



THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS

BRIAN ROUFF

“Rouff has a chance to be to Vegas what Carl Hiaasen is to Florida.”

—Tod Goldberg, author of *Gangsterland*



“The story of young love, a cross-country road trip, a haunted house, and a war with a corrupt casino owner—all captured with the depth and detail only a genuine Las Vegas insider can deliver.”

—Megan Edwards, author of *Getting off on Frank Sinatra*



“Anna Christiansen takes on City Hall in this gripping Sin City story. Her mission in *The House Always Wins* is a classic tale that’s equally suspenseful, well-written, and memorable. Author Brian Rouff keeps the pages turning as he pulls out all the stops in his latest Las Vegas novel.”

—Cathy Scott, author of *The Killing of Tupac Shakur* and *Murder of a Mafia Daughter*



“Brian Rouff has done it. Again. His ability to weave in humor, mystery, and drama with iconic Las Vegas history makes readers feel like they’ve been given a winning poker hand. *The House Always Wins* had me giggling and smiling and turning the pages as fast as I could.”

—Jami Carpenter, Executive Producer and host of Vegas PBS’ “Book Club.”



“Rouff takes fact, mixes it with a bit of fiction, and stirs it into a wonderful cocktail. It’s a terrific ride through Vegas old and new.”

—Paul Atreides, author of the “World of Deadheads” novels

“Brian Rouff’s ability to get inside his characters while examining universal truths is outstanding. *The House Always Wins* is funny, poignant, and builds a bridge between the yesterdays, todays, and tomorrows that make up our lives.

—Bob Burris, writer/producer “1000 to 1.”



“A page-turner with a humorous twist you won’t want to put down.”

—Morgan St. James, author of *A Corpse in the Soup*



“Las Vegas is a city of ghosts. Some apparitions haunt its mobbed-up past. Others seem to walk among us. Author Brian Rouff understands Las Vegas and its ghosts better than most, and it shows in his latest novel. *The House Always Wins* is entertaining and intriguing and will make a great addition to your Las Vegas bookshelf.”

—John L. Smith, author of *Of Rats and Men* and *Even a Street Dog*



“A love story. Vegas. A house with deadly secrets. Brian Rouff does it again with *The House Always Wins*.”

—Gretchen Archer, author of the *Davis Way Crime Caper Series*



“Once again, Brian Rouff has created a masterful cast of diverse characters. Readers will enjoy the wit, style, imagination, and intrigue in this unusual and compelling novel set in Las Vegas.”

—Stephen Murray, author of *Murder Aboard the Queen Elizabeth II*

THE HOUSE
ALWAYS WINS

❖ PROLOGUE ❖

Dear Auntie:

I don't even know how to begin to apologize for not writing or calling or even posting on your Facebook account these last difficult months. I'm afraid I hurt your feelings and I hope you know I never intended to.

I have no excuse except to say I didn't want to worry you. And truth be known, I was scared you'd tell my parents, not that you'd be betraying my trust, but because you'd genuinely think it was the right thing to do. And the longer I waited, the harder it got. And then I had to wait till the whole fiasco was over, so I'd know how it all ended.

Finally, here we are and I need to explain everything. But it's such a lengthy and convoluted story, with bad guys and friendly ghosts and mayhem and murder, that I knew I had to start at the beginning and tell the whole tale exactly as it happened while it was still fresh in my mind. Little did I know it would turn into

a full-blown memoir. Maybe I should have; after all, writing is what I do best.

I won't blame you if you don't read this. But I so hope you will. I know I don't have the right to ask your forgiveness. But at the very least, I need your understanding.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you more.

*Your Unworthy Niece,
Anna*

PART ONE

May

❖ CHAPTER 1 ❖

On Sunday night, I woke up once an hour to look at the clock. Funny how your brain won't let you get a good night's sleep when you have a big day in store. Of course, I finally fell into a deep slumber about 30 minutes before the alarm's piercing bleet-bleet-bleet managed to work its way into my dream, materializing as the backup signal of a giant dump truck getting ready to flatten my car. I don't even want to get into *that* symbolism.

After slamming the snooze button with enough force to make me wonder if it would ever function again, I stumbled out of bed and somehow made my way to the bathroom, where the harsh fluorescent lighting accentuated every flaw and imperfection, past, present and future. Red, puffy, too-far-apart eyes? Check. Pillow marks crisscrossing my right cheek? Check. Tiny scar on my chin from a childhood jumping-on-the-couch accident? Double check. Friends and family tell me I'm a fine-looking young woman (that's how they say it), but they don't count. I'd trade a hundred of those well-meaning comments for one "hot." Maybe in my next lifetime, I'll bargain away 20 IQ points for an extra cup size.

A steaming shower, a few drops of Visine, and some hastily applied makeup helped a little, as did the large coffee and Kind Bar I grabbed at the Stop 'n' Go. On the five-minute drive to work, I practiced my speech for the hundredth time.

"Mr. Knudsen, I've been with the paper almost

two years now ...”

The first of my second thoughts. He knew how long I’d worked for the *Scandia Gazette*. Or did he? Couldn’t hurt to remind him. The opening stayed. But what was the proper grammar? “Almost” or “nearly?” I’d check my *AP Stylebook* when I got there.

“I’m a good reporter. You said so yourself at my review.” A review that lasted all of five minutes and resulted in a \$25-a-month raise, which enabled me to add the Kind Bar to my morning routine on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

In my mind’s eye, I could see Mr. Knudsen glance at his watch impatiently.

Okay, time to speed things along. “Please don’t make me cover another butter-sculpting contest or town-hall meeting.”

Ick. That sounded needy. Mr. Knudsen didn’t respond well to needy.

“Isn’t it time you put me on a real story?”

Dummy, don’t make it a question. Too easy to say “no.”

How about this? “I deserve to work on a real story.”

On cue, a scene from my father’s favorite movie flashed into view. Clint Eastwood telling the bad guy, “Deserve’s got nothin’ to do with it.” Right before shooting him square between the eyes.

Now what? I thought of something yesterday. Why didn’t I jot it down? Maybe I wasn’t such a good reporter after all.

These unproductive thoughts swirled around my head like angry hornets as the car pulled into

the parking lot. My car did that a lot—operate on automatic pilot. Darn it, I wasn't ready.

"Hey, Anna," Barbara, our receptionist, said cheerily as I walked through the front door. "Mr. Knudsen's ready for you."

No time to settle in, check the *Stylebook*, or even refill my coffee. I swallowed hard, not an easy thing to do when your mouth is dry as a sand dune. "Thanks," squeaked out a thin voice that sounded nothing like me.

Before I could announce my presence, Mr. Knudsen motioned me in without looking up from his paper. He maintained an open-door policy at all times, although most people never took advantage of it, because that meant having to actually talk to him. He was a gruff old guy with a shock of white hair that was always the same length. How he pulled that off I'll never know. The office, piled high with old newspapers and older bread crumbs, smelled like dust and cigarettes, a holdover from the days when you could smoke indoors. I sat in the one metal chair fronting an ancient desk and smoothed my skirt, trying to look professional. When he spoke, I could hardly hear the words, because of the pulse thrumming in my ears. Whatever I'd practiced went out the window in that instant.

"How old are you these days?" he asked, peering at me from under his glasses.

The question caught me off guard and I had to think for a moment. "Twenty-four. Almost twenty-five. A quarter of a century." It sounded old to me, because it was the oldest I'd ever been.

He tore his gaze away from the printout, moved

his glasses to the top of his head, and fixed me with an appraising stare. “When you get to be my age, you’ll start subtracting years instead of adding them.”

I smiled weakly, not knowing what to say.

Clearing his throat, he continued, “So Jeremy’s out sick, some kind of stomach bug, and Carol had to go to Lansing on a family emergency. Not life or death, I’m told, but we’re shorthanded nonetheless. I know you’re tired of all this county-fair and obituary crap and I’ve got nobody to cover tonight’s concert at the Royal. A band called the Dickweeds. Supposedly making a name for themselves out west, though with a name like that, I wonder how. Ever hear of ‘em?”

My heart gave a little flutter. They were on my Spotify rotation, a retro alt country blues band with a small horn section. “Yes, sir.”

“In my day, all the groups had normal names. Grateful Dead, Pink Floyd, Lynyrd Skynyrd. Anyway, I need a review, plus a profile of the lead singer. Twelve-hundred words give or take, on my desk Wednesday morning. I’ll run it front page of the Living section, above the fold. The ad department wants younger demos? I’ll give ‘em younger demos. Interested?”

By way of response, I jumped up, leaned across the desk, and kissed Mr. Knudsen on the cheek. He didn’t look shocked exactly, but close for a man with only two expressions—gruff and gruffer.

“Can’t you read the sign?” he asked, regaining his composure and pointing to a yellowing hand-lettered poster on the wall. “Do Not Touch the Editor.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.” My face felt like a furnace. I backed out of the room and right into a filing cabinet. It made a loud thump. “Thank you for the opportunity, sir.”

“Don’t let me down,” he said.

A small voice told me I already had.

❖ CHAPTER 2 ❖

Scandia, Michigan, is a city of 12,000 or so residents situated halfway between Charlevoix and Traverse City on the shores of Lake Michigan in the northern part of the state. We're not Yoopers, as residents of the Upper Peninsula (U.P., get it?) are often called, but we share a similar dialect and sensibility. Visitors sometimes make fun of our town, because they think we're named after an amusement park, but the name was ours first.

I'd lived here my whole life, which was why I didn't pay much attention to my surroundings as I traveled between points A and B. (In a town this size, that was about all the points we had.) This proved especially true that night as I steered my Ford Focus, which I bought with my own money (mostly), toward the Royal Theater on Main Street and my first plum reporting assignment.

I squeezed into a really tight spot that might or might not have been a parking space just around the block from the theater and headed toward the Royal, camera bag slung low over my shoulder (I was doing double-duty as the photographer). The Royal, a historic white-brick three-story structure patterned after a Renaissance Danish castle, replete with domes and turrets and a little Dutch-style windmill in front that looked completely out of place, was built in 1927 when Scandia's fishing industry was booming. It survived the Depression, made a comeback after the war, enjoyed its hey-

day in the '50s and '60s, and closed for repairs in 1974. It didn't reopen until three years ago, when a smattering of federal stimulus money trickled our way and put our dormant construction industry back to work, at least temporarily.

Since then, the Royal had been home to performers as diverse as Garrison Keillor, the Fab Faux, the Missoula Children's Theater, local old-time favorite Mitch Ryder, the Fly-Fishing Film Tour, and a host of political types running for office. And of course, tonight's headliners, the Dickweeds. Scandia didn't normally attract up-and-coming bands like this and I was determined to find out why they chose to grace our stage at all.

Assuming I could get in. To my dismay, the line stretched all the way to the end of the block. Mr. Knudsen said my ticket would be waiting at Will Call, but the Royal didn't have a separate Will Call window, so I had to wait with the rest of the patrons. I looked around for a familiar face, but didn't see one, an oddity in a town our size. What I did notice was I seemed to be the oldest person present. Apparently, I was pushing the upper limit of the Dickweed demographic.

After a half-hour, I finally found myself at the box-office window, where a moon-faced girl with a bored expression took way too long inspecting my ID before saying, "You're not on the list."

I felt my chest tighten. "Th-th-that's impossible," I said. "Please check again. It's important."

She gave the paper a quick once-over. "Sorry, no Anna Christiansen. Next!"

The kid behind me began to nudge me out of the way.

“Wait! I’ll pay. How much?”

“Twenty-two fifty. Cash or debit?”

Hands shaking, I fumbled through my purse, extracting a ten, a five, three ones, and some assorted change that just didn’t add up. And my debit card was nowhere in sight.

“Next!” the girl said again. I wanted to reach through the window and punch her in her chipmunk cheeks.

“Come on, lady, move it,” said the kid behind me, who was now slouching next to me. I wanted to hit him, too.

“Okay, okay, do you have SRO tickets?” Desperate now, picturing my whole journalistic career going down in flames.

“SRO?”

“Standing room only.” I crossed my fingers and prayed.

“Well, we do, way in the back of the balcony. But you won’t be able to see anything.”

“I don’t care. How much?”

“Twelve fifty.”

I pushed the change her way. A nickel fell on the sidewalk and the kid stooped to pick it up and hand it to me. Maybe I wouldn’t smack him after all.

The girl continued, “But you have to sign this waiver. No refunds under any circumstances.”

She thrust the form in my direction and I dashed off a hasty scrawl that looked an awful lot like “Screw You.”

Clutching my ticket like a precious stone, I entered the ornate lobby and headed toward the stairway leading to the balcony. Already, I could hear the sounds of the opening number, a mid-tempo blues rocker I recognized, "I'm Sick of Me." I knew just how they felt.