she’d become.

     “There’s a coffee shop around the corner. Want to get some iced tea?” Rachel said.

     “Okay.” Niall fell into step beside her. “Does Holland know you’re here?”

     “Of course.”

     “Don’t pretend you’re too pure to sneak around behind your husband’s back.”

     “Thirty years ago. I was hoping you’d gotten past it.”

     “Past you tearing my heart out?”

     “You’re not the only one who suffered.”

     “From where I sat, you hit the trifecta. You wanted to be as famous as me, now you’re infamous. Married to a living legend, Texas rich. Hell, Dubai rich. Where’s the suffering?”

     “Is it out of your system yet? I’d like to talk about more than the past.”

     Niall opened the door to the coffee shop and a baby-faced hostess with a video game body, too many pixels concentrated in her chest, greeted them. “Two for our early bird special?”

     “Just iced tea,” Niall said. Did they look old enough for the early bird? He saw them still young, wild and passionate. The hostess snatched two menus and led them to a window booth.

     “Can we get a table with more privacy?” Rachel said.

     “Trust me, no one here knows who we are,” Niall said.

     The hostess studied them, drew a blank. “Follow me.” They trailed her to a table in back by the kitchen. “Is this okay?”

     “Fine,” Niall said. “Can we get two iced teas?”

     “I’ll ask your waitress to bring them right over.” The hostess returned to her post.

     “Is getting mobbed by screaming fans usually a problem?” Niall said.

     “Not for me. It used to be for you.”

     “Not lately.” Sitting across from her, he was leveled by a flashback of the same scene at Ben Frank’s after Patrick’s arrest. The Rachel he met in 1964 seemed to superimpose herself on the subdued woman across from him. Glimmers of the exhilaration he felt years ago stirred again.

He blinked and concentrated on the slight sag at her jawline, a hint of darkness beneath her eyes, and other alterations time and gravity had etched in her face. Neither of them spoke until a waitress delivered two iced teas garnished with less than perky lemon slices. “Can I get you anything else?” the waitress asked.

     “No, thank you,” Niall said. The waitress left. “I’ve murdered you in my dreams, you know.”

     “Then we’re even.”

     “I felt awful afterward, wracked with guilt and remorse.” He waited for her to express regret for her homicidal fantasies but she looked away.

     “It was Mark’s idea for me to come here.” Still not meeting his eyes. Playing him.

     “Well, yeah, it’s a perfect Miller moment for him. Me signing autographs while he lines up a world tour.”

     “You always assume there’s a dark ulterior motive.”

     “There always is.”

     “He’s made mistakes like everyone else, done some hurtful things he regrets. At least he can admit it. He knows he should have asked you about a reunion tour before he booked it.”

     “Holland admits he made a mistake? They’re making ice cubes in Hell.”

     “In his defense, you were quite vocal about preferring death to the Dragons.”

     “Nothing’s changed.”

     “For you, maybe. Mark’s been working with a writer on his autobiography, going over the past, evaluating his life and legacy.  It made him realize the best times were playing with you, Carl and Patrick. Maybe other guys were technically better but he never felt as pumped up and alive as he did with you.”

     Niall checked his watch. “Tick tick, honey. Too late for this bullshit. What does he want?”

     “Why do you have to make this so hard?”

     “Because you deserve nothing less.”  In his daydreams, visualizing himself like an actor in a film, making up conversations he’d like to have, he always chose the high road. Why was it so difficult now? Rachel ripped open two packets of artificial sweetener, dumped them in her iced tea and stirred. “That stuff will give you cancer,” Niall said.

     “Thanks, but I’ve weighed the risks, and I’m good with it,” she said. She looked exhausted.

     “I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Let’s start over, okay?” Maybe he could salvage this disaster.

     “You know we hired a kid to play you, right? Will Norcross.”

     “*We* hired? Are you in the band now?”

     “He’s not working out.”

     “I’m way ahead of you. Holland wants you to pimp me into coaching that kid to be me, right? Tell him forget it. Will needs to crash and burn, make an original move for once in his life.”

     “Actually, Mark wants to discuss you returning to the Dragons.”

     “Doesn’t sound like the control freak I knew.”

     “He’s not making an offer, just requesting a face to face.”

     “So he can diss me in front of the others? No thanks, I pass.”

     “He just wants to meet and talk. What else have you got going?”

     Niall threw a ten down and stood.  “It’s been real. Call me in another thirty years.”

     Rachel reached out and touched his arm and an electric current shot through him. After all these years, she could still light him up. “Stay a few more minutes,” she said.

     As much as Niall wanted to stalk out, he couldn’t. He hated her. He loved her. He wanted to hurt her. He wanted her, just wanted her, always had and always would. He felt like he was part of a surreal loop in an almost forgotten recurring dream.

     “The Rock’n’Roll Hall of Fame might induct the Dragons next year,” Rachel said.  “For sure they’re considering it. Mark wants it more than anything. He’s been inducted as a solo artist but he wants to get in with the Dragons. He thinks it’s a done deal if the original Dragons do one more tour.”

     “How come you’re talking to me instead of one of them?”

     “Mark didn’t tell Carl or Patrick he was approaching you. He didn’t want to undermine Will in case you refuse.”

     Niall laughed. “That’s the Holland I know and loathe. It takes a real megalomaniac to make partnership decisions without informing his partners.”

     “Will you think it over at least?” Rachel said.

     “Will you screw me behind his back if I do? Turnabout is fair play.”

     Rachel stood, fumbled in her purse and produced an ivory business card she placed next to Niall.  “I’ve done what he asked me to. I’m leaving now. That’s our contact information if you decide to follow up.”

     “Don’t hold your breath.” Not what he wanted to say. He couldn’t meet her eyes.

     “Suit yourself. Good luck.”

     “Same to you,” Niall said. He longed to touch her, to ask for another chance, but she’d already donned an invisible shield that wouldn’t let him near. After Rachel left, Niall finished his tea and took a couple of deep breaths to collect himself.

     When he walked outside to the parking lot, unusually humid air engulfed him, making his skin moist and sticky. Claire wasn’t waiting in his car, so he headed toward the thin strip of grass separating the sidewalk and street, assuming she sought shade there. He spotted her under an anemic palm.

     “That was a long fifteen minutes,” Claire said, standing up.

     Niall could see she had more to say; it cost effort to bottle it. “I’m sorry. Seeing Rachel after so long threw me.”

     “What did she want?”  They crossed the asphalt toward Niall’s car.

     “Holland wants to discuss me replacing Will on the Dragons tour. What a gimmick, huh? *Niall Carmichael appearing in the role he was born to play, Niall Carmichael*.” When Claire didn’t reply, Niall glanced at her. He couldn’t read her expression under the sun’s glare. “What do you think?”

     “You’re doing it, obviously.”

     “After thirty years of telling the world *over my dead body*? I’ll come off like a lying fool.”

     “No one will judge you, especially if you say you’re doing it for them, your fans, because they’ve been begging you to do it for so long. They’ll believe it because they want to.”

     “I’m not sure I can be in a room with Holland, acting like all is forgiven and we’re cool.”

     “The world’s changed; so have both of you. You’ve married, had kids, an entire lifetime - a real *life –* since then.”

     “A huge betrayal has enough after-shocks for a lifetime. What he did – “

     “*They* did.”

     “I can’t talk about this now.” They reached Niall’s car. Parked under the sun’s relentless glare, its interior was like an upholstered kiln. Niall turned on the ignition to run the air conditioner before they climbed inside so they wouldn’t emerge glazed and hard.

     “Are we still on for dinner?” Claire said.

     “Rain check? I’m wiped out and I need to process all this.”

     “No problem. Just remember, I’m here if you want to talk and I’m on your side. That’s why I just spent eight hours being your salesclerk.”

     “For which I’m incredibly grateful.” But three was a crowd and Rachel would be riding shotgun in his brain all night. There wasn’t room for Claire.

     At home, Niall replayed the way his fans looked at him, as if he was still the same superstar that he’d been thirty years ago. Why couldn’t Rachel see what they saw, why couldn’t she look at him the way she did when she loved him? Instead, she saw him more clearly than he saw himself. It had always been her gift, to see him as he was, even when he didn’t want her to.

      There were questions he wanted to ask her but never would. Are you happy? Do you ever think about me? Did you ever really love me? Why did you stop? Was there anything I could have said or done to save us? Why did you choose him instead of me?

     He tuned his first and favorite guitar, his sunburst ES-335, and played a few old Dragons songs. Eventually, a new melody and words surfaced.

*IF AND WHEN*

*If and when*

*We meet again*

*Pretend it’s for the first time*

*Act as though*

*Your life is full*

*I’ll say I’m doing fine*

*Don’t tell me you’re broken and aching*

*And I won’t show you my scars*

*Let’s act like our hearts aren’t breaking*

*Pretend we’re not who we are*

*We shared a past*

*It didn’t last*

*It happens every day*

*Love comes and goes*

*I still don’t know*

*Why it has to be that way*

*Don’t tell me that you miss me*

*I won’t beg you to return*

*No matter what, don’t kiss me*

*A spark might light and burn*

*If and when*

*We meet again*

*Say that you forgot my name*

*The past is gone*

*We both moved on*

*Things can never be the same*

*Don’t say life’s full of second acts*

*Don’t hold out hope we’ll reunite*

*It’s too late now, we can’t go back*

*But I’d sell my soul for a rewrite*

*I’d sell my soul to do it right*