



BRYAN T. CLARK

ANCIENT HOUSE OF CARDS



Ancient House of Cards

A Voyage for Unconditional Love

Written by Bryan T. Clark

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Ancient House of Cards: A Voyage for Unconditional Love

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Dedication

This book would not have been possible without the love of reading instilled in me by my mother. As a small child, being driven downtown to the library once a week was not a requirement, but an adventure. My fondness for reading and the ability to imagine a world beyond the boundaries of an African American child growing up in a small suburban neighborhood arose from those Saturday mornings spent in the library.

Likewise, I could never have completed this book without the loving support of my beautiful husband Lil B, who read every draft and offered fresh insight and valuable criticism. Although I tell you how much I love you every day, you couldn't possibly know just how much that is.

Two souls, who mean the world to me, I dedicate this to you.

The Dilemma

Good or evil
Right or wrong

Some call it a moral compass
That whispers in your ear
The fork in the road

It's there, within us

It's that moral dilemma
That causes us this agony

Chapter One

Ian Stephens slammed his cell phone against the living room wall in his apartment and watched it shatter as he vowed never to speak to Julian again. His head was spinning, and his hands were shaking beyond his control. He was tired of hurting, feeling used, and working so hard to keep a doomed relationship from ultimate failure. He and Julian had been together almost four years, most of which had been troubled by infidelity, mental abuse, and heartache.

As he pieced his phone back together, he dialed the number to his closest childhood friend, Niles. They had been friends since the eighth grade when Niles' family had moved to the tiny town of Morris, Colorado. Even as children, Niles and his family had always been there for him, and at times he wished he had been born into their family instead of his own.

"We're done! This time it's really over!" Ian cried to Niles over the phone. "The bastard is actually throwing me out. He wants me out before he gets home tonight."

Niles listened quietly on the other end of the phone as Ian tearfully related the fight they had earlier.

"So where is he?" Niles interjected.

"I don't know. He hasn't been home in three days, probably over at that Goddamn Alton's house!" Ian cried.

Their conversation was punctuated with periodic silence on the line, while Ian cried and Niles bit his tongue about how he really felt. This was not the first time Ian had called him crying about Julian. Everyone but Ian knew that their relationship had been over for months if not the entire past year. He knew Ian didn't really want to hear the truth; he just wanted to be the victim.

Niles sighed into the receiver. “Now don’t hate on Alton. He’s not the ass here; it’s that piece of shit of a boyfriend of yours. I actually feel sorry for Alton. Let Julian go. Pack your bags and come stay over here. My apartment is plenty big enough for both of us. We can get the rest of your stuff later.” Niles had made this offer to Ian a hundred times over the last two years and knew this time was not going to be any different.

Ian wept, “No! I want to see him. I am going to wait for him. I want to confront him about sleeping with Alton.”

“Why!” Niles screamed. “You already know they’re fucking! Why bother? He is either going to lie to you or admit it, and you don’t want to hear the truth. Do you?”

Ian knew that Niles was right. It really was over. It had actually been over four months ago. Ian couldn’t remember the last time they had sex, ate a meal together, or did anything as a couple. His heart was broken as he swallowed hard, attempting to hold back the tears that were welling up in his eyes. He knew deep inside it wasn’t going to get better. It was over, just as Niles had said.

Trying everything not to start crying again, Ian asked, “Do you have any wine there?”

“Yes,” Niles softly replied.

“Okay, I’ll be there in about an hour.”

“I know you,” Niles quickly shot back. “Don’t stall trying to wait for him to show up. Just get over here,” Niles sternly told him before hanging up.

After a hot shower, Ian felt like his heart was no longer going to explode out of his chest and he was no longer on the verge of crying. He was surprised to find that he actually wanted to be out of the house before Julian arrived like Niles suggested. Ian had been in denial for so long about his relationship with Julian that he hadn’t seen it for what it really was—and that was over.

Ian stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror blow drying his sandy brown hair as he looked at his reflection. He hated what he saw: Though he was five-ten and a hundred and sixty pounds, he felt out of shape. His skin was pale, and his grey eyes were now sunken with permanent dark circles under them from years of stress. Subconsciously, he had stopped caring long ago about how he looked and jeans and a black tee shirt had replaced any fashion he ever had. At twenty-seven years old, he was starting to have a sense that his life was never going to be anything but turmoil and conflict.

Why had he put up with Julian as long as he had? Certainly Julian had made it clear a long time ago that he didn't love him anymore. If Ian were honest with himself, he probably didn't love Julian anymore either. So what was it that kept him from leaving? It was a question he probably couldn't answer without years of counseling.

Ian had painstakingly packed a small suitcase full of socks, underwear, his tee shirts, and a couple pairs of jeans. That was all he needed—or so he thought before glancing at his nightstand and catching sight of a picture of the two of them last year in the Florida Keys. *God was that a fun, quick, three-day trip*, he thought.

Ian looked around the bedroom. Everything in it reminded him of his failed relationship—the comforter Julian had bought that he had never liked but lied and said he loved it, the old box TV that sat on the edge of the dresser that they found at a yard sale. He looked at the five or six different colognes sitting next to the TV; each and every scent was Julian—Polo, Calvin Klein, Versace, Dolce & Gabbana. Even the crap Stetson that he had been wearing four years ago when they met was still there. All that was in this room, he now hated as it all led back to the person who had broken his heart.

Ian was set to leave the apartment when he thought about leaving a note. His heart told him there was wasn't anything left to say. His heart pounded as he grabbed his suitcase and backpack and slowly made his way toward the door. Ian stood at the door trembling, wondering if he should leave the key in the glass bowl on top of the hallway table where they always dropped their keys when they came in.

It's my key to my apartment, Ian reasoned as he closed his fist around the key. Ian knew if he left the key, it meant he wasn't coming back.

Ian closed and locked the door, shoving the key down into his jeans as he walked toward his nine-year-old black Chevy Tahoe that he had received on graduation night.

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Within minutes, Ian had pulled underneath the carport, parking his truck next to the motorcycle Niles had purchased just a month ago. Niles was there waiting for him, and Ian was proud of himself for not breaking down from the warm embrace he received from his best friend. After dropping his bags by the front door, Ian walked into the kitchen and opened a bottle of chardonnay that he had given Niles for his birthday. Ian fought back the tears as Niles stared at him while he poured the wine.

Ian could feel Niles eyes locked onto him and knew he was about to speak. "So, are you really okay with this, or are you trying to convince yourself you're okay with it?"

"No, Niles, I am done. I am not going to cry over that asshole. I really don't care anymore!" Pausing for a minute, Ian took a sip of his wine. "When I stopped and really thought about it, I knew you were right. Why would I want to be with him if he didn't want me? I could never trust him. Alton can have him."

Ian took another drink, this time swallowing about half of the wine in his glass as he leaned back onto the old barstool in the dark and tiny two-bedroom apartment. Ian repeated what he had just said in his head as he turned and looked into the living room. He watched as Niles walked in and sat on his couch stroking his grey cat, Mr. French.

Ian released a heavy sigh as he watched Mr. French purring. *If only humans could love as animals do*, he thought. He couldn't think of one person in his life that loved him as much as Mr. French loved Niles.

Silence reigned as Ian sat thinking that never in a million years would he ever have thought he would've found himself in a relationship where he was being mind-fucked so bad that he actually stopped living for himself, devoting everything to keeping Julian in his life. It made him sick to see that he had become so like his mother. He had witnessed his mother and father's horrible marriage that lasted until the day his dad dropped dead at work of a massive heart attack.

In twenty-seven years, Ian had already reached the place it had taken his mother fifty years to get to. Tired and withdrawn from life, Ian was alone except for his mother and Niles. They were the only two people in his life that really existed outside of Julian these days. He remembered, as a child, hating his mother for staying with his dad. He had thought of her as weak for not leaving his father. Now, he too was in a relationship very similar to his own parents.

He had always imagined himself stronger, more enlightened, but there he sat in Niles's kitchen, brokenhearted over a man who didn't love him and had abused and isolated him from everything.

When Ian looked at the screen on his cell phone checking to see if Julian had called and he somehow missed it, he saw that his phone was about to die. Then he realized he had left his

charger at the apartment. “We’ll see how long Julian can keep that apartment without me. I hope Alton has a job. What do you know about Alton?” Ian asked Niles.

Ian glanced up and saw that Niles looked perturbed over his question. “Nothing. I know a girl named Caroline who works with him down at the bank. I think he is actually her supervisor, but other than that, nothing.”

Ian chuckled again. “Well, at least he has access to money. He will need it.”

“You know, Ian, you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need to. I have plenty of room, and with our schedules, we would never see each other anyways,” Niles suggested.

Ian took another sip of his wine and was pleased at what he tasted. He picked up the bottle to look at the label. “Thanks, I just might take you up on it—at least for a little while, until I can figure things out,” Ian responded.

Ian picked up his glass and finally moved into the living room. The day had been long for him, and he was tired, his face drawn. “This is not me. This is not what I want in life. I need to get back to real photography, be outdoors, and work on some of my projects that I have wanted to do for a while. Stop settling for the money and take some real pictures again. I miss photography.”

As the words came of Ian’s lips, he remembered the fun he used to have in high school learning about photography as well as a course he took in college. He had dreams once upon a time of tracking through the Himalayas with some expedition group, of being the official photographer capturing it all. His days were now spent in a studio, one portrait sitting after the next—that was what paid the bills.

Taking a seat next to Niles on the old, blue couch that sat against the wall, Ian decided to take the focus off him and his failed relationship by asking, “So are you seeing anyone?”

“No, not really. I’ve had a couple of dates with this guy named Najeeb, but I get the feeling he is not really into me.”

“Is he hairy?” Ian interjected. “Where was he born?”

“I know what you’re thinking. What, just because his name is Middle Eastern, he has to be from Iran? He was born in Turkey, but he speaks perfect English like you and I. As far as hairy, I haven’t got that far yet,” Niles sadly admitted.

Niles checked his watch. Ian knew Niles worked nights as a stocker at the local grocery store and he had to leave soon.

Niles stood up. “Okay, I have to get ready for work. Are you staying up? There are clean sheets on the bed in the other bedroom. You and Mr. French enjoy each other. FYI, he’s a cat. He doesn’t give a damn that you’re sad, but he will want you to feed him in the morning. Make yourself at home and get some sleep.”

Before Niles walked away, he kissed Ian on the forehead and then proceeded into the bathroom.

“Good night,” Ian said as he checked his phone hoping it had not died on him.

Listening to the shower running and Niles moving about in the bathroom, Ian sat on the couch thinking about his life. His thoughts returned to five years ago, when he went away to the University of Denver. The plan was Niles was going to move to Denver during Ian’s sophomore year, but they never got that chance.

During Ian’s first year in college, his parents unexpectedly discovered that he was gay and his father not only cut him financially off, but refused him back in the house when he returned to Morris. Ian was forced to go to work, so as an art major, he got a job in Morris working at the only portrait studio assisting the photographer at Bird’s Eyes Studio’s.

Now as a professional photographer himself, Ian shot fewer and fewer of the pictures he desired and more of the quick, easy money portrait sittings of babies, families, and people's pets. He had come to hate portrait sittings. His days were filled with trying to make ugly dogs cute and crying babies adorable. It never had been what he wanted to do, but it paid well.

Last year, when his father passed away, Ian had inherited two hundred thousand dollars, enough money to purchase the business as well as the building in downtown Morris.

Now stuck in the sleepy town of Morris, which combined with smaller towns around it, made up a total population of about thirty thousand, he thought he was content. Morris, only thirty minutes outside of Vail and 180 miles west of Denver, was once known for its cattle ranches and farming. It was also where Ian was born. Morris' location on the Colorado River offered great fishing as well as white water rafting, so tourism became the town's bread and butter. The surrounding mountain terrain was rich with natural history and scenic beauty, offering deciduous patches of forest, hiking trails, and canyons. The actual town itself was quite charming with Main Street mimicking the little town of Mayberry.

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The next morning, when Ian awoke and came out of the spare bedroom, the apartment was quiet. It had been a rough night for him as he had lain awake most of the night thinking of Julian. He saw that Niles was already home and that his bedroom door was closed. As he walked through the living room and into the tiny u-shaped kitchen, Ian saw Mr. French sleeping on his usual end of the couch.

Ian checked his phone again as he waited for the coffee to brew enough for his first cup. He couldn't believe that Julian hadn't texted or left any messages. He thought about calling the house, but he stopped himself.

What's the point?

Sipping on his coffee, Ian knew he had drunk too much last night. He had a horrible headache; with only an hour or so to pull it together before his first client, he had to get going. His schedule was light today, two babies in the morning and nothing again until five-thirty. A light schedule would not ordinarily be a welcome sight, but today he relished in the thought of not seeing a ton of people, pretending to be bubbly and attempting to create a happy experience for them.

Before jumping into the shower, he glanced at his phone, again feeling a sense of rejection as there were no calls or messages from Julian. Holding the phone, he thought about calling his mother and checking in with her, but he dismissed the idea. He knew he had very little battery left—and a part of him was still hoping Julian would call him. Ian decided that he would call his mother from the studio and ask her out to lunch due to his light schedule.

For the most part, his mother grated on his nerves. Opinionated and passive aggressive, she made it well known that she did not agree with her son's '*lifestyle*' or '*choice*' as she put it. Yet Ian tried to make it a point to have lunch with her at least once a week after his father's fatal heart attack last year. He chose lunch dates for many reasons. He could check in with her and see how she was doing—but, by doing lunch, he could escape after an hour or so without her being hurt.

When he arrived at his studio, he turned on the heat to start warming up the old brick building as he went through the mail that had collected over the last several days. He had been so consumed with Julian over the last week that he had neglected most of the business outside of the actual portrait sittings.

Ian was aware that he had to pull it together, concentrate more on his business and his mother, and be a better friend to Niles. He often felt guilty that Niles let him off the hook for his many faults. He thought of Niles as the brother he never had.

When the phone rang, Ian grabbed it before it could ring a second time. “Birds Eye Studio, this is Ian!” he cheerfully announced, actually hoping it was Julian.

The voice on the other end asked, “I was looking for someone that could photograph a dog wedding.”

“Ma’am, did you say a dog wedding?” Ian repeated.

“Yes, I know it’s silly, but my Muffin is marrying the neighbor dog, Benny. They met at the dog park. It would be this Saturday if you’re available.”

Ian knew this was an all-time low. Even if he needed the money, as a photographer, he wouldn’t photograph a dog wedding. “I’m so sorry, ma’am, but I am all booked for this Saturday. I’m sorry that I can’t help you. Good luck,” he told her as he hung up the phone, drained by the caller, now vowing to let the machine pick it up the rest of the day. He hated that the only real reason he picked up the phone so fast was in hopes that it was Julian. It was a hold on him that he wasn’t even aware of most of the time.

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Over lunch, Ian and his mother laughed about the call. “Really, a dog wedding? Some people have way too much money for their own good,” Lucille said.

Ian’s mother, Lucille Stephens, was in her early fifties but appeared older. She was a heavysset woman and had been all her life. She shopped only clearance and wore an outfit because it was cheap, not because she had any liking for it. Wrinkles had appeared around her jowls and neck many years ago, probably from the stress of her marriage. Ian hated her hair, and

he often asked her to let him color it. The simple woman that she was, she always refused him and preferred to keep it dishwater grey and cut short down to the nape of her neck.

“So, what is going on with you, darling?” she asked. “You look tired. Are you not sleeping well?”

“I am sleeping fine mom, Julian and I broke up. I moved out last night. I am staying with Niles for a couple of days until I can figure something out.” He could tell from her pinched lips that she didn’t want to hear any talk of his relationship with another man, but she had brought it up. “I guess he is seeing someone else. I’m done this time. I really am.”

His mother had looked away, not acknowledging what he had just told her. Without looking up, Lucille stated, “Not sure if you heard or not, but our new priest starts this week. We will meet him this Sunday. You should come meet him. It’s been awhile since you escorted me to service.”

Ian knew from a lifetime of experience that this was what she mastered, the ability to move right over a statement or question as if she had never even heard it. Between the time his parents found out he was gay and his father dying, Ian rarely talked to her, feeling as if she chose her miserable husband over her own son. “No, Mom, I’m good. Maybe some other time,” he said.

The tension of what had been said—and what hadn’t been said—hung in the air. Clearly seeing that she was hurt, he now felt guilty about reacting to her as the two continued eating the remainder of their lunch in silence.

Chapter Two

Father Sebastian Morales unpacked the last box of books on the shelf in his new office. His new space was small, just enough to fit a chair and desk with two other chairs in front of his desk. A small bookshelf was under the only window in the office, and the walls—at one time an antique white—had turned to a dirty light yellow. The current priest, Father Joseph, had the identical office setup next door. Their offices opened to a larger room where a couple of the nuns and volunteers worked, taking phone calls, welcoming visitors, and building the church's Sacred Heart Newsletter.

Father Morales stood there for a moment looking at the name plate on his desk: Father Sebastian Morales. *It has a nice ring to it*, he thought as he repeated it a couple of times. Although a very small parish, Church of the Sacred Heart had a congregation of just over two hundred. Architecturally, it was the most beautiful church this side of Vail Mountain. The congregation was mostly comprised of the elderly who were dying quicker than new members were coming in. At this rate, the church would run out of members long before it ran out of money.

Father Morales knew that part of the reason the Bishop recruited him for this particular parish was his age. He was by far one of the youngest priests coming out of seminary; at the young age of thirty, he had been ordained within six months of graduating. He was thought of as sharp and bold, and the Bishop thought he could bring in new life to a declining membership.

Father Joseph had been at Sacred Heart almost twenty years. For a priest doing four services a week, home and hospital visits, and keeping up with the business of the church, it was clear he needed help as he grew older and slowed down.

The church had little to no outreach programs aimed at the kids and young adults in the community. In the past, it was automatic that, as kids grew up, they went on to have their own family, but continued to stay a part of the church. This was clearly not happening anymore, so Father Morales had been called, and he welcomed the challenge of rebuilding the faith within the parish and the community of Morris.

“Come in,” Father Morales called out in response to the knock on his door.

A nun entered the room with a weary smile. “Good Morning, Father Morales. I am so glad to meet you, and we were all very excited when we heard you were coming to us. I am Sister Mary Elizabeth. I am in charge of the church newsletter as well as our ‘Shut-In’ program. Sister Mary Kathryn and I are usually here by nine or so.”

Sister Mary Elizabeth was old and feeble with a face that was as wrinkled as a cotton shirt. In her long, white robe and habit, she walked very slow, barely lifting her blocky black shoes off the ground as she made her way to a vacant chair.

“Good morning, Sister. It is so good to meet you as well. Have you seen Father Joseph this morning? I know he told me on the phone the other day that he was going to be out of town until sometime this morning. I look forward to meeting him as well. By the look of the rectory, he is a very organized man. That place is spotless. I felt a little guilty for how I left it this morning.”

Sister Mary Elizabeth laughed as she responded, “Father Joseph has been in Denver the last couple of days at an interfaith conference. He should be arriving this afternoon. I see that you found your office already.”

“Yes, the groundskeeper let me in this morning. His name was William, right?” Father Morales asked as he watched her slowly take a seat in the green vinyl-backed chair in front of his desk.

Sister Mary Elizabeth answered him. Although it was inaudible, the nod she gave indicated he was correct.

Once Father Morales realized she was not going to speak, he cleared his throat before buying another couple of seconds to think of what to say to her. “When I arrived last night, he was in the parking lot. He said that he was expecting me and got me settled into the rectory.”

The sister stared at Father Morales for a second or two before speaking, “Father Joseph has had that rectory all to himself for the last twenty years. I am sure it will be quite the change for him to have such a young person living with him.” Again, Sister Mary Elizabeth held the conversation hostage for several seconds by appearing as if she was going to continue. After almost a minute of complete silence, her voice cracked, “Well, I just wanted to introduce myself. I have work that I must get to.” Staring into her glazed eyes prior to dropping her head, Sebastian could feel nothing but passion and sincerity coming from her. Based on his experience he knew there were only two kinds of nuns, the Mother Teresa and the Fire Breathing I’m Coming For You Nuns, who to this day scared him.

Sister Mary Elizabeth slowly stood up. Once balanced on her feet, she began to walk toward the door. Father Morales watched as her small frame moved across the room and out the door. He liked her and couldn’t wait to learn her story.

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Father Morales had always known he was going to be a priest, and his moment was now. Because he was born and raised in Spain, his choice of profession was met with great joy from

his family. It was something to be very proud of, to have a priest in the family. Growing up, this seemed like a natural fit for him, as he spent all of his waking hours in the church in his village.

He had been the best altar boy the church had seen in years. When he wasn't in the sanctuary, cleaning, polishing, and setting up the altar for service, he was in the kitchen with the nuns helping to prepare meals for the shut-ins that lived in remote locations outside of the village. Some days he rode on his bicycle for hours to deliver food to the elderly.

Father Morales was so busy between his studies, church, and family that he hadn't had time for a girlfriend, even if he had those desires. The thought never occurred to him that he was missing out on something until high school when Grace asked him to the freshman dance. He knew Grace from the neighborhood and had grown up with her and her family. Grace lived with her grandparents next to the church. She was a loud girl who always knew everybody's business. When Sebastian told his buddy Ricardo that Grace had asked him to go with her, Ricardo laughed at him.

"Are you really surprised she asked you, Sebastian? She has only been trying to get your attention since sixth grade. I heard she is a good kisser," Ricardo replied.

That was when it hit Sebastian that he wasn't just asked to a dance by Grace, but there were expectations that came along with it. Pressures he had never experienced before that moment.

Although he didn't know what it was at the time... that was the first time he felt anxiety over anything in his life. By that Friday, he was so sick that he was vomiting and couldn't go to the dance. Although his mother didn't understand it either, she was relieved that he was missing the dance as well. The last thing Roccio Morales wanted was a girl distracting her son away from the thought of becoming a priest.

After that close call, Father Morales became better at avoiding situations that could lead to any sort of an attraction by the opposite sex—and suppressing the feeling associated with not wanting to reciprocate.

It wasn't until college, his sophomore year at Saint Peters University in Barcelona, that he realized why he had no attraction toward the female gender. Late one evening, he had walked into the communal showers; he was tired and just wanted to go to bed after washing away the grime from a day spent working in the gardens.

Standing under one of the ten showerheads along the wall, Sebastian stood facing the tile, allowing the hot water to run down his neck and back, completely lost in his own thoughts. He hadn't notice Dane, a fellow student, had come in with his shower kit, and was positioned across from him. He didn't know Dane that well, other than that he was a guy who lived on the same floor as him. From time to time, they saw each other and Dane always made it a point to smile and say hi. He was a small guy who looked as if he was fourteen rather than someone who would be in college. He was that person in school that didn't fit the Christian stereotype; he was funny, wild, and charismatic. His M-O was “shock and awe,” all about the reaction he received from his audience.

At first, Sebastian didn't see him come in until he heard the shower turn on behind him. As Sebastian turned around, he was in shock. Dane's penis hung between his legs—and to Sebastian's surprise, he found it to be captivating.

Until that moment, Sebastian had never looked at the human penis as a sexual object, but there it was, swaying back and forth as Dane showered. When Dane noticed that Sebastian was paying attention to it, he slowly started washing all around it as he lifted it up and washed his

balls and thighs. As Dane's penis began to respond to his own touch, he smiled at Sebastian as he grabbed his bar of soap and began stroking himself gently.

The foam increased between Dane's fingers, and Sebastian watched motionless, frozen in disbelief as he stood under a rain of water until he heard another voice, "Oh, excuse me. I'm sorry."

When Sebastian looked over, he saw someone backing out of the shower and quickly exiting the bathroom. Sebastian then realized his own penis was standing fully erect while he watched Dane stroking himself.

Sebastian panicked as he grabbed his towel and ran out of the shower. After locking himself in his room, he leaned up against the door, trying to catch his breath. Although mortified, he wasn't even sure what had just happened, but he fell to his knees and asked for forgiveness.