



ADAM CARPENTER

Passion In
PARIS

ra^venous
romance

Passion in Paris

Book One of the European Flings Trilogy

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication

by

Adam Carpenter

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www.ravenousromance.com

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE

Could it really be that easy, falling in love?

Seat 34D, right across the aisle.

Definitely sexy, seemingly rich, classically handsome, and that was just on the surface.

Matthew Donovan warned himself not to get ahead of himself, to not be...well, himself. At age thirty-six, he had a tendency to over think, or more appropriately, over-love. Pre-love, if such a notion was possible. It was a quality that had served him well in the non-profit sector, his ability to effuse over topics that others might have thought mundane. His enthusiasm spilled over to others, oftentimes bringing with them checks for large amounts to whatever charity Matt was peddling. After all, either in business or in life, you think with your brain and you love with your heart, and for a pie-in-the-sky dreamer like Matt, he always thought love was right around the corner. Or in this case, right across the aisle.

They had already met, at the bar while waiting for their flights to be called. Matt nursing a Grey Goose martini (his favorite), while the man in the finely tailored blazer sipped a refreshing white wine. He was tan, his fingers long and empty—meaning, no wedding band and no pale strip of skin where one should have been. Which could mean he's either single or one of those perennial cheaters who knows his way around an airport lounge—or maybe, just maybe, he was gay. Easily forty, his dark hair going to gray at the temples, he had crinkles at his eyes that Matt found oddly sexy.

“Where are you flying to?” the man had asked upon noticing Matt.

Matt of course had already scoped him out, sitting just two bar stools away. Terminal 8 at JFK was busy at eight o'clock at night, international flights scheduled throughout the evening hours for arrival in Europe the next morning. Matt's flight was at ten minutes after ten, and he'd left plenty of time to get through the increasingly difficult security checkpoint. Which now allowed him the chance to relax with a cool drink. The handsome man to his right had settled in moments after he had.

"Paris," Matt announced.

The man nodded. "Coincidence. Me, too. Flight 28?"

"Yeah, I think that's it."

Setting down his white wine, he extended his hand over the bar. "Name's Colton."

"Matt."

"Business or pleasure?"

What was Matt supposed to say? Not sure, it's complicated...see, I'm planning to fall in love, what category does that fall under? Truth be told, with the sky blue hue of this guy's eyes gazing right at him, Matt kind of thought it was already happening. "See a friend I haven't seen in a while."

"Great time of year to see Paris. You been before?"

"Long time ago. High school exchange program."

"Can't be that long ago. What are you, twenty-eight, twenty-nine?"

Smooth talker, this one. "Thirty-six."

"You look great for your age."

"Oh, uh, thanks."

"Girlfriend?"

“Uh, no.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Uh...”

“Sorry, too personal?”

“No, I don’t care. I don’t hide. I’m proud...it’s just, no, no boyfriend at the moment.”

“Shame,” Colton said ambiguously.

What was a shame?

“What kind of business are you in?”

“Non-profit. Especially now.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m a fund-raiser and a grant-writer by trade, but cutbacks at the agency I worked for left me suddenly trying to raise my own funds. Using my long-held savings for this trip. Once I get back, time to ramp up the job search.”

“Sorry. Tough world out there right now.”

“How about you?”

Just then the man’s cell phone went off and he held up a hand, indicating he had to take the call. And that was the end of that conversation, the man busied himself with his call for the next fifteen minutes, speaking quietly into the mouthpiece but gesturing strongly with his free hand. Matt had the impression that this man, whatever his business, usually got what he wanted. Ordering another martini, Matt satisfied himself by people watching, the bustling throngs of society passing him by, suitcases trailing after them like needy, unwieldy children. Everyone racing somewhere, few taking the time to actually enjoy the precious few pleasures of travel. Of course, not everyone was fortunate enough to be headed to Paris for a summer-long excursion of

love, romance, and self-discovery. Such was Matt's life at the moment, and he sighed contentedly over the adventure that awaited him a continent away.

As he sipped mindlessly on his drink, he felt a gentle pat on his back.

"So, Matt, see you on board."

"Sure, Colton."

The man smiled at him, his hand lingering just a bit too long on his back. He rubbed it before removing the warm touch, before he himself took off into the anonymity of the bustling terminal. Matt stared after him, sneaking a peek at a nice, tight ass, wondering if Colton might give him a glance back. But no, a man who exuded such confidence didn't need a second look. He'd already made his impression, made up his mind. God, Matt wondered, was that a come on, or was the handsome Colton just an overly friendly guy? And what had Matt really learned about the man during their short dialogue? As far as Matt could remember, he'd answered most of Colton's questions without getting off many of his own.

Matt held onto his fantasy throughout the arduous boarding process, waving across the aisle to Colton as they each settled into their seats and feeling ridiculous when he realized what a nerdy move that was. Colton had the aisle on one side, Matt on the other. Empty seats next to them, three additional seats in the middle section taken by parents with their young child. Still, a second coincidence like this—not only on the same flight but also with seats nearby—maybe there was something in the stars directing them toward each other?

This is stupid. What, you think once we're airborne, Colton will excuse himself to go to the loo, giving Matt the fast come-on, join me, let's spread our wings while we fly. Matt wasn't accustomed to traveling overseas. Is this how people passed the time, by screwing each other in those tiny bathrooms? Mile high club, indeed, and not something Matt saw himself ever joining.

He didn't have the guts to go through with it. Sex was fine, nothing wrong with that. But even if he was given the opportunity to suck on Colton's cock, wasn't that getting off on the wrong...er, appendage? En route to the most romantic city in the world, how did a quick, dirty blow job enhance his trip?

Matt stole a look over at a focused Colton, who was busy placing earbuds into his ears, toggling now with his black-tinted iPod. Zoning out for the long flight, something Matt too should be considering. He fumbled in his carry-on for his new Kindle, looking over his book selections and thinking—given that his current state was horny, one of Ryan Field's cleverly titled erotic novels wasn't the right choice. He tossed the Kindle into the pocket in front of him, stole one more look at Colton's enticing profile, and then closed his eyes.

To think, a mere eight hours from now, he'd be landing in Paris.

The entire trip had come about so quickly, so unexpectedly.

His friend Jake Westbury had started all this crazy talk about finding true love, starting with his dreams of spending a summer in Europe. He, their mutual friend Freddie Markson, and Jake were pals for over ten years, and in that time none had really been in what could be called a serious relationship. Matt had come the closest, living with a guy for a year before it blew up in his face. The three friends tended to hang out together, and as such, men tended to stay clear of them at the bars. One of them alone, an easy pick-up. Two of them drinking together, might be a date, boyfriends. The three of them? An intimidating pack, not one to infiltrate. Which would explain why they were all still single. With Jake headed to find true love in London and Freddie impulsively choosing Rome, they had both stared at Matt that night at the bar, waiting for him to take this daring leap of faith. Fine, Paris it is, he'd said. If a hopeless romantic like Matthew Donovan couldn't find love in the most romantic of cities, then there was no hope for any of

them.

Matt, actually, was the first of his friends to leave on his adventure. Since he was not currently employed, there was little keeping him in New York, and so he'd booked a flight for Paris the Tuesday before Memorial Day. The flights were cheaper, the plane emptier. And quite frankly, the sooner he got onboard the plane the less likely he was to change his mind about this foolish venture. Come on, three months in Paris. It was pure fantasy.

Fantasy was Matt's comfort zone, and Paris the only international city he'd ever visited. A good combination. Twenty years ago when he was in his final year of high school, an exchange program sent an impressionable, seventeen-year-old Matthew Donovan to the city of lights, his only companion a fellow student named Sally Richelieu. Bye-bye Peoria, Illinois and hello Paris, France. Peoria, you couldn't get more corn fed than that. He was more than happy to escape the heartland for the bustling wide sidewalks of Paris. Yup, even back then Matthew Donovan lived with his head in the clouds.

When the airplane rushed down the runway and shot into the sky, Matt opened his eyes and realized he'd dozed off during the security features demonstration. He'd actually downed a third martini before boarding, so perhaps he was feeling their woozy effects. He gazed out his window, watching as the streaked highways of Queens faded away with the plane's increasing altitude. Soon they broke through the clouds, encased in a cocoon of night, hurtling their way toward the light of a new day, a mere four thousand miles away.

It was about two hours into the flight when Matt noticed out of the corner of his eye Colton rising from his seat to stretch. They'd already dined, a glass of wine had eaten away at Matt's tolerance, and most of the other passengers had dozed off or were busy watching a movie. Thankfully the child in the middle seat was completely zonked out. Matt's eyes briefly

connected with Colton's. The man stretched again, his hands massaging his own neck. He smiled once at Matt, and then he headed down the narrow aisle.

And this time, he did look back. Right at Matt.

No way.

No fucking way.

Maybe it because he was still horny, maybe because he was slightly tipsy, or maybe because love and sex and romance and Paris were all ingredients that made up this recipe for passion, but Matt found himself rising from his seat and following down on the parallel aisle. As he reached the back of the plane, he saw Colton slip into the narrow space of the bathroom, closing the door but not locking it. Sneaking a peek around, Matt realized no one was paying any attention to them. Most people in the rear of the plane were sleeping, and the flight attendants were toward the mid-section of the cabin. The engines were loud back here, you could barely hear anything else. His heart beating, fearing he'd be caught, Matt almost turned back, and then suddenly he took his chance. He entered the bathroom and quickly slid the lock across. He and Colton were alone, and in very tight quarters. How the hell were they supposed to do anything? Matt felt like his arms were confined to his sides.

Colton wasted little time, pressing his lips against Matt's. He tasted like wine, sweet and intoxicating. Matt's mind swirled, his knees going weak. As Colton continued to kiss him, Matt reached for the buttons of the man's shirt. His chest was covered with a thick brown pelt. Matt slide his fingers through the coarse hair. This guy, he was all man.

"Pretty sexy," Matt said between kisses.

Tracing fingers down the furry trail, Matt reached a tight bulge inside the man's jeans, the hungry cock pushing against the fabric, desperate to be released. Matt obliged, somehow

finding space in the confined bathroom to bend down. On his knees, he pulled the pants down, exposing hairy legs. Colton's eager cock popped up; he hadn't been wearing anything between pants and skin. Hmm, nice, he thought, dessert. As Matt went to take the cock inside his mouth, the plane hit a rough patch of air and he missed.

"Sorry," he said with a laugh.

"It happens."

The phrase caught Matt off-guard. "You've done this before?"

"Hell, yeah. Best feeling in the world, shooting a load at thirty-five thousand feet."

"Never experienced it."

Colton just grinned as he said, "You will."

Okay, Matt's cock jerked inside his pants. He'd begun to fear this erotic encounter might be a one-sided affair. A quick blow on his part, a quick orgasm on Colton's part, and then it was back to their respective seats to watch separate movies, enjoy different drinks, live distant lives. With renewed enthusiasm, Matt took hold of the cock with his hand, steadying both him and his prey.

"There you go..."

Matt's soft lips took their first taste of him, his tongue slipping out to run along the reddened tip. Encircling it, he then licked underneath, at the shaft, at tightened balls. At last he engulfed the entire cock into him, sliding its length to the point where the man's generous patch of pubes tickled at his nose. Matt's mouth slid back, then forward again, and before long he was sucking hard, the gentle waves of the aircraft offering silent music in their dirty dance. Matt cupped his hand around the man's ass, discovering a fine coating of hair on his cheeks.

"Mmmm," Matt said unintelligently, sucking harder, taking more of the shaft deep inside

him.

Above him, Colton's hand held his head, directing each suck, each pull and push.

"Yeah, keep it going, I'm getting close..."

Matt redoubled his efforts, saliva slipping from his mouth, lubricating every motion. He felt light-headed, maybe all the drink was getting to him. Or perhaps they were sucking all the oxygen out of the air in this tiny space. Wasn't that supposed to create a headier orgasm?

"Oh yeah..." came the sound of Colton's grumbling, baritone voice, louder than Matt thought it should have been. What if someone was waiting to use the bathroom, what if someone could hear them and was calling for a flight attendant? He expected a banging on the door any second. Why the hell was he thinking such thoughts when this hot guy was getting ready to unload...? The thrill of being discovered had him leaking pre-cum.

And that's when Colton's cock exploded. Matt kept the cock locked inside his mouth, drinking down every drop, feeling the gush as it slid, slipped and suckled down into his gullet. His mouth still wrapped firmly around the pulsing cock, he felt Colton's knees buckle under the weight of his powerful release, no doubt surprised that Matt hadn't pulled out.

"Oh man, you..."

Still on his knees, Matt gazed up, the man's hairy chest casting a fuzzy vision of his new lover. "My specialty, my vice. Guys who pull out at the moment of climax, they just don't know what they're missing. Me, I love that first hot spurt, the way it sizzles against the back of my throat."

"Yeah, you surprised me. You look like such a good guy...you know, regular."

Matt stood, planting a kiss on the man's mouth. "If I was so, uh, regular, what made you think I'd follow you here? That I'd actually go through with it."

“The way you stared after me when I left the bar. I left you wanting more.”

“You...staged that?”

“I saw your carry-on bag first, you gotta be careful what you leave out in the open. Your boarding pass was sticking out, so I already knew you were on the same flight. Seat 34A.” He flashed his attractive smile.

“What are you, some kind of detective?”

“Lawyer.”

“Huh, a lawyer,” Matt said, amused, suddenly staring down at the jeans crumpled around Colton’s ankles. “Without briefs.”

Colton laughed. “Cute and funny, I like that. I like you a lot, Matt.”

“Yeah, thanks. You’re...”

“So, Matt, your turn?”

He visibly gulped, he couldn’t help it. Was this guy now going to give him a blow job to remember? “Uh, yeah, if you want...”

“No, no. Not that way. You know what I like?”

“Not at all.”

Matt watched as Colton withdrew from the pocket of his shirt two small items. A travel size packet of lube, and the unmistakable shape of a condom wrapper. Matt’s eyes widened with definite surprise; was this guy really expecting to fuck him? I mean, a quick blow job was one thing, but for a full round of intercourse, right here in this tiny bathroom, on this airplane, with all these people just on the other side of this cheap, plastic door? But what happened next caught Matt even more by surprise. Colton flipped him the condom while he busily lubed his own ass.

No way.

No fucking way.

Matt realized he was repeating himself, but come on...

Even if he couldn't wrap his mind around such an idea, his cock was way ahead of him. And seemingly, unsurprisingly, very much in control. Feeling his booze-infused daze, Matt found himself unzipping his jeans, ripping open the condom wrapper with his teeth before rolling it down over his hardened cock. Colton had already turned around, but in the mirror Matt could see the wanting expression on his face. Matt positioned himself behind him, fingers pushing at the hairy opening. Colton's hand came around to help, taking hold of Matt's cock.

"Go ahead, trust me, I'm good for it."

Matt began to eagerly push. At last his head pierced Colton's ass, and his cock easily slid in. The mirror acting as a third party, Matt watched Colton's changing expressions as he pushed in deeper, fully.

"You okay."

"Totally. Man, you feel great, nice cock, perfect...size."

Matt needed no further encouragement than that. His hands gripping Colton's shoulders, he pushed, pushed again, his cock getting comfortable against the tight walls of his sweet ass. A growing passion seemingly took control, time slipping away. Matt plunged, he thrust, and here in the friendly skies he fucked this sexy, hairy beast with all his might, his breath coming in short, quick bursts, the man in the mirror encouraging him to pound harder, harder. Matt's body banged against him, his arms coming around the front, fingers grabbing at the thick tufts of Colton's impressive chest. God, that fur felt great, sending fine tingles from his fingertips down to his toes. A powerful urge rushed through his body, building, building...

"Keep it in, don't pull out," Colton said, "I need to feel you when you..."

“Ahhaaa,” Matt said, his body jerking once, twice, as orgasm ripped through his cock, his legs, his entire being quivering over the fierce eruption. Breathing heavily, Matt’s cock remained buried inside him, waiting until every last convulsion waned. “Oh, wow, oh, wow. Even with an orgasm like that, I think I’m gonna stay hard for a while. What you had me do, that was so unexpected.”

“What—you expected me to be the dominant one?”

“Well, yeah.”

Matt felt their heated moment was nearing its end, and so he withdrew, stuffing his semi-hard cock back inside his briefs, zipping up quickly afterwards. When Matt looked back up, Colton was completely put back together, too, pants up, shirt buttoned, tousled hair back in place. Yup, moment definitely over.

“Give it a minute before you leave, okay? I’ll tell the flight attendant you weren’t feeling well, might have been the chicken.”

“I had the pasta.”

Colton tossed him a look. “Sure, whatever. Just...stay here. I’ll see you later, ok? But thanks, Matt. That was one of the best fucks I’ve ever had up in the sky. And trust me, I’ve had more than my share.”

“Yeah, so I’m getting that impression.”

“Aw, come on. We’re both grown-ups. No sense in making more of this than it was.”

That might have been the end, except Colton did give him a farewell kiss, pressing his body tight against him, his hand touching the outline of his cock. As sweet as the gesture was, it felt a bit empty, tasted a little bitter. As Colton slipped away, Matt looked at himself in the mirror, feeling slightly ridiculous. Had this really happened? Had he, just minutes ago, been

fucking the brains out of a guy he'd just met at the airport bar? It all seemed unreal, except for a sudden sharp cut he felt against his thigh. He reached down, and that's when he discovered the business card stuffed inside his briefs.

COLTON ABBOTT. INTERNATIONAL LAW.

Followed by a mobile number and an email address.

There was some handwriting on the back.

"Thanks," the writing said. "Perhaps we'll meet again."

Matt was tempted to tear the card up and dispose of it along with the empty lube and condom packets. But while those went into the trash bin, Matt stuffed the business card into his back pocket. Not that he expected to need the services of someone who specialized in international law, hurtling his way toward France as he was, but who knew what awaited him once he landed. It was always good to have a lawyer's ass in your back pocket.

When Matt returned, safely and undetected, to his seat in row 34, he noticed across the aisle that a woman was seated in the row Colton had once occupied. And he was nowhere to be seen. Okay, that was strange. It was almost as if he hadn't really existed, that Matt's encounter with the sexy lawyer had been pure fabrication. No one would believe it anyway, not Jake, not Freddie. Christ, out of the three of them, the last one who'd be expected to join the mile high club would have been Matt. He was too straight-laced for such a gay fantasy.

He settled back into his seat, sleep over-taking him.

Okay, he'd had his little fling. Got the adventure out of his system.

Next stop, Paris.

Time to truly—head over heels, ridiculously and unequivocally—fall in love.

CHAPTER TWO

“Matt! Over here!”

He heard the accented, affected voice, his eyes searching the assembled crowd inside the terminal of Charles de Gaulle airport but coming up empty. Trouble was, too many flights had landed around the same time in the morning and too many people, visitors and citizens alike, had endured slow-moving, endless lines through immigration control. Once Matt stepped to the official behind the plexi-glass booth, he was questioned about the reason for his trip, the official digging in his heels when Matt mistakenly announced he was staying within their precious borders for three months. He was advised, sternly, by the mustachioed officer, that any longer than that he would face deportation and not be allowed back to France for a period of five years.

“I know, I know. *Merci monsieur...*”

God his accent needed work. He barely remembered any French from his exchange program years ago, his language teacher would be so disappointed. But, hey, it's not like he got much chance to practice his French, even fancy bistros in Manhattan had menus written in English. Kind of took the “inter” out of “national.” Still, he'd worry about that another day, at least for now he was cleared of any entry complications, the official stamping his passport angrily, that mustache of his twitching with reticence as he did so. Guess the governments of France and the United States still harbored ill feelings toward each other.

At last Matt made his way down the escalator, following the dual-language signs toward baggage claim. His bags were already doing the circular dance on the carousel, and he grabbed

them with more force than he intended, nearly toppling over as he did so. Surveying the baggage area, Matt wondered what had happened to the elusive Colton Abbott. Since their mile-high membership cards had been stamped he'd seen neither hide nor hair of the man. Matt had made an attempt to find him, walking the length of economy class for his airborne lover and coming up empty. A curtain—and an intimidating flight attendant—had kept him from surveying the lay of the land in first class, but even still, why would a man sit in the confined space of economy if he really had a seat up front? Had it all just been a way to ingratiate himself with Matt? Clearly a seasoned traveler, Matt must have been his fuck-buddy of choice for the long flight.

Great, half a day into his new adventure to Paris, and already he'd been sexually taken advantage of. Didn't bode well for the coming weeks, did it? Matt had to remind himself not to be so trusting. Men were scum, right? Yeah, even when they were sexy scum. Those were his thoughts as he dragged his bags into the main terminal, the sound of his name being screamed out above everyone else's bringing him back to today, to now. To his newfound life in Paris.

"I'm over here, Matty. *Mon dieu!* To your left."

Matt turned around at the second cry of her voice. Over the heads of several Frenchmen—some of them wearing colorful berets and holding written signs for travelers they were supposed to pick up—Matt suddenly saw a pair of arms waving in the distance.

"Sally!" he exclaimed.

The group of people waiting at arrivals parted like the Red Sea, creating a narrow path for, what was assumed, the two lovers to meet, reconnect, embrace, leap into one's arms and be twirled around for all to see, all to applaud. What actually happened had everyone disappointed, because finally Matt and his so-named friend Sally connected, and yes, they did kiss, cheek to cheek, and embrace, tightly and spectacularly, but what followed was totally off script.

“Call my Sally once more and I snip your balls!”

“Bitch.”

“Whore.”

“Slut.”

“...okay, I’m out of insults,” Matt said.

“God, it’s gonna be a long summer.”

“Bitch.”

“We did that already.”

Despite their foul banter, the two once-upon-a-time friends hugged again, and the woman who went by the name Sally even though she didn’t like it, broke the embrace and pushed him back, assessing the man before her.

Matthew Donovan. Thirty-six, six feet tall, with wavy dark blonde hair, he was as cute now as he’d been back in high school. He’d been as gay as they come without acknowledging it back then, made even more obvious the one time Sally had kissed him and gotten back nothing but a request for what brand of lip gloss she used. Ah, that was then, this was now. “Of course, look at you, all grown up now, I think you can even maybe shave now,” she said. “God, Matty, you remember how gawky you were, tripping over your feet all the time, like the rest of your body hadn’t yet caught up to the growth spurt your legs had gone through? That one night I had to pick you up out of the snow because you’d tripped over those oversize feet of yours...”

“Uh, I think it had nothing to do with my feet and everything to do with the vodka you’d helped to pour down my throat.”

“Yeah, fun times. I’ve got some vodka in my purse, for old-times sake. But of course, I always have a bottle in my purse, you never know when you’re gonna need to call in for some

liquid reinforcements.”

“Hey, Sal, thanks, but I think I had enough on the plane.”

“Ooh ooh, I smell more than vodka...I smell a story, and it better be juicy. Do tell. Oh, and for the last time, call me any derivative of Sally and I swear...”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll grind my nuts into a peanut Thai sauce. Got it. So...*Simone*...”

“That’s much better,” she said, slapping him hard on the sleeve. “Come on, let’s get out of this terminally boring terminal and you can tell me all about the hot, wild sex you had on the plane. Was he yum? Young, old, rich, poor, big...?”

“No wonder you go by the name Simone. You’re like a drag queen without the penis.”

She laughed. “Good one, I like that.”

Matt, bags in tow, followed quickly behind the fast-paced, reinvented Simone Richelieu, who brought them out into the bright sunshine of a Paris morning. Matt stopped.

“What now?”

“Nothing. Geez, just give me a chance to breath in a little of the French air.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Matty, if we’re gonna hang this summer, you need to lose that word pronto. That geez crap sounds positively mid-western. You want to live in the cornfields, I’m sure there’s a flight leaving in a matter of minutes. Better to crash than to land. You want to smell the fruit of the vine, then stay with me. You are in *vin*-central.”

Paris and its lush surroundings, Simone and her over-the-top gesticulations, this was all something Matt was going to have to get accustomed to. But hey, this was only the first day...really, only the first hour; he had plenty of time to get acclimated. He’d get used to her forthright nature in no time.

They settled inside her tiny Renault, cruising out of the parking lot, and headed south

toward Paris's Right Bank, when Simone snuck a curious peak at her friend. Matt felt the heat of her gaze, threatening to melt him faster than the French sunshine.

"We've got miles to go before we hit your hotel. So tell me, was he good?"

Matt sighed. How after twenty years could she still read him like a book? Still, he started his story off the way he knew she would expect.

"God, Simone, you're such a bitch."

* * *

The grandly appointed Hotel du Louvre was expensive but so what, Matt wasn't all that concerned about money this summer and, truth be told, he liked its convenient location. It would do for a couple of weeks until he was able to secure more permanent temporary lodging, hopefully an apartment overlooking the Seine. At the farthest edge of the Avenue de la Opera, the hotel was centrally located near the world famous museum, as well as several exclusive shopping streets, and, as Simone said, "one of the best crepe carts in all of Paris." They were inside his room on the third floor, an open, floor-length window allowing them access to a small balcony. Simone was out there now with a cigarette between two carefully manicured fingers, tendrils of smoke adding a cloudy haze to the bright blue Parisian sky.

"But, darling, don't stay here too long," she called out. "It's a nice place, but over-priced and definitely on the wrong bank. The Left Bank, that's where all the action is. My apartment, my design firm—I rarely come over this way, and when I do...well, I hide behind sunglasses."

Matt, busy unpacking, laughed. "Simone, something tells me you hide behind sunglasses all the time, probably even when you're sleeping."

“Depends what he looks like,” she said, wandering back into the room as she twirled her tongue.

“God, what’s happened to that pudgy little girl from Peoria?”

Indeed, what had happened to the one-time Sally Richelieu? Standing before him there was no sign of the slightly overweight girl with blonde pigtails and freckles, instead transformed into a woman of angles. Her face, body, legs, all angular curves. Her hair was a black bob with no trace of her former color, and on her body was a form-fitting dress, also black.

“You wear a lot of black.”

“Obsidian,” she insisted.

“And the name? Simone?”

“My parents were absolute fools, Matt. For Christ’s sake, who names their child Sally? What, am I supposed to be Charlie Brown’s little sister, all pathetic? Pull the football away just as he’s about to kick it...”

“Uh, that’s Lucy...”

She ignored the correction. “Don’t you think Simone is far more sophisticated, and...well, just better?”

“Fits your last name at least.”

“Exactly. Simone Richelieu. It has panache.” She paused, checking her watch. “Honey, it’s closing in on noon, so if you want to grab a bite to eat or a quickie drink, we’ll have to do it soon. I’ve got an appointment at two that I absolutely mustn’t miss.”

“It’s okay, I’ll be fine...”

“Nonsense. I need to eat.”

He took in her ridiculously slim frame. “Really?”

“Matt, don’t you know the old myth—French women don’t get fat.”

“You’re not French.”

“A technicality. Oh, and if you ever say such a thing in public, I’ll...”

“Make mince meat of my balls?”

She purred like a cat that had trapped a playful mouse. “Exactly. And from what you’ve told me about your trip, your balls are the last thing you need handicapped. You’re going to need them and that thing that’s attached to them.”

Matt laughed. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

As they departed the Hotel du Louvre, Simone took the lead, guiding them across the wide expanse of the avenue, watching for traffic turning off several off side roads. There was a *creperie* on the far corner, and Simone directed him to a seat at the outdoor café on the Rue St. Honore, taking up a seat beside him. This was French style, allowing both of them a view of the street and all its trappings. Matt stretched his legs, trying to push the lingering jet lag from his system and enjoy the fact that he was here, truly, really, in Paris, sitting at a café with the only person he knew in the entire city. Orders placed, they had beverages set before them—a café au lait for him, red wine for Simone—before Simone turned to him and asked him what was really going on.

He’d already told her about Jake and Freddie, how he had been coerced into signing onto their flights of fancy. One summer, each of them choosing a European capital, the goal to find the one great love of their life. “Paris was a natural choice for me, the most romantic city in the world...”

“And you, the world’s most hopeless—and helpless—romantic. What a combination.”

Matt drank his coffee, wishing he’d gone for something stronger. Oh well, there would be

plenty of opportunities for drinks of a more adult nature.

“So, how it’s going so far?”

“What?”

“Your search for Mr. Right.”

“Oh. Well, considering I just arrived...”

“Come on, the guy from the plane, do tell. I made a smart remark about sex on the plane and you turned eight shades of crimson. And trust me, I’m a designer, I know from degrees. And I’m a strong-willed, very sexual woman, I can smell coitus anywhere.”

“Coitus?”

“Is French, no?”

“God, three months of this,” he said, joking. He leaned in, not wanting the people sitting on either side of them to hear. Simone leaned in, where she informed him no one cared what he had to say, even if they understood his English. “And even if they do, they’re not about to admit it. This is Paris, dear, lighten up. Spill. I believe I asked if he was young or old, rich or poor, well...”

“Yeah, yeah, okay, fine. There was this guy from the plane. He was a few years older, and he had this air of sophistication about him that kind of impressed me. Handsome in that classic way, strong jaw, tanned skin. Moneyed, you know? He knew his way around the airport, practically seduced me at the lounge back at JFK. Once we were on board, he smiled my way before heading toward the back of the plane.”

“Don’t you just love sex on a plane?”

Of course she said that just as their food was delivered, a cool Nicoise salad for her, a traditional *croque Monsieur* for him. Matt fingered the greens that accompanied his sandwich. No

French Fries. Guess that was too American for here.

“So, sex on planes,” she said, seeing him again display his crimson rainbow. “Please tell me you went through with it.”

“Of course!”

“Then why...oh wait, Matty, dear, was that your first time?”

“No, I’ve done...oh, you mean on a plane?”

Salad staked on her fork, she waved it in his direction. “Good thing you weren’t flying Virgin Airways.”

“Funny.”

“So, what happened? I want details, French girls like that. My business partner, Simon, he’s like a clam when it comes to his sex life. I know when he’s had sex—which is like all the time—and like I said, I can smell it seeping out of his pores. But who he did, or who did him, he’s harder to crack than, well, a virgin on an airplane.”

So Matt told her. The seductive kiss once he’d locked the door, the blow job he’d given the guy, then how he’d turned around and asked for Matt to give it to him.

“Huh, guy sounded like a total top from your description.”

“Colton surprised me, too.”

“His name was Colton? Probably a momma’s boy. No wonder.”

“Actually, he left me his business card. Colton Abbott. He’s an international lawyer.”

“Or he’s a player and had those printed up.”

“Why would he do that?”

“So he could get the cute, preppy American boy to screw him in the airplane bathroom.”

“Geez, that bodes well for this trip. Only sex I’m gonna get is from Mr. Right Now.”

“Oh, sweetie, you’ll be fine, just watch yourself with those jet-set types. Half the time they’re high on coke, or looking to score some more. Sex is all a game to them. That’s why it’s better to fly private. You want to have sex, you send the cabin attendant to the cockpit, and then you and your companion can enjoy your own, uh, cockpit. And Matt, what did I say—drop the gee whiz stuff.”

“Got it. Bitch.”

“That’s more like it.”

They finished their meal, Simone again checking her watch.

“You gotta go?”

“Soon. Simon can start if I’m late.”

“Simon.”

“Yes, my business partner.”

“Just business?”

“Honey, I told you...oh, maybe I didn’t. Right, Gavin Simon is gayer than...you.”

“I’m not terribly flamboyant.”

“We’ll have to work on that. Come on, let’s take a walk along the Seine, it’s a beautiful day and you need sunglasses. I bet we’ll find a cheap pair from one of the sellers along the Quai, there’s tons of them, usually selling awful paintings of the Eiffel Tower and such.”

She linked arms with Matt, the two of them strolling across the wide boulevard. Matt’s eyes darted everywhere, at the old-style architecture, at the tiny cars that sped past them, honking at them with abandon. Women with little dogs bypassed them, talking on their mobiles, as they were called here. Didn’t look all that different from the Upper East Side of New York, save for the language. He thought even a tiny Maltese had snarled at him in French.

Walking through the lush *Jardin des Tuileries* at the eastern edge of the grand, imposing Louvre Museum, he gazed to his left where he saw I.M. Pei's pyramid entrance to the museum rise up seemingly out of the hard ground. He knew people opposed its modernity considering the structure it accompanied, but today, with the sun gleaming down onto its shiny glass panes, Matt took an intake of breath.

"Three months? You'll get used to it," Simone said.

She was so cavalier. She was so cool. She was so jaded.

Matt determined then and there that he liked being the naïve farm boy.

At last they were walking along the *Quai des Tuileries*, the Pont Royal nearby. In the far distance Matt got his first peak at the jutting Eiffel Tower, and that's how he knew he really was here, this was no dream. Leaning over the cement railing, gazing longingly at the languid waters of the river Seine, he was struck by its azure glow, and again there came that intake of breath. He was already falling in love with the gorgeous city laid out before him. He spun around with sudden delight, letting out a good old-fashioned "Whoo-hoo!" Simone tried to shy away from him but they were still linked arm in arm and Matt wasn't letting go. He leaned over and planted a kiss on her cheek.

"I give it a week," she said dryly.

"Oh, no, madame, you must indulge him his pleasures. A man such as this, full of life, he is a rare find."

Matt and Simone both turned at the sound of the heavily accented voice. A man of about thirty was leaning contentedly against the thick rail, surrounded by an array of canvases. Arms crossed, he wore a welcoming smile and a jaunty green beret, and with his dark, scruffy goatee he looked positively French, positively Bohemian. Hollywood's version of a French artist. Matt

gazed at the paintings, immediately recognizing brightly realized renditions of Paris's famous most sites and attractions.

"Perhaps the gentleman can interest the lady in a piece of fine art."

Simone practically pushed Matt out of the way as she perused the canvases set out before her. "When I see fine art, maybe the gentleman will buy me something. For now, mind your own business." And then she added something in French, speaking so quickly he knew it was meant only for her and the accosted French painter. Whatever she said, it wasn't kind, and the man nodded before resuming his seat on a small wooden stool.

They moved on, ignoring several other kiosks of trinkets, postcards, books, and yes, more paintings. "Simone, that's wasn't necessary. He was only..."

"What? Trying to make a sale to some unsuspecting tourists? Matt, you want to buy cheap paintings to remember Paris by, or do you, like me, want to fall in love and never leave?"

"Since when did you fall in love?"

"I fell in love with the persona of Simone Richelieu."

"Sounds like a crowded bed."

"I'm happy."

"Yeah, but self-love only gets you so far. Love can't happen unless you open your heart."

"Honestly, already writing romantic poetry? Maybe I can ask that painter where he bought his beret. You can take up a seat beside him."

He tossed her a weary look, partly from the jet lag, partly from her cynicism.

"Okay, I get it honey. Sorry, it's just...this place is different. You must get into the spirit of life here, learn to relax while still remaining tough. Sweets, you're a New Yorker, you don't

get taken in by con-artist artists there, do you?”

“No. And he’s not a con-artist, just a struggling artist.”

The ringing of her mobile saved him from saying something else, and she answered it with a decidedly crisp French accented, “*Oui?*” She chatted a bit, Matt not catching a word, then she hung up with a look of annoyance. “Simon. Wondering where I am. Look, I must dash.” She leaned in, air-kissed his one cheek, then the other. Then, whispering to him, which meant what she was going to say was for their ears only, said, “Just watch yourself, Matt. That artist over there—he’s no more French than I am.”

“Really? But he has the look...”

“Honey, so do I. But his accent is forced.”

As she started off, Matt’s mind triggered something that had been nagging at him since lunch. “Your business partner is named Simon. And you’re Simone?”

“Honey, that’s the name of our business. Simone and Simon.”

“Sounds like an American cop show.”

She paused before she said, “Bitch.”

Matt’s raucous laugh echoed down the lush blue waters of the Seine, and he realized this was going to be one fucking amazing summer.

CHAPTER THREE

A week had passed since Matt's arrival in Paris, and he'd spent most of his waking hours getting acclimated, his nights sleeping off the exhaustion he felt from all the walking he'd done during the day. The upside of such physical activity was that he was in no danger of putting on pounds, given all the cheese, crepes, and wine he'd already partaken of. Only one day had it rained, and he'd spent that indoor time on the hotel's computer perusing apartment listings on the Left Bank. He didn't even consider choices on the Right Bank, Simone would have served his nuts on a party platter. He even checked out two of those available apartments, but neither suited him. Both closet-sized, they made his Manhattan apartment look palatial.

Sunlight glinted through the lace curtains to cut across his eyes, waking an already stirring, naked Matthew Donovan. He'd barely slept, seeing every hour, on the hour. This morning, restlessness set in—perhaps he was growing tired of the same routine. Up, shower, breakfast at the hotel, walk the busy streets, see the museums, nod at strangers while sipping at a glass of wine at a street side cafe, all the while keeping his conversations to a minimum. He carried with him his French language book, practicing word pronunciations when he was in his room but knowing he wouldn't grow proficient enough to see him through the entire summer. Did it matter? His English had gotten him by. Relegated to three months of limited conversation, he could deal with that. What he couldn't absorb was this nagging feeling that woke him.

He realized what was bothering him.

He was lonely.

Falling in love in New York had been difficult enough, why did he have to go and add a language barrier to the whole process? Damn Jake and his ridiculous game of peer pressure. He had it easy, they spoke English in England. A smile crossed his face as the image of Freddie came to his mind, Freddie who was as xenophobic as they come, trying to make his way through Italy with a limited vocabulary of pizza and gelato. So Matt had his own issues to deal with, not least of which was how he would go about meeting someone whom he could seduce with his own brand of American charm? Truthfully, he was feeling a little horny, and the only fantasies his mind had to rely on were his recent sexual experiences, the failed date with “Ernie” back in New York, and the rather successful one with Colton on board his flight.

Thinking about his sex with Colton made Matt’s cock thicken. His hand slipped beneath the covers, fingers toying with coiled pubes, his hard shaft. He rubbed his cock while he closed his eyes and thought back to that unlikely encounter on the plane. Recalling the enticing, rough feel of Colton’s hairy chest, the taste of his fine cock, the way he had exploded into Matt’s mouth, Matt’s loins stirred. His hand caressed his smooth pecs and tight abs, two body parts he worked hard at and was proud of. Fingering the trail of thin hair beneath his belly button, his body shuddered from the sudden, silky touch. He jerked his cock more, the twin sensations of heat and cold creating waves of passion inside him. His eyes closed, the images of each thrust into Colton’s firm ass filling his mind. Matt let out a deep breath, urging himself toward climax. God, how he missed the intimacy between himself and another man—too long had passed since he’d shared something beyond the physical. Love-making for Matt wasn’t all about the orgasm, that represented the end and who wanted such a wonderful experience to end when you could continue to share a deeper passion with someone. Someone who made you feel special, who awakened long dormant senses throughout your body. Just then Matt felt pressure inside his

cock, and usually he would prolong the sensation, indulge himself, but right now he just wanted the release.

Colton's sexy image faded from his mind like an old photograph, only to be replaced by the face of the painter with the beret he and Simone had encountered his first day in Paris. That sexy accent, the fuzzy goatee and patchy stubble, the vibrant, swirling colors of his oil paintings, the inherent talent shining through those canvases...

"Oohhh..."

His pulsing tip exploded, spurt after spurt shooting into the air, heated come oozing down his fingers, the length of his cock. He let out a sigh of relief as his body found instant relaxation. That's when Matt realized he'd been too tense, too worried about making this trip a success as opposed to going with the flow. Watching the remnants of come seep out of his cock, Matt knew should do as nature did. If his cock knew, instinctively, to do what comes naturally, why then couldn't Matt? Next opportunity to present itself, Matt decided he would run with it.

As though life was challenging him to keep his promise, his cell phone rang, the sound startling him out his sexual haze. Truth be known, his phone had been fairly quiet since his arrival in Paris. Jake and Freddie had promised not to call—and he had made the same promise to them—and besides, neither of them had left for their respective journeys yet, so what kind of trouble could they have encountered already? Maybe they were chickening out of their respective trips, giving Matt an easy out. Given his lonely status, he might just take them up on their offer and return to the States, his search for romance among the romantic an utter failure. All those thoughts ran through his mind until, on the third ring, he picked up.

"Hello?"

"Sweetie, you need to work on your accent."

“Hello, Sally.”

“Bitch,” she said harmlessly. “Look, honey, sorry I haven’t been in touch since that first day, but the firm has been busy, busy, busy. But all work makes for dull girls, so Simon and I have decided to host a small cocktail party for some of our clients and friends. Tonight, our office, seven o’clock, we’ve got a rooftop deck, great views of the city. We can be found in Saint-Germain—you can find that, right? Left Bank, darling. I do hope you’ll be able to make it. Dress sexy, who knows who you’ll end up meeting. Unless of course you’ve already fallen in love and you can’t make it tonight because you’re getting married tonight?”

“Sounds nice, thanks. I’ll be there,” Matt replied.

“Oooh, do I detect sadness in that voice of yours? You okay, honey?”

“I will be.”

“It’s natural to be a bit homesick, tonight will cheer you up.”

Further advising him that no sad sack faces were welcome, she tossed off directions that Matt would have to double-check on his map, and then before he could even manage a garbled *au revoir* she’d signed off with a playful ta-ta. Matt stared down at himself, phone in one hand, his other still grabbing his flaccid penis. At least he’d gotten off before she’d called, he wasn’t sure he had the energy to jerk off again.

He got out of bed and padded into the bathroom. He cleaned himself off, showered, and then as he stared back at his face in the mirror he remembered what Simone had said, “dress sexy.” Well, that look could start with his face, and so for the third day in a row he opted not to shave, leaving the hint of a starter beard on his cheeks. Hey, if such a look on the Parisian painter’s face could get Matt to shoot his load, maybe his own scruffy look would get him some action at this party. No more jerking off, he wanted a good hard fuck.

* * *

The offices of Simone & Simon were located in the Sixth *Arrondissement*, situated along the busy Boulevard Saint Germain at the corner of the Rue de Seine. Turned out to be just a leisurely thirty-minute walk from his hotel. Matt made a left onto the crowded thoroughfare in the trendy neighborhood at ten minutes to seven, too early to buzz the door. He hated to be the first to arrive at a party, and in Paris he imagined fashionably late meant you showed up whenever you wanted. So he took up an empty seat outdoors at the Café de Flore, one of the many restaurants that lined the boulevard. He ordered a “*vin blanc*” and the waiter nodded with approval, over the order or Matt’s use of the native tongue he couldn’t be sure, but moments later he was served a small glass of house wine. Matt sampled it, thought it a bit tart, but offered up only a polite nod. The waiter didn’t appear to know much English, and Matt wasn’t so fluent with his French as to be able to offer up a compelling argument on what the wine lacked. So he just sat contentedly, watching, drinking, and occasionally checking his phone for the time.

It was a perfectly gorgeous night, with the sun just starting to dip, casting an orange glaze across the fading blue sky. As though generous swirls of contrasting paints were married to one canvas, Matt thought it would make a great picture. He’d left his camera back in his hotel room, so he took a quick shot with his camera, pleased with the result. Maybe he could have it blown up, framed for his apartment. Or perhaps it would look better if it was an actual painting, and immediately he thought again of the young artist peddling his wares along the Seine. Probably had a whole catalog of paintings like this, a dime...er, rather, a euro a dozen. He wondered how often the painter could be found at the river’s edge, contemplating a quick bypass on his way

home.

For now, though, the party awaited him. He tossed down an appropriate amount of Euros on the small white plate the waiter had left, the bill delivered the same time as the wine. Five minutes later he was buzzing the door to the offices of Simone & Simon and was being admitted without anyone asking who was ringing. Matt found the elevator and pressed the button for the sixth and topmost floor. The doors emerged directly into spacious offices, the din of conversation over soft music immediate.

Matt stepped out into the large, open room, tastefully decorated with lots of black and white designs, tables and chairs, wall hangings, all sharp and angular. Yup, he was in the right place, it was like Simone herself had draped her wardrobe all over the place, so alive with her personality was this office. There were about twenty people mingling throughout the room, a mix of men and women dressed both casual and business-like. As Matt gave his own clothes a once-over, he decided he fell somewhere in between the stylish suits and casual denim. Feeling confidence fills his veins, he was glad he'd stopped to loosen up with a primer coating of wine. He made his way toward a makeshift bar.

"Bon jour, monsieur."

"Bon jour," he repeated.

"You would like some wine?" the young bartender woman said to him. In English.

"Blanc," he said with more than a hint of satisfaction.

Once served, he moved slowly around the room, looking at the wall hangings. They were photographs, accompanying captions alerting observers that these were "after" pictures of rooms, offices, spaces, that Simone & Simon had decorated. It was an eclectic selection, which Matt supposed was the point—the firm could adapt their talent to another person's style, the results

obviously successful. Matt's earlier confidence drained away as he realized that this crowd, even if they could understand him—or he them—no doubt would first ask him what he did for a living. Would they think less of him when he announced that he was unemployed, or would they be envious of his summer-long hiatus in Paris?

Out of the corner of his eye, Matt noticed a rather striking man dressed in form-fitting black slacks and a silver-colored dress shirt. He admired the way the clothes draped against his slim frame, the confidence with which he wore them as he spoke animatedly to the small group before him. Like he was holding court, the crowd nodding, smiling, lifting glasses of red wine with enviable cheers. Why was Matt so obsessed with confidence? He was smart, he was good-looking, and if his only fault here was his lack of French, well, that was just something he'd had to get used to...or change quickly. The language book in his blazer pocket would remain where it was, though this was no kind of party to be flipping pages in search of the clever retort.

Bon-mot, he reminded himself, and smiled to himself.

"Matt! Oh, I didn't see you arrive, you look fab...great jacket," said Simone, emerging from a group of people who parted effortlessly to allow her to greet her new guest. She air-kissed him again, cheek to cheek, but this time Matt was ready for it and he played along.

"You're getting good at that. Paris must be agreeing with you." Before he could answer she turned to the group to get everyone's attention. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet my fabulous friend Matthew Donovan, from the States. He's spending the entire summer in our beloved city, so we'll make a Frenchman out of him soon enough! Now, everyone be kind, his French sucks but he's got a wicked sense of humor, so if you want a good laugh you'll have to indulge him and speak English—which I know all of you know."

"Should I feel as embarrassed as I look?" Matt said to her.

She added something in French and the whole group cracked up.

“Okay, now I should.”

“Nonsense, Matty, I just told them you were here in Paris to fall in love.”

“Gee, thanks.”

She waved off his innocent charm. “Everyone here is mostly friends, others long-standing clients. We’re not trying to impress anyone here more than we already have. So relax, refresh your drink, enjoy yourself. Oh, wait, you have to meet my partner...where the hell is he? Probably got his tongue down some guy’s throat...he’s such a whore...Simon? Yoo-hoo, Simon, dear? Where are you?”

That first group Matt had seen when he arrived parted ways, and emerging from within it was that handsome man he’d seen exuding such confidence. He wore it still as he sidled his way toward Simone. Matt’s mouth went dry when he caught a full look at this guy, and he wondered if he’d be able to get any words to get out. Matt could only stare at what was a beautiful man.

“Matt, I’d like to you meet my business partner, Simon. Simon, meet a man who knows more about me than I’d like to admit to. And Matt, if you spill any of these secrets...”

“You’ll serve my nuts to the squirrels, yes...”

The man laughed. “Aha, you do know our crude little Simone.”

“Nice to meet you Simon.”

The man smiled widely, bright white teeth glowing against his tanned skin. “Actually, all of my friends call me Gavin, and I now count you among them. Please, Gavin.”

“Gavin? That’s an interesting nickname.”

“Actually, no, it is my given name. Gavin Simon.”

“Oh, I get it now...”

“Yes, I’m afraid you do. One of Simone’s little American jokes. She’d likes the play on words, even if it was lost on all of us. Still, it’s nice to meet you, Matt.”

They finally shook hands, Matt feeling slim, elongated fingers encircling his. Matt found himself liking Gavin’s easy-going nature—not to mention his striking appearance. His black hair was worn slicked back, and his tan face was made even darker by the heavy shadow of a five o’clock beard. His features were soft, but masculine. He looked well off and comfortable, with himself, and with life. Matt also couldn’t help but notice that Gavin wore his shirt with the first two buttons undone, a generous coating of black hair easily discernable upon his chest. Hot, French, and definitely sexy—and probably far out of Matt’s reach. Then he realized he was still staring, the tip of his cock at full attention. “So, uh, nice offices,” he said, his voice nearly failing him. “Very nice, sleek. Very Simone. I like it a lot.”

Matt flushed red and hoped his bulge wasn’t noticeable. Gavin smiled at him as Simone rolled her eyes over the mating dance happening in front of her. “God, get a room you two. But at least I don’t have to worry about you two not getting along, such an idea would absolutely crush me. Simon, why don’t you show our guest the outside terrace, I think he could use some cooling down.”

“A fine idea. I’m sure Matt is tired of your bourgeois company anyway...Matt, Simone tells me you don’t know another soul in the city, which I think is awfully brave of you. We’ll have to see what we can do to rectify that situation,” Gavin said, all the while leading Matt through a set of doors and out onto a small deck. About ten feet by ten, the balcony offered up amazing views of the city, chief among them the impressive Eiffel Tower, sparkling lights streaking against the dark sky. A quiet descended upon them, as Matt realized the rooftop was high enough to avoid the near-constant sounds of the noisy Boulevard Saint-Germain. A couple

other people had wandered out as well to enjoy the cool night air, but they kept their distance as the party's co-host concentrated on welcoming Matt. With fresh drinks in hand from a second bar situated outside, they cheered and drank, Matt watching Gavin through the upturned glass. The image was mottled, and yet still he was beautiful.

"Matt, where are you staying during your visit?"

"I'm at the Hotel du Louvre..."

"A hotel? Won't that get costly after a while?"

"I'd love to find an apartment for the three months, but so far nothing has turned up."

"Hmm," Gavin said, "let me give it some thought."

"Thanks."

As they settled in to talk about jobs and fine wines and other innocuous subjects that Gavin was well voiced in, Matt found himself sneaking quick peaks at Gavin when the man wasn't looking. Was his dark skin tone natural, or sun enhanced? Were his clothes specially tailored, or was he fortunate enough to have a body which suited off the rack perfectly? And that solid, thick chest of his, Matt's eyes kept darting toward that exposed triangle of hair, imagining just how far down it went.

"So, Matt," Gavin said, "Simone tells me you have come to Paris to fall in love."

"I'm afraid she's being a bit melodramatic."

"Our Simone? *Non*," he said, with an ironic laugh. "But you, why do you shy away from such an admission, isn't it everyone's wish to fall madly in love, and to do so amidst the lights of Paris? Well, there is no place finer in this in world. You have set yourself a great task, and I envy you your search."

"What about you, Gavin? Someone special in your life?"

Eyebrow raised, he simply shook his head. “Let us just say, I am still looking,” he said, and then he placed a hand upon Matt’s warm, scruffy cheek. “Is that what you wish, to see if there is perhaps some spark between us?”

“Oh, no...I wasn’t suggesting...”

Gavin placed a sudden kiss on Matt’s lips, the scratch of his heavy beard against his own three-day stubble an added bonus. As he pulled back, he said, “I will tell you what, Matt. I think it’s important for you to get settled first, truly find your own place in Paris, and then I think dinner between us would be something I would enjoy partaking in. Who knows what awaits us after a fine meal and a bottle or two of ridiculously expensive wine. Does that sound to your liking?”

“I’m game if you are,” was Matt’s reply.

“Good. I look forward to it.”

With that Gavin took out a business card and placed it inside Matt’s empty glass. “If you do not hear from me by next week, do not hesitate to call. I will be away on business for a few days, so do not take my silence as disinterest. You are quite handsome, Matthew, and I look forward to getting to know more about you.”

Before returning to his other guests, Gavin snapped his fingers as though an idea had occurred to him. “I have this friend. His name is Anton. His situation is...complicated—though what self-respecting Frenchman doesn’t have a complicated love life—but as a result I believe he may have an apartment he is not using. He could probably use the extra money from renting it out. I will call him on your behalf. Simone will know how to reach you?”

“Uh, yeah, thanks.”

“Don’t thank me now,” Gavin said, leaning in for one last, lingering kiss. Matt kissed

him back, his fingers touching the man's chin, tracing down his neck where he was allowed a quick brush of Gavin's chest hair. "You will thank me later. In many ways. In many positions."

Gavin left, but Matt had to remain in place for a while.

New in town, a stranger at this party, the last thing they all needed was to see his hard-on.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning got off to an abrupt start with an early morning phone call.

“So, did you fuck him?”

“Simone!”

“Oh, please, Matt, you were practically drooling on his fine silk the moment I introduced you to Simon.”

Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he said, “Uh, did you notice? He likes to be called Gavin.”

“I’m sure he likes to be called many things,” she remarked.

“God, I can’t believe I’m friends with you,” Matt said.

“Ooh, after all I’ve done for you this past week, that’s harsh,” she said. “So, did you? Or did he? I can’t quite figure Simon’s preferred position. Sometimes he acts like such a girl, but he’s got such an aggressive manly side too. Always with some new, intoxicating cologne that transcends his body, and some days I’m tempted to rip open his shirt and play with all that yummy chest hair—and don’t tell me you didn’t find him ultra sexy. Your eyes were completely undressing him all night. So? Is he a top? Bottom? My bet is he’s versatile, but like I said, he doesn’t screw and tell. It’s his absolute worst quality, and I’ve told him that. I mean, you’re business partners for nearly seven years, and I don’t get to know your bedroom antics? I’ve told him more about my proclivities than I’ve told my former lovers. So I expect you will tell me everything. Cut, uncut? Does he do the dirty talk?”

“You’re impossible,” Matt said.

Just after eight in the morning, Matt felt slightly dirty himself with such talk—before his morning café au laid...uh, lait. As for Simone, she was an early riser, no doubt stemming from her impatience with life, sleep no doubt an inconvenience to her schedule. Matt had been staying up late to enjoy the Parisian nights, knowing there was nothing waiting for him with the early rising of the sun. But now that she'd woken him, he propped up on one elbow, looking out his window. Bright sunshine, another gorgeous day. What the hell was he doing still in bed?

“Simone—you were there. I drank too much wine, but I left alone.”

“Sure. But you gays are so secretive. I bet you had a rendezvous all set up.”

Leave it to Simone to use a French word and make it sound so American.

“My bed is empty.”

“Sure, now it is. He had a train to catch, a rich client in Belgium.”

Give the man some credit, Gavin hadn't lied to him about having to leave town for a few days, but Matt sure hoped he'd return soon. Simone was right, he'd undressed him with his eyes all night, near him, from afar, the result was the same. Naked, if only in his mind. The promise of dinner, perhaps more, was enough for Matt to want the next few days to fly by.

“There's nothing going on between me and Gavin. I mean, I appreciate you introducing us, but he's kind of on the hot side, and I'm...”

“Matt Donovan, don't you dare sell yourself short.”

“No, no, it's just...he could have anyone he wanted. And probably does.”

“Oh he'll be back in a few days. I'm sure you'll hear from him. He loves sex.”

“Yeah, but he's not what I'm looking for. I don't think Gavin is the fall in love type.”

Simone oddly had no reply to that one. Maybe because she knew Matt spoke truth.

“Okay, honey, enough sex talk for the morning. Here's the reason for my call. Simon did

leave me a message before he left, something about an apartment for you to look at?"

Now Matt perked up. He couldn't believe it, Gavin had remembered?

"Guy's name is Aaron...no, that's not right...Anton...uh, I don't have a last name. Anyway, he's got a spare place...must be nice having a spare apartment in Paris...but whatever, Simon called the guy and mentioned you and the long and short of it is you need to be at the apartment building today at one o'clock, Anton will be waiting. He'll only be there for an hour. It's in the Latin Quarter, do you know where that is...?"

"Simone, why do you think I don't know my way around Paris?"

"Because you keep pulling out that insipid map, dear, that's why." Still, she rattled off the address and Matt had to race out of bed to write it down on the pad across the room. He had her repeat it, and he jotted quickly before issuing his thanks.

"Don't thank me, thank Simon. I'm sure he can think of many ways."

"Thanks, sweetie. If the apartment works out, I'll have you over for drinks."

"Right. And you'll have Simon over for breakfast."

"God, so impossible. Good-bye, Simone."

"Oh, Matty?"

He sighed. "Yes?"

"Welcome to the Left Bank,"

He could still hear her throaty laughter echoing inside his room, even long after she'd disconnected the call.

* * *

Paris's Fifth, the Latin Quarter, was located on the southern edge below Saint Germain, and was home to well-heeled youth as well as artists and bohemians of advanced age, a mix of trendy people who knew where to live and the willingly indigent who knew how to survive, somehow the two cultures able to co-exist, making money while resisting the call of capitalism. This was an inclusive neighborhood, and as such Matt felt comfortable, especially after noticing several same sex couples holding hands as they walked down the narrow streets. He liked it already.

He'd walked from the hotel again, as he did most days, shunning the noisy, graffiti-tinged Metro in favor of crowded, sun-dappled streets. With air temperatures in the mid seventies, he was comfortable in just a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt, rolled to his elbows. He carried a shoulder bag, which held his camera and guidebook and map, as well as a few personal items he thought he might have to show the owner of the apartment.

As he turned down the Rue Saint Jacques, familiar sights came back to him. Yes, it had been twenty years since he'd last walked these streets, but the monuments hadn't changed, the façade of the Sorbonne beckoned like an old friend. How many nights back then had he spent on its cobbled steps while watching people pass by, girls whom he was supposed to be attracted to though he'd always focused on their boyfriends? Their brooding eyes, their wild hair, the way their jeans cupped tight butts. Matt had known inwardly he was gay since he was fourteen, and before that semester abroad was over he had finally scored his first male-male experience, a drunken make-out session with a reed-thin student who thought the world was all bullshit.

Smiling at the memory, Matt at last came to the cross street of Rue Royer Collard, the building located between the larger thoroughfares of Saint Jacques and Saint Michel. It was one of those tiny, narrow, curving streets with restaurants that would never score high ratings in any guidebook located on the ground floor, apartment buildings stacked above them. Matt quickly

found the right number, and depressed the button for the top floor apartment. A buzz sounded, and Matt pushed at the door to gain entrance. He quickly discovered there was no elevator in the building, and so he began the long, winding trek to the upper floor. If he ended up living here, he'd certainly stay in shape.

The building was old, walls crumbling in places and in need of a fresh coat of paint...or plaster. He detected foul odors from discarded food cartons behind the closed door. Charming. He couldn't believe a man of Gavin's refined taste was recommending such a place, but hey, beggars couldn't be choosers and Matt definitely fell into the former category. At last he arrived, and before he could knock the door opened slightly, a hooked chain keeping it in place.

"Hello? Are you Matthew?"

"Yes. Anton?"

"I am Anton, yes," the man said, only half of his face revealed behind the wooden door.

But then he closed it, and Matt could hear the chain being unhooked. As the door opened wide, Matt's mouth opened with surprise. "Hi...I mean, *bon jour*. We meet..."

"Yes, we meet again. How unlikely is such a thing?"

"Then I'm right, you're the artist from the Seine."

The man extended his hand. "*Oui*. Anton Marcel. I am an artist, and can often be found along the banks of the Seine. You and your friend, I remember you both from...was it last week?"

"You have a good memory."

"She was...not nice?"

"She's memorable, yes," Matt said. "Sorry."

"And you are American? You are our best clientele, I have sold many of my canvases to

visitors from the States. There are very many of us who ply our art along the Seine, you help us to pay our bills.”

“I meant to buy one...”

“Is okay, Matt. Perhaps before you leave Paris...”

“Yeah, sure, of course.”

Both men stood in the doorway, smiling at the coincidences, but not moving beyond their awkward conversation. At last Anton stepped aside and welcomed Matt inside.

The one-room apartment was deceptively large thanks to a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows that faced the western part of the city, abundant afternoon sunshine beaming through. The other wall was slanted, in line with the roof. Matt gazed about the Spartan room—a narrow bed and table in one corner, a maroon-colored sofa with two old pillows against an exposed brick wall. Two floor lamps were strategically positioned by pieces of furniture, but with this amazing light Matt supposed they were rarely used. In the far corner were dozens of blank canvases stacked against the wall, and a painter’s stool was pushed out of the way. No easel was apparent. Matt assumed this was Anton’s studio, and why he was willing to vacate it was beyond him.

“It’s great, I love all the natural light.”

“It is perfect.”

“Why are you looking to rent it?”

“Ah, it is complicated.”

That’s what Gavin had said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It is nothing so secret. My ex-wife and I, we share a young child—his name is Henri—and money has grown tight of late, and so we have agreed for the sake of Henri, to move back in together. So for a few months, we will rent out my studio. You are interested?”

“Yes...but, I’d hate to displace you. I’m sorry to hear about your troubles.”

What Matt was really disappointed to hear was the phrase “ex-wife.” It meant the cute painter with the jaunty beret and the patchy goatee was...straight. Not that Matt could be surprised by the notion, but considering the other morning when he’d been jerking off, what face came to him before he came but that of the painter. He’d even contemplated a special trip to the riverbank to seek him out and...and what? Ask him out, tell him he thought he was cute, that the thought of him made his cock twitch and shout?

“I will show you one last thing,” Anton said, “and I believe it just may convince you.”

Matt followed Anton to the back end of the apartment beyond the large windows. They emerged onto a small balcony, wrought iron railings lining three sides. It wasn’t large, but there was room enough for two chairs, separated by a small, antique table. They were facing west, and Matt took in an amazing view of the Eiffel Tower, not unlike what he’d seen from the deck at Simone’s offices. How had he lucked into such a find? This apartment, the balcony, it was perfect, and Matt could imagine many nights sitting out on the balcony, sipping at some wine while he watched the flickering light show the Eiffel Tower gave off each night. He stole a look at the second chair and grew wistful. The last thing he wanted was a fantasy for one.

Still, it beat what he had at the Hotel du Louvre, and no doubt was far less expensive.

Matt turned to him and said, “I’ll take it.”

“But I have not quoted you a price.”

“I don’t care. This is just what I was looking for...even better. Anton, I came to Paris to fall in love, and my God, it’s already happening. Because this apartment is my ideal lover, and finally makes me feel like I’ve arrived.”

“To fall in love in Paris,” Anton said, “is everyone’s desire. I wish the same.”

Matt wasn't sure, but he could have sworn that statement was directed squarely at him. He had to wonder, just why was Anton's wife an ex? Complicated could mean so many different things.

* * *

"So, how's the apartment?"

"Fantastic. I can't believe my luck."

"I'm glad it's working out."

"I still don't know how you knew it was available. How do you know Anton?"

Gavin Simon leaned over, his hand sliding beneath the cuff of Matt's shirt. The shock of his touch against his skin was electric, and Matt suddenly gazed into his emerald-colored eyes.

"Are you really interested in talking about Anton?"

Yes, Matt's heart said.

But his mind, and other parts of him, knew differently. "Uh, no."

"Good. I like talking about you. About me. About you and me."

Slick. Matt nodded, marveling over his good fortune this past week. He'd secured a three month lease on the garret from Anton, and had vacated the Hotel du Louvre the next day. Moving day had gone quickly, since the place came furnished. All Matt had to do was get his luggage to the new place, fill the tiny fridge with some essentials, and a quick cab ride and short shopping trip had taken care of both. He'd enjoyed getting to know his neighborhood, buying wine and cheese and fresh fruits for the apartment, spending hours on the balcony with his wares, sinking happily into a routine that suddenly felt anything but. And then his phone had rung,

Gavin Simon on the other end. Dinner, tomorrow night.

Matt had agonized over what to wear for what was essentially his first date in Paris, and had ended up going shopping along the Champs-Élysées. He'd settled upon a nice pair of slacks and an open-necked shirt at a place called Celio, not unlike what Gavin had been wearing the night they met but less pricey. So of course Gavin had showed up having gone the other direction, jeans and a T-shirt, the only hint of style coming from the expensive blazer he wore.

Gavin had been pleased to know that Matt had taken the apartment, and so to make life easier had suggested a small Indian restaurant in the Latin Quarter. They had shared spicy dishes of lamb vindaloo and some kind of chicken Matt was unfamiliar with. All he knew was that his mouth was on fire from the heat, but the fact that Gavin was sitting across from him had already turned up the temperature on the rest of him.

"You know, Matthew, I still do not know what you do for a living."

He loved when Gavin called him Matthew. With his tantalizing French accent, he almost managed to eek out a third syllable.

"I was in grant writing."

"Grants...you mean, like charities?"

"Yes. It's non-profit—especially when it came to my own bank account. Honorable work, don't get me wrong, but it won't buy a mansion in Connecticut. We sponsored individuals who were dealing with terminal illnesses in their families, and we sought financial help to ease their burden. The last thing you need to worry about when a loved one is dying is money."

"Very honorable. So what happened? You speak of it in the past tense."

"Cutbacks, just like in any business. I was let go a few months ago and was given a nice severance package which is essentially paying for this trip."

“And New York, do you miss it?”

“I think part of me believes I’m still there and I’m going to wake up any second.”

“Not a chance of that happening. You are in Paris, that much is for certain.”

Matt smiled. “I love how that sounds.”

“Would you like to hear something else you may like?”

Matt looked to the neighboring tables, but no one was paying any attention to them. Why Matt couldn’t relax and stop worrying about what other people might think, he didn’t know. If Paris itself was a fantasy, the fact that he was sitting in this darkened restaurant, only the glow of a candle flickering between them seemed surreal. Gavin’s hand pulled away, and Matt felt the moment leave them.

“You are nervous, Matthew?”

“No...”

“You find me attractive?”

“Are you really asking me that?”

“Matthew, I will tell you something about myself, and I do not wish you to judge me too harshly. I have made for myself a successful life—a thriving business that I co-own, which pays me a fine salary and provides many benefits. I am blessed with very good looks, and I know when a man finds me attractive. What I also am, proudly, is a sexual being. The touch of a man, his kiss and his smell are what fuel my passions. I will be honest with you. I find you to be very sweet. You are kind and giving.”

“Not exactly your type, I gather.”

Gavin took a healthy sip from his wine glass. His eyes darkened, or perhaps the candlelight nearly went out. “On the contrary. Too often I meet men who are trying so hard to be

something they are not. You are yourself, and that has attracted me greatly. But I also know why you have come to Paris, and that is to fall in love. So just as you have been honest with me, I will be honest with you. I am not ready to, as they say, settle down. I enjoy life, and I would like to enjoy life with you. Tonight. Do you find that objectionable?”

“Uh, I don’t know what to say.”

Again, the hand returned, a slight caress in the restored candlelight. “Then say nothing. We are near your apartment, would you not like to christen it...assuming you haven’t already? Yes, have you met someone else?”

Yes. No. Maybe.

Matt’s mind flashed another image of Anton, then let it fade.

“No, I haven’t been with anyone...”

Gavin smiled. “Then it is settled.”

Matt was torn. Yes, he wanted sex so badly, and Gavin was as hot as he’d ever had. But he knew it was just sex and nothing more than that. Could he live with that? And would this be a one-time affair, or something that would continue throughout the summer. An unexpected phone call, a quick rendezvous, a heated encounter. Then silence, until that next call. Matt realized Gavin would answer neither question, he was a live in the moment man, and at this moment he had made clear his intentions. He wanted to go home with Matt.

Bill paid, they ventured out into the cool night. Their direction was charted, and in just a matter of minutes they had made their way to Matt’s building. A soft light from above the entrance shined down on them, their shadows joining them. Gavin leaned in and kissed Matt, the heat of their meal still on his tongue, a dual sensation that made Matt go weak in the knees. He parted from the kiss, and then opened the door, taking Gavin’s hand as he did so.

Battling the stairs, by the time they arrived inside Matt's apartment they were already breathing heavily. It would only intensify once the door closed, Gavin attaching the chain.

"Can I get you a..."

Matt's words were cut off. Gavin pressed him against the brick wall, his body hard against him as his mouth found his, his lips and his neck, his earlobes. An uncontrollable wave of passion washed over him, and he responded quickly, his tongue thrust into Gavin's mouth, his hands sliding the fine blazer to the floor. They stopped, each of them staring at the other in the dim light. But then Gavin unbuttoned his shirt quickly, tossing it off. His chest was beautiful, a thick mat of black hair that covered his torso. Matt plunged his face into the thicket of fur, lapping at it, licking nipples hidden underneath coils of hair.

"Oh fuck, you're so hot...Gavin...take me to the bed..."

They fell onto the narrow bed, Gavin atop him, his hard cock pushing against him as they fumbled to remove their remaining clothes. Matt's new shirt tore slightly at the elbow, but he didn't care. His pants were unzipped so fast, he marveled at Gavin's quick technique. His cock popped up, and Gavin wasted little time in taking it into his mouth. He sucked hard, fingers cupping his balls. Matt groaned with pleasure, his cries filling the small room.

Just then Gavin lifted his legs, and his mouth found Matt's ass. Tongue darting out, he licked at his tight hole, his thick beard scraping seductively against Matt's tight cheeks. It was as though Gavin were preparing his ass for penetration. My God, this guy was going to fuck him, and soon by the likes of it. They were wasting little time with formalities.

Matt decided to run with it. Wasn't this what he wanted?

"Matthew...you will have me now."

Was it a question, or a demand? Matt needed little encouragement, his body on fire. His

clothes a rumpled mess on the floor, Gavin got on his knees, his thick, uncut cock positioned before Matt's pulsing ass. They looked deep into each other's eyes, Matt recognizing absolute lust inside them. His own cock jerked, a hint of pre-cum leaking out. The hungry man hovering above him had him turned on so much; Matt reached up, his hands running through the luxurious hair of his chest.

"You like that, yes?"

"Definitely."

"You will enjoy my hairiness more, as I fuck you."

Gavin effortlessly slipped on a condom from a nearby drawer, while Matt took hold of the bottle of lube found in the same place, and before long each of them was primed for action. Gavin slid in, fast, urgent, powerful.

"Owww," Matt screamed out, shocking by the aggressive way Gavin had entered him.

But a second later he relaxed as he got used to how the cock filled him. Wrapping his legs around Gavin's ass, his hands discovered a healthy coating of hair on Gavin's shoulders and back. Christ, where wasn't this guy hairy?

"Grab at my back, you will enjoy what it does to me."

So Matt gripped at the patches of hair on his muscled back, Gavin thrusting even deeper into him, exerting himself as hard grunts burst forth from his throat. Matt accepted every hungry thrust even as he watched Gavin's faraway expression. For a split second Matt had to wonder if Gavin was even here, emotionally, in this narrow bed, or was he lost in his own world, fucking for fuck's sake, not caring who it was lying beneath him. It felt wrong, this kind of sex. So sudden and so passionless, no hint of something deeper. Just sweaty grunts, garbled groans, angry thrusts, time passing on its own plane until climax was achieved. A fierce Gavin pounding,

pounding, pounding until he was able to get off. Still, the thrusting cock awakened Matt's senses, his cock was so hard, leaking even more, but as much as his body reacted his heart just wasn't in it. This wasn't what Paris was supposed to be about. He meant to fall in love, not feel like his ass was someone else's receptacle.

"Ahhh," Gavin cried out.

Matt again felt hard thrusts deep inside him, more, more, before the uncontrollable Gavin unleashed himself, his body bucking with each jerk of his exploding cock. Matt's cock too burst, come shooting out of its tip just moments after Gavin had achieved his climax, and while it wasn't exactly simultaneous the effect was pretty close. Both Matt and Gavin sought breath for their starved lungs, Gavin still lying atop him. He had no choice, there was no other room on the bed. But passion had slipped out of Matt already, and he wanted nothing more than for Gavin to pull out, get up, get dressed, and get out.

He wouldn't tell Simone about her business partner's aggressive sexual practices. He wouldn't tell her he was a top, he wouldn't tell her he was as furry as a gorilla, he wouldn't tell her he was a selfish lover who fucked others while he was lost in his own dream world.

"Pretty fucking great, was that not?" Gavin said.

"Not," Matt whispered as he unwrapped himself from Gavin's ass, unsure if he'd actually spoken what he intended, or if Gavin even understood the complexity of the English double-negative. Regardless, Gavin at last rolled off him and padded to the bathroom to clean up. Returning moments later, he tossed on his clothes, said thanks, best fuck he'd had all week, that was great, didn't even offer up a kiss. He just opened the door and closed it just as quickly, and that was that.

Matt lay in bed, his ass sore, his heart empty.

Sometimes sex sucked.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tearing aimlessly at a flaky croissant, his *café au lait* long grown cold, Matthew Donovan had a sudden epiphany, deciding that to have things happen, he needed to make things happen. True romance would never find him holed up by himself on the balcony of his garret most mornings, and definitely most nights.

He had been in Paris for nearly three weeks now, and since his rather perfunctory fuck from Gavin he'd been keeping pretty much to himself. Simone was out of town for the better part of June on business, and he hadn't heard a word—much less a text or email—from Gavin, nor had he expected to. He'd probably already screwed his way through half a dozen other guys already, and Matt wasn't all that eager for a second go-round with him anyway. The two of them, in a nutshell, encompassed all of the people he knew in Paris. A few times in the last days he had been tempted to contact Jake or Freddie, see how their trips were going, but he refrained from breaking their agreement, not wanting to let on to the fact that he was...well, there was only one word for it. Matthew Donovan was still lonely.

That was all going to change today. Or so he told himself.

Monday morning, a brand new week filled with new opportunity, bright sunshine had awakened him after a weekend of persistent rain. He'd been feeling cooped up inside the tiny artist's studio and even a respite during the weekend storms in the neighboring *Jardins de Luxembourg* hadn't been enough to snap him out of his funk. Now, as he finished the last crumbs of his croissant, he gazed out at the fabulous city laid out before him. Come on, Matt, get your

shit together, you're in the most beautiful place in the world, nothing is stopping you except your own lack of guts. Geez, grow a pair. Take Paris by storm, make it fall in love with you rather than accept the status quo. With such new determination washing over him, Matt got up from his creaky chair and returned his dirty dishes to the sink. He showered, shaved off the starter beard, and immediately felt refreshed, reborn. He felt like himself.

Dressed casually, his bag thrown over his shoulder, he was ready for the outdoors.

Yeah, but where was he going?

As he flicked off the apartment's bare, overhead light, a figurative light bulb went off over his head, and at last he knew just where to go. And he was in a sudden hurry. Emerging onto the Rue Saint Michel, he considered which Metro stop was best, and so he made his way to the Luxembourg station, waiting for a few minutes for the rattling train. He hopped aboard and, after a couple long, underground transfers, emerged above the station at Pont Neuf. Behind him the spires of Notre Dame towered into the sky, and to his right spanned the massive buildings of the Louvre. But neither of these popular attractions represented his destination. Walking beside the Seine, he watched as boats both pleasure and tourist, bypassed him, and his heart swelled with the idea of traveling on one of them, the man of his dreams beside him. A smile crossed Matt's face. This was Paris, you had to embrace all it offered, you couldn't hide behind closed doors, you couldn't look down from your balcony and watch other people enjoying their lives. You had to be an active participant.

Matt traversed the *quai*, slipping past slow walking tourists and lovers lost in their own worlds, appreciating the privilege of where he was, the freedom he'd been afforded. He stopped at the occasional kiosk, flipping through old books, contemplating sending out a few postcards, all the wares on display. He didn't buy anything, not now, he still had nearly two months in Paris

and so there was no need to be weighed down with trinkets and souvenirs, not when he was finally getting his...frog legs, and then he laughed aloud at the thought of the French delicacy.

“A man who laughs by himself, some might question his sanity.”

Matt heard the voice, if not the words, and he stopped in his tracks as he realized one of the vendors had spoken to him. In English. It was, of course, Anton speaking to him, and Matt’s face went red with embarrassment. He’d reached his intended destination, but so much for taking a surreptitious approach.

“Oh, Anton, *bon jour*.”

“*Bon jour, monsieur*.”

“Oh, so formal. Please, I insist you call me Matt.”

“Matthew,” the young man with the beret said.

As nice as it sounded in his accented voice, Matt was reminded of the elongated way in which Gavin had spoken his full name. His face grimaced. “It’s Matt. Like I said, let’s keep it informal. After all, I’m your tenant, and isn’t it always better to keep our relationship friendly?”

“So long as you pay your weekly rent, I am fine with that,” Anton said.

“Deal.”

Anton smiled at him, and Matt took that opportunity to appraise him again. This was the third time he’d seen him, the first in the intimidating presence of Simone, the second when he was so pre-occupied with making a good impression that he had barely noticed Anton. Now, though, he was struck by the man’s engaging smile, a handy technique in drawing in tourists who had no use for one of his paintings but no doubt ended up purchasing one anyway. With his trademark beret—he wore a purple one today—and his checkered shirt and black pants, he was the prototypical Parisian. A nice body and an engaging smile went a long way, and were two of

the reasons Matt had found himself returning to the man's corner of Paris. That, and the fact that he found him incredibly cute, his goatee and patchy beard somehow alluring.

"So, Matt, you are enjoying my garret?"

"Very much. The balcony is my favorite part, to wake up and have breakfast in such surrounding, I couldn't have asked for better."

"I am glad. So, Simon, he is a good friend of yours?"

Simon. The name was unfamiliar to Matt, and then he realized he meant Gavin. Man, he must keep his friends on their toes, none of them quite sure what he would answer to. Like he was two people, the charming host and the selfish lover who left the bed the moment climax was achieved.

"Uh, no. He's a friend of a friend. He heard I needed a place to stay, and...well, here I am staying at your place. How about you, how well do you know Simon?"

"Well enough," was his enigmatic reply.

So that left Matt wondering: maybe this cute little Frenchman was gay after all, or at the very least bisexual. He had an ex-wife, a son, but he also knew Simon, and if Matt could assume anything about Gavin Simon it was that he fucked whomever he decided to. If Anton was among his targets, then for sure they had screwed. Or more appropriately, Simon had screwed Anton, probably in that tiny bed, and then he'd left him, and a wounded Anton had turned to his art, painting some masterpiece with a brush and a wounded soul. Or maybe just a sore ass, Matt recalled.

"So Anton, I was wondering...well, I don't really know many people in Paris."

Before Matt could say anything else, Anton said, "I would enjoy a drink with you."

"Wait, how did you know...?"

“You have been shifting from foot to foot since you arrived, which to me reads like a man with something on his mind.”

“Wow, you’re good.”

“I am an artist. I am in touch with my own self, my soul. Being so open about yourself, it allows you to see the frustrations within others. You are not happy with your visit to Paris, are you? It’s not turned out as you had envisioned?”

“You are perceptive,” Matt said, “but no, it’s not that I haven’t enjoyed myself. It’s just...I came here for something in particular, and I haven’t found it yet.”

“Perhaps you are looking too hard,” he said. “Life among the Parisians, it is about not being yourself, it’s about opening yourself to new experiences, letting down your guard. People are relaxed here, and they can read those who are not. Paris is about making your soul a part of the fabric of the city, and as such you weave your desires into its daily pulse. Only then will things come to you, your hopes and dreams, those missions, those tiny moments that comprise a contented life. Matt, let go your desires, and let them find you.”

By now a couple of other people had made their way to Anton’s display of paintings, and he excused himself to deal with his real customers. But before he did, he looked back at Matt and said, “Six o’clock, at the base of the Eiffel Tower. Do you like that idea?”

“Uh, very much,” Matt said, his voice nearly failing him.

He was touched by Anton’s words of advice, and excited about the invitation. The Eiffel Tower, it was Paris’s most renowned attraction, and the one place that everyone in the world associated with romance. And it was here he was going to meet Anton. But he had to remind himself, don’t get ahead of yourself...don’t be yourself. Relax, let the world come to you. It was in direct contrast to how Matt lived his life, but hey, this was Paris, foreign soil for him, and as

such he had to adjust to its pace.

“See you then,” Matt said.

“I look forward to getting to know you better,” Anton replied, and then he walked off to attend to his waiting patrons.

Me too, Matt wanted to say, but he swallowed those words. They could wait to be spoken, those, and hopefully many more. For the first time in days, Matt felt like the world had presented him with a new opportunity, and it was all because he’d acted on instinct, he’d allowed his lush surroundings to rule his heart.

As he continued his leisurely walk along the Seine, he stole a look back at Anton, and he noticed the man returning the gaze. Their eyes locked, and each man smiled. Matt checked his watch. Only noon. What would he do for the next six hours, because as much as he needed to occupy his time, mostly he needed to think of something...someone, other than Anton. Yeah, he thought, good luck with that. Matt was already falling in love, not that that was anything new. The hopeless romantic was often the most disappointed of all lovers, they expected too much.

* * *

Six ten in the evening, and Matt Donovan remained alone, only his thoughts to occupy himself. Just like he’d done all afternoon, but now it was after the scheduled meeting time with Anton, and he was growing antsy. He’d always prided himself on his punctuality, but in Paris he supposed six o’clock might mean anything between ten minutes late to an hour. So, what to do? Nothing else to do, Matt settled in to wait for his date’s arrival.

Date. Was that even accurate?

It was just a drink, Matt wasn't even convinced that Anton was gay. And even if he was, did that mean he was interested in Matt? Could just be a nice night out between new friends, one helping the other get acclimated to a new city. Okay, fine, but why here, at the base of the Eiffel Tower? Forget that it was the most phallic symbol imaginable in Paris, but its long association as the defining destination in a city known for romance, Matt couldn't help but read into this being the meeting place for their first...damn it, he didn't want to call it a date. Expect more, you get less, wasn't that the message behind Anton's earlier words of advice?

Maybe he'd chosen the wrong place. To say meet at the base of the tower, was that even specific enough. Its iron structure was huge, with four massive legs embedded into the ground, there was no natural meeting place beside it. With kiosks of souvenirs dominating the area, throngs of tourists taking pictures, pointing into the sky at the piercing top of the tower, it was hard to focus on action taking place on the ground.

As it was, Matt was positioned near the edge of Quai Branly, the Eiffel Tower just behind him, the Seine and Pont D'Lena stretched out before him. Traffic busily swept past him. From here, Paris was a wide-open swath of sky on this early summer night, the sun still blazing high, nearly blinding. Matt's eyes continually gazed the grounds for a sign of Anton, and so far he'd come up empty. Why hadn't he exchanged phone numbers with him, a call or text might have helped to zero in on where they were supposed to meet.

Except maybe the invite had been a ruse, just another game among gay men. Perhaps a better offer had come along.

"Matt! This way."

The English words spoken with Anton's heavy accent caught his attention. He was just coming off the bridge, his arms waving. He jogged across the busy quai, smiling as he darted fast

moving cars. As he approached, Matt could detect his smile expanding.

“Sorry I’m late, problem at home. I pride myself on punctuality, but when others depend upon you, well...”

“The best laid plans...” Matt said, as though that explained away every excuse.

“Exactly.”

Anton looked different. He’d ditched the beret, and his neck length hair bounced in the light wind of the early evening. Dressed more casually, it almost as though he’d left behind his traditional Parisian artist disguise, favoring the comfortable skin of his own self. Matt liked what he saw, a casual Anton, sales of his paintings gone from his mind, Matt his only concern. At least, that’s what he hoped for. A quick touch of Anton’s hand to Matt’s shoulder was the first indication that yes, this indeed was a date. Matt enjoyed his touch.

“So, you want to go up?”

“Up?”

“The Eiffel Tower?”

“Oh, God, that’s probably the last thing you want to do.”

“If that’s what you want, Matt, I’m fine. Part of being a Parisian is taking pride in all our city has to offer visitors. Many of us frown upon the tower and all its trappings, but truth be known, I kind of still enjoy it. I mean, why let a jaded sensibility rule your heart? The tower was impressive when it was first built for the World’s Fair and it remains impressive. So, shall we buy two tickets and watch the sunset?”

Okay, that image sounded so nice. Really nice. But Matt didn’t want to take advantage of him, and so he confessed he’d been here already on his trip. “Actually, twice. Nothing else to do, I’ve been playing tourist. I did an early morning visit, and then one late night. So, really, Anton, I

appreciate your willingness, but it's not necessary. You said something about a drink? I think I could use one."

"Me too. After the day I've had...I might have something stronger than wine. Do you trust me?"

"This is Paris. I'm just going with the flow."

Anton nodded. "Well said, Matt. Let's go, I know a place on the other side of the river."

"The Right Bank?"

"Something wrong with that?"

"Just my friend, Simone, she says everything happens on the Left."

"Oh, she sounds like one of those faux French who live by attitude."

"As opposed to what?"

"Those who follow their heart."

So the Eiffel Tower grew smaller, fading into the distance as they made their way across the Pont D'Lena, emerging onto the Avenue de New York, Matt laughing, commenting on the appropriateness behind the name of the street. As they passed the majestic Palais De Chaillot, they wound their way eventually to the Avenue Du President Wilson, and when Anton indicated a small wine bar, Matt commented on the decidedly American theme of their night.

"I've got a secret to share with you, Matt," Anton said as they took up seats outside.

"Let me guess. You're not really French."

"*Mon dieu!* How did you know?"

"Simone told me."

"Ah yes, your Left Bank-loving American...friend."

"That's okay, you can say bitch. She is one. A good one."

“No doubt a good friend, too.”

“She’s helped me a lot in terms of getting settled in Paris.”

“And Simon, too?”

“I know him as Gavin.”

“Many know him as much.”

Matt nodded, and thankfully was spared any more talk of the seemingly notorious Gavin Simon by the arrival of their waiter. Anton spoke in fluent French, pointing to Matt and then himself, and waiter nodding before disappearing. Two glasses of *vin blanc* arrived seconds later, and Matt figured this was either pre-arranged, or Anton was a regular. Regardless, the good service went noticed, and as they raised their glasses in toast, Matt instantly felt tension leave his shoulders. As apprehensive as he felt during his date with Gavin, the feeling now was the exact opposite.

“To new friends,” Matt said.

“And new lives,” Anton added.

They drank, and their eyes connected, even as they set their glasses down on the small round table separating them. Matt imagined his question over Anton’s sexuality had been answered. No man looked at another man like he’d just done and then expected him to high-five and go off to a ball game. No, this was something raw, unexpected, emotional, a connection made on some deeper level neither had expected, and wasn’t that the way it was supposed to be? Wasn’t that just as Anton had advised?

“Matt, how are you enjoying the garret?”

“It’s fantastic. I can’t believe I lucked into it. I suppose I have Gavin to thank.”

“I would rather we talk about anything other than Simon...Gavin.”

Matt wondered exactly what the story was between them? Former lovers? If so, why were they still in touch, and how come Anton was so accepting of Gavin's recommendation for a tenant? But he let it go, he'd much rather talk about Anton anyway.

"Tell me about your son."

Anton's face brightened. "Hey is my pride and joy. Henri is his name—so French, yes?"

"Very."

"But I have taught him to speak English as well, it is something his mother and I fight over." He paused to take a long drink of his wine. "One of many topics. But we do not have to discuss her, it is my boy you asked about, and I will tell you about him. He is seven, and he seems to have no interest in following my interest in art. I mean, he enjoys art, he just has no aptitude for it. His favorite subject is mathematics, and his brain naturally gravitates toward the sciences. Subjects his father found rather challenging. He is smart, and usually filled with good humor. But he will also let you know when he's unhappy, and I'm afraid it was that side of my Henri that I was witness to earlier. That's why I was late."

"It's okay. I mean, kids are unpredictable."

"Yes. And Henri is my priority. When he is upset, I am upset."

"May I ask what was wrong today?"

"His mother announced she was going away for a long weekend, which meant she would not be taking him to the Rodin museum, as she had promised. I assured him he would still go, but with me. He threw a temper tantrum, but I know it had everything to do with his mother's new boyfriend—he calls himself Biker, but his actual name is Harold. He wears leather often and motors around Paris in his motorcycle. He has bought Gilly a new helmet, but so far has come up empty when it comes to Henri—which doesn't bother me in the least."

“So you and Gilly?”

“I did love her once, even though I always knew I was gay. We married to gain me the permit to stay in Paris, and one night after much wine we tested the waters. Our love-making was lacking, but it did produce a most wonderful result.”

Matt blushed, trying to hide his reddened face behind his glass.

“I have embarrassed you?” Anton asked. “We French, we speak easily of sex.”

“You’re American,” Matt said.

“It has been over ten years since I have considered myself anything but French, anyone other than Anton Marcel” he said, finishing his wine. “Anthony Fisher, that was my real name. There are other stories, Matt, I would very much enjoy a second drink with you and tell you more, but alas I must cut short our evening. With Gilly lost in her own sexual re-awakening with Biker, I am afraid my son needs me. Henri is right now with his grandmother, who—trust me—is not all that pleased to be one. She’s a cold one, denies her age as quickly as she denies having a grandson. I apologize for leaving you, I was hoping we could dine, we could relax and get to know one another.”

“You could have canceled, I would have understood.”

“Yes. But I had misplaced your phone number, and the last thing I wanted was to, how do you say, ‘stand you up’?”

“You know perfectly well that’s the phrase.”

Anton shrugged and rattled off a few words in French. As if to prove Matt wrong.

Matt reached for the napkin before him, scribbling with a handy pen his phone number. He stuffed it into the pocket of his new friend’s shirt, smiling as he did so. “There, now you can’t misplace it. Please—use it.”

“I will, Matt,” Anton said, his voice showing a rare hesitation. Matt could already tell that Anton was the type of guy to speak his mind, no matter the consequences of his words. So why the reluctance to follow through on his current thought? Finally, he found the words he sought. “Perhaps you would like to join us—me and Henri—at the Rodin Museum. Have you been?”

“No, it’s on my list. Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

Anton leaned forward, his hand covering Matt’s. “Intrusions are more than welcome.”

“I’d love to join you.”

“Wonderful. Friday—two days from now. Does that work for you?”

“Gee, I’ll have to check my busy calendar.”

Anton grinned. “I like your insouciance, your innocence. You’re easy-going nature. It’s been too long since I have heard a word such as ‘gee.’ It is refreshing.”

“Simone told me to drop it.”

“Simone, I believe we have established, is a bitch. Trust me, I know from them.”

Matt knew he meant his ex-wife, Gilly. And only then did he wonder if he was jumping into the deep end of the pool without looking to see if there was any water. But any leap of faith was necessary in the pursuit of true love, and thrusting himself into the drama that was Anton’s life was the only way to get to know the handsome painter better. As he looked across the table at Anton, he realized his heart had already staked a claim to him.

“Friday it is.”

As they parted in the fading light of a Parisian night, Anton leaned forward and, with a level of confidence that eluded Matt, he kissed him gently on the lips. A slight scrape of Anton’s goatee against his skin sent fresh waves of desire through his body. Matt smiled with genuine pleasure, perhaps for the first time since his arrival. Still, as much as he looked forward to the

museum visit with his son, what he really hoped for was a night alone with Anton.

For now, as Anton disappeared around the corner, Matt remained just that. Alone.

He ordered a second *vin blanc*.

He'd have to start to work on his French.

CHAPTER SIX

Okay, you're hot for this new guy you've met, and he's already kissed you once and you really liked it, wanted more right then and there, a lot more, and so of course you can't help but think longingly about the next time you see him. It keeps you awake, sweating, thinking, desiring his touch, imagining the moment of truth, of impact, of love's ultimate embrace. For this so-called second date, Matt knew the promise of romance...of sex, even a stolen kiss or the heated touch of skin against skin, was practically nil. Because the day would be spent not only with Anton, but his seven-year-old son, Henri. A kid. Mood killer.

Matt had to admit he knew nothing about children.

Henri seemed to already be mad at his mother for having a new boyfriend.

How was he supposed to react when he learned his father also had a new boyfriend?

That morning, Matt tried on several pant and shirt combinations to the point where his narrow bed resembled a Barney's warehouse sale at the end of the first day. It was just a kid, he probably wouldn't even take notice of what Matt was wearing, so why was he trying so hard to impress? Maybe the more comfortable he felt, the more at ease he would be in this situation. After all, he'd never before had a date with a man and his son before.

Indeed the *Musee Rodin* had been on his list of attractions to visit, along with the nearby Napoleon's tomb at the *Hotel des Invalides*, but he had not yet crossed them off. He still had two months in Paris, nearly the entire summer, so what sense was there to rush. Plus, he tended to save his museum days for when the rain fell. But the Rodin turned out to be the ideal museum for

a beautiful day, because the grounds were as much an attraction as the sculptures and artwork to be found inside the grand mansion. And today was shaping up as an ideal summer day—warm temperatures and a blazing sun, made all the more hot because of Anton.

They were to meet right outside the museum on the Rue de Varenne, it would be easier on Henri.

“You come to the house, Henri may refuse to leave,” Anton had said the day before their date, calling to confirm. “If we meet you at the museum, he has no choice but to go along with what we planned.”

“Is Henri unusually difficult?” Matt had asked.

Anton had just laughed. “Oh, Henri—my son, he is hard to explain. He’s an attraction all to himself. We could sell tickets.”

Hence, Matt’s indecision when it came to his wardrobe. He eventually settled on a light pair of pants and sandals, a T-shirt that clung nicely to his well-defined chest. Try and resist that, Anton. He slung his bag over his shoulder, tossed his digital camera inside, and at last he was ready for whatever the day brought. He emerged into the morning sun, intent to be the first to arrive.

The *Musee Rodin* was located in the Seventh, a bit of a hike from the Latin Quarter, but still located on the Left Bank. So Matt just surged into the busy crowds of Parisians, walking through the gorgeous, expansive *Jardins du Luxembourg*, coming out the other end to the busy Boulevard Raspail. He walked with determination, and finally approached the Rue de Varenne. It was healthy six additional blocks before he reached the gated entrance to the grounds, the large 18th century mansion rising up magnificently from a lush, expansive lawn. The verdant grass was luxurious, well-landscaped, leaving Matt eager to tour the grounds and its famous rose garden.

He'd been anticipating seeing the world-famous sculpture "The Thinker," but located just inside the entrance he couldn't help but miss the more appropriate, menacing sounding, "Gates of Hell."

That's when Anton showed up accompanied by a rail-thin boy with an unruly thatch of dark hair atop his squirrely face. The boy had pure fury written across his face, like he had the power all on his own to open the entrance to Hades.

"Matt, *bon jour!*"

"*Bon jour*, Anton," Matt said, accepting the man's warm embrace.

"Henri, say hello to Matt. He's a new friend of mine."

Henri did not say hello, not in French, nor in English. He merely crossed his arms.

Defiance. That was a good attitude in which to start the day.

"*Merci*, Henri, for letting me join you on your visit to the museum. That's kind of you."

Henri stared back at his father, as though he hadn't understood.

"Don't even attempt that, Henri. Matt knows you speak perfect English."

Henri stared daggers at Matt. "*Oui?*"

Matt nodded. "*Oui*. Yes. *Si*."

The boy suddenly grinned. "*Italiano!*"

Truthfully, Matt had been going for Spanish, but he supposed Italian was correct, too.

"Henri enjoys languages. It's his second favorite..."

"After math, right?" Matt said.

The boy tossed Matt a wary look, wondering how he knew such a thing about him. Testing him, he announced, a sneer in his tone, "One plus one. That equals two."

"But we're three," Matt stated.

“We shall see,” the boy replied testily.

Wow, you really did have to see his kid in action. He changed expressions on a dime, his mood dependant upon whatever the last topic of conversation was. They’d been in each other’s company for barely five minutes and already he’d seen fury, wariness, a smile, and one look that could kill. Charming kid. Probably all an act, Matt thought, a way to piss off his parents. But could you blame him? Only seven, his parents divorced, one dating a guy named Biker, the other one gay. Happy therapy!

“So, shall we? Henri has been looking forward to seeing ‘the Thinker.’”

“Me, too!” Matt said.

While the contrary boy ignored Matt’s obvious attempt at striking a bond, an appealing looking Anton leaned in and said, seductively, “Shame, I thought you might be anticipating one of Rodin’s more accomplished sculptures—‘The Kiss’.” And he stole a brief moment to surreptitiously lick Matt’s earlobe, sending a wave of passion down his spine.

“Oh, uh...”

Anton grinned, a promise of more between them apparent in his sparkling emerald eyes. Still locked on Matt, he announced, “Let’s go, Henri, there is much to see! Much more.”

Indeed there was, but for now they would have to be contented with what the museum had to reveal. As late morning fell upon them, the three of them left any conflict back out on the street, concentrating instead on the plan for the day, touring the remarkable treasures found inside the well-kept, airy museum. From the impressive Beaux-Arts mansion that housed Rodin’s collection to the magnificent pieces on display, the beauty unfolding before them was a treat for their senses. Henri was notably impressed and very well informed. He knew that Rodin’s “girlfriend,” as he put it, was a woman named Claudette Colbert, not that he knew much

about her. He also stated that the “Gates of Hell” sculpture located outside had consumed Rodin for the last thirty-seven years of his life, and that the sculpture went unfinished upon his death. Anton smiled over his brilliant son, and Matt beamed with pride over the close connection between father and son. He couldn’t imagine having a child of his own, he had always known he would a childless gay man, and that whomever he ended up with would want the same. Suddenly there was Henri, almost as suddenly as there was Anton, come to think of it.

Nearly two hours after they’d begun their tour the seemingly inexhaustible, unapologetic Henri announced he needed a break. He wanted lunch. So the three of them ventured outdoors, taking up seats on a bench shaded by the sun. Anton had packed food, baguette sandwiches and sparkling Evian water and a couple varieties of cheeses. They settled down to feast on their tasty picnic. Henri chatted amiably as he ate, his earlier insouciance gone, or at least on hold. After they finished, Henri noticed two boys around his own age running around the garden, playing and laughing. Two women sitting on the bench next to them noticed Henri watching with envy, and they suggested he join their sons.

Henri turned to his father, and asked, in French, “Papa, may I?”

“Sure, what’s the harm?”

“We’ll keep our eyes on him,” the woman said. “If you two want some alone time.”

Matt blushed under the shade of the cherry blossoms. It’s not that he was embarrassed by being gay, nor that he was on a date with another man. It’s just how easily the women had indentified them, assessed the situation. A smiling Henri gave his father a quick hug, again speaking in French as he gazed furtively at Matt. Then he was gone with the wind, joining the two boys who welcomed him easily and quickly.

“What he said—good or bad?”

“He told me not to kiss you in public.”

“He’s a good kid, but boy is he hard to read. You sure he’s just seven?”

“We ask him that all the time. He tells us age is just a number.”

“This, from a math whiz.”

“That’s my son. An enigma wrapped in an algebraic equation.”

Matt watched with marvel as Henri easily adapted with his new friends, and wondered as the only child of divorced parents how his intelligence mixed with boys of regular aptitude. “It’s like he knows exactly what he’s doing, saying, and thinking. Every move of his is deliberate, calculated even, down to what mood to use when, when to speak which language, and who to direct his observations toward.”

“Wow, you’re good, Matt. It took Gilly and I seven years...and counting, to figure that out,” he said. “He likes to play us against each other, and I can only imagine what it’s going to be like when you and I and Gilly are all in the same room with him. He’ll have a field day with us—a take no prisoners approach.”

“So I get to meet Gilly?”

“Oh yeah. We’ve got this rule...I meet her boyfriends, she meets mine...ooh, sorry, that sounds so, well, forward of me. We’ve barely had time to get to know one another, and look at me, inviting you to meet my son, my ex-wife. I know I’m getting way ahead of myself. Sorry if I embarrassed you.”

Someone who leaped before he looked—just like Matt. He liked what he heard.

“Stop apologizing. It sounds nice, and I look forward to getting to know all of you better. Especially you,” Matt said, his smile widening. “But you know, I don’t want Henri to think I’m some pushover. He doesn’t get his way all the time.”

“How do you mean?” Anton said.

Impulsively, Matt learned forward, and in the shadow of “The Thinker,” Matt shut off his mind and embraced the feeling inside his swelling heart. He placed a warm, seductive kiss upon Anton’s lips. They held it, savoring the moment, the heat of the day sizzling between them. When they parted, both women on the neighboring bench applauded. Matt, no longer blushing, said, “Henri never said I couldn’t kiss you in public.”

* * *

With the sun setting behind him, Matt returned to his garret alone just as another Paris weekend was getting started. Revelers young and old were out strolling everywhere, arms linked as preludes to romantic—and bodily—entanglements, laughing with abandon as they let the troubles of the work week seep out of their systems, indulging in fine local cuisine and bottles of wine at the numerous cafés that lined the busy boulevards and narrow side streets. After leaving Anton and Henri, he was both elated and sad, a man as special as Anton was someone he’d long-been seeking, but the complication that was his family was preventing them from further exploring the obvious attraction between them. Friday night, they should have been sitting with their own wine in the corner of a cute bistro, touching, caressing, anticipating the moment they would return to their bed and make love all night long, a sweaty exchange where each eager thrust was matched by linked hearts. Sex and love, mingling, entwined, as they should.

He closed the door behind him, dropping his bag aimlessly to the floor. Going to the small refrigerator he hoped he still had some wine left, even though he knew he didn’t need anymore. He’d found a small English-style pub in the boulevard Saint-Germain, sitting by

himself and drinking beer after beer. Still, he hadn't wanted to go home so early, not by himself, and truth be known he was all museum-ed out. He was also exhausted from the continual ramblings of Henri. Matt pulled out a chilled bottle of Sancerre, grabbed a glass and headed outside to his balcony. Enjoying the view, he poured a glass of wine and began to sip at it, thinking about Anton as he did so.

His cock started to grow hard inside his pants. Just the mere thought of the way Anton's patchy beard had scraped against his skin as they kissed goodbye, it had left him with a longing inside his body, with little chance of the heat being doused. To masturbate, well, it might give him some needed release, but it would probably also leave him feeling emptier. All he had had in this garret was sex by himself. A fleeting image of Gavin Simon came into his mind, the hirsute body atop him, plowing his ass until he'd satisfied himself. Yup, even with another man Matt had been alone, sexually.

Matt wandered back into the garret, where he stripped out of the clothes he'd sweated through during the long, sweltering day. The air of the apartment like a cool breath against his naked skin, he felt his hardened nipples, wished someone's...anyone's...lips encircled them. He closed his eyes and exhaled, letting go of sexual dreams as he did so. He reached for a pair of tight black briefs, a thin card slipping out of them and onto the floor.

Colton Abbott. International lawyer.

The one other man he'd had sex with since coming to Paris—though technically, he had come over international waters. Did that count? He wondered where the sexy lawyer was, still in Paris, back in the States, or onto some other exotic location. Could he call him...should he call him? Would Colton even remember him? A man like that, he'd admitted already that Matt hadn't been his first airplane bathroom screw. So tossed the card aside, knowing he'd never dial it. The

romantic soul which ruled his heart knew it was already committed, as ridiculous as that sounded. Even though he and Anton had only exchanged kisses, rare stolen ones that left him wanting more, to have sex with another man now know would feel like cheating.

He returned to the balcony in just his briefs, refreshed his drink and thought to hell with any neighbors who could see him. Give them a treat, nice body that he had, so smooth and lean, muscles developed but not so anyone would mistake him for a power lifter. Beginning to feel the effects of all the booze, Matt allowed his eyes to close again. Who knows, maybe he'd sleep out on the balcony. To wake up amidst the early Parisian sun, birdsong filling his ears, it didn't get that much more...

...romantic.

Shit.

He felt depressed.

But he also felt a sudden, warm tingle on the back of his neck, followed quickly by a second one. Was it raining? Were those drops he felt, chilling him...exciting him? A familiar scent washed over him, and that's when Matt's eyes flared open, his body practically jumping out of the chair. He swirled around, surprise giving way to a broad smile.

"Anton...what are you doing here. I thought Henri needed..."

"Gilly had an argument with her new boyfriend, she came home to read Henri a story. She saw me sitting alone in the dark. Said I looked like I'd just lost my best friend. 'Not quite,' I told her. Then she told me to get out of the apartment, 'go fuck your new toy. Someone should get some tonight.' That's a direct quote."

"Oh, and is that why you've come back, is that what you desire?"

"From the moment you kissed me in the garden at the Rodin, it's all I could think about."

They came together in another embrace, neither caring they were visible to the neighbors across the way, but still, with Matt scantily clad, his growing erection an Eiffel Tower replica, the two men made their way back into the garret, closing blinds and locking doors as they did so. At last Anton came to him in a fierce burst of passion, his mouth encircling Matt's, tongue darting in, out, back in, an oral tease of what was to come later...or maybe sooner, given what Matt felt pressing against his groin.

Words other than those expressing their desire went muted as both men crashed to the confines of the narrow bed. Bodies melded into one, hands touching and caressing exposed skin, remaining items of clothes thrown to the floor in a disinterested heap. Matt felt the warm touch of Anton's body for the first time, thrilled at his touch and his taste. Compact, strong, with a subtle coating of dark hair on his arms and his chest. Lying on his back, Matt exhaled as Anton's tongue flicked at his neck, wandering fingers teasing hard his nipples.

"Oh yes...that feels..."

His words were cut off.

Anton's kiss stirred him, Matt experiencing a tingling chill course through his entire body. Nails digging into the muscles of Anton's hard back, it was almost like he was pushing the man deeper against his own body, desperate to make them one entity. Anton responded with a sudden thrust of his cock against Matt own cock.

Matt reached down to touch them both.

But Anton pulled him back.

"No, it is too soon. There is time for such things."

"Yes."

"A long night awaits us."

“A long life awaits us,” Matt repeated, just to hear the words again.

Neither said anything, the shock of such words piercing their hearts, but somehow not wounding them. Because for both lost souls those words penetrated deeply, their minds having waited a lifetime to hear them...to believe them.

Matt said nothing, going with flow, respecting Anton's lead, especially after his tongue traced a trail down his neck, licking at the sweat of his chest, his hard nipples. Waves continued to crash against him, and he couldn't believe that his body was responding with such ferocity just by this man's simple touch. Too often he hurried with sex, like with Gavin...how he had just thrown Matt to the bed and fucked him, fast, hard, thanklessly. Now, their shared passion was building like an orgasm, as skin upon skin, lips upon lips, danced in the darkened music of the night. Groans escaped Matt's lips as he accepted every tease, every touch, every lick upon his sweat-soaked self.

At last Anton made his way down further, his hand encircling the girth of Matt's cock. He slid down, then up, the sensation a dual edge of roughness and heat. Leaning down further, Anton slipped Matt's cock into his mouth, coating it with his juices. He pulled out and again his hand took command, sliding effortlessly along the shaft, milking him with fluid motions. Matt felt his balls constrict, and he arched his back as he fought orgasm. No, not now, not yet, but Anton wasn't stopping. Their eyes connected, and Matt pleaded, no, yes, wait, now...release me...don't let me release myself, but Anton just smiled as he leaned in for a kiss, his goatee like sandpaper against Matt's skin. He reached out, fingers grazing the hair on Anton's chest.

“Yes, feel me...”

“Touch me,” Matt said.

“Love me,” Anton stated.

“Release me,” Matt said, his breath short, halted, struggling deep.

Just then Matt felt tension build inside him, in his legs and in his loins, and through the thickening shaft of his pulsing cock. Anton increased his motion, jerking him with newfound ferocity. Again Matt’s back arched with ecstasy, and this time Anton reached around, thrusting a middle finger suddenly, wildly, unexpectedly, deep inside Matt’s ass. As he shuddered aloud, his cock burst. White spumes erupted, one, two, a third liquid spurt that splashed upon Anton’s chest.

“Oh, oh my God...why...so soon...” Matt was attempting to say.

Anton leaned in close, his breath hot against Matt’s neck. “An early release, it shows me your passion for me. And now that you have come, you can relax and wait hours if needed for your next release, but between now and then know the time will be well spent.”

With those words, Matt knew he was in for a long night of undying passion. The effects of the beer and wine he’d consumed began to fade, a new intoxication taking over. He grabbed Anton and flipped him over with ease, knowing his body was stronger, knowing too that as he pinned Anton beneath him, it was just as the man wanted.

Matt took Anton’s thick cock into his mouth, and he sucked, hard and hard. Gentle slides became fierce thrusts. As he took in each inch, the cock burrowing down his throat, Matt felt Anton grabbing at his hair, pulling, fingers sliding down onto his slickened back. Anton wrapped his legs around Matt’s tight ass, pulling him ever closer as Matt continued to suck his fat cock. Not giving up, he gurgled and gagged, and still Anton held back, his orgasm as elusive as love had always been for Matt, but now, he knew that love had found its way to him, and as such he knew that Anton would soon blow. They were conjoined, the emotional longing and the physical release, and just when Matt thought his heart could swell no larger, the tip of Anton’s cock grew,

skin taught against the blood-fueled cock, and finally, finally...finally, warm come burst from Anton's cock, and Matt continued to suck, suck, suck him dry, taking each drop into him, loving it silky sheen as it slid down his throat.

"Oh...wow...Matt...you...did you just..."

"Yeah, I did," Matt said as he released hold of Anton's cock.

"No one...I mean, not ever..."

"One of my specialties," Matt said.

"Oh, really? What other specialties are you about to show me?"

And then, in the darkened room of the garret in Paris's Latin Quartier, the city below them teeming with revelers and partiers, the two men, newfound lovers, their eyes locked on each other, suddenly knew what the other was thinking, what words waited on the tips of their tongues to be said. Anton, still trying to find his breath, still seeking breath from the hot, mind-bending blow job Matt had just given him, well, he said it first.

"Fuck me, hard. Screw me, now." And then he paused. "Love me long, Matt."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Inside the shadowy garret, light began to streak through closed curtains. On the floor, an empty bottle of Loire Valley Sancerre lay discarded, two over-turned glasses like fallen pawns beside it, a hint of wine lining the bottoms, symbols of their toasts, of the drinks they had shared. A new morning awakened after a night of explicit passion, two bodies beginning to stir in the small bed.

Matt was the first to open his eyes.

His arms wrapped around Anton, their bodies spooned, a smile washed over him as he remembered all that had taken place in the prior hours. He wished they could stay like this forever. But he knew Anton had to work, Saturday was his busiest day for sales and foot traffic, and as such he had to return home to gather his canvases and settle into his usual spot along the Seine. Still, it was early enough that Anton didn't have to leave just yet, and so Matt snuggled in tighter, his cock rising as it pressed against Anton's naked ass.

"Hmmm," his new lover murmured in the otherwise quiet of the morning.

Matt nibbled on his ear. Licked his neck.

"Oooh," Anton responded.

"Morning."

"Bon jour."

"Oui," Matt agreed.

Matt's cock had grown, was practically entering Anton all on its own.

"Yes," Anton said.

“You have to get ready for work.”

“I have time to be loved.”

Matt reached over and found the lube bottle they had liberally used the night before, and right next to it a pile of condoms and torn packages were messily positioned. Sliding one over his elongated cock, they remained in their spooned position as Matt began to slide in. Tightness gave way to warmth as he pierced him. Anton let out a sigh of relief once Matt’s cock settled inside, his hand reaching back to stroke Matt’s smooth cheeks.

Matt slid in, slid out, slowly and gently at first, his speed and energy building in intensity after each thrust. His hand stroked the light coating of dark hair upon Anton’s chest, rubbing hardened nipples. Enjoying its furry texture, Matt’s passion threatened to overwhelm him. After a deep kiss he felt down to his toes, he pulled out, Anton switching to his hands and knees. Matt once again entered him, fast, hard, urgent, and Anton let out a short shriek that echoed off the walls of the tiny apartment. With streaks of light permeating the slanted ceiling, Matt watched as his shadow entered Anton’s shadow, as he entered Anton. He watched with surprise the intensity being played out by their silhouettes upon the wall, like dirty-minded shadow puppets. Matt thrust and thrust harder, Anton receiving each one with eager, lustful acceptance.

Grabbing at his ass, taut skin caught in his whitening fingers, Matt plunged further inside Anton, grunting, groaning, his throat still raw from the night before, now laying bare a guttural growl that hummed throughout the room. The bed squeaked and the headboard slammed against the outer wall, both men ignoring the loud noises they were making, thrusting and receiving, demanding and pleading, fucking and bucking.

“Oh, Matt, again, again...give it to me...”

Like last night when Matt had fucked him for the first time, Anton took every inch, every

thrust, encouraging his partner to please him, love him, make him come. Matt continued, while Anton grabbed his own cock and began to rub it, hard, harder. His breathing growing harder, Matt felt orgasm begin to rise within him, and so he pushed even harder, his shaft disappearing deep inside Anton, the sparse hair at his crotch scratching at Anton's ass. Just then Matt allowed a garbled cry to escape his mouth, and he felt his cock spurt. Once, twice, thrice, a fourth pump that had him catching his breath in his throat, sucking air down starved lungs.

“Don't stop, don't...”

Anton continued to jerk at his cock, and suddenly he too let loose. Hot come spit out of the tip, dripping off his hand and onto the sheets, stained earlier from numerous orgasms that had wracked their bodies the night before. Matt's fucking ceased, and slowly he pulled out. The release allowed Anton to fall onto his back, his chest heaving with tortured exhaustion. Matt slid in beside him, kissing him on the lips, nipples, licking down a thin trail of hair until settling around Anton's belly button. Drops of come had gathered there, and Matt lapped up the tiny pool.

“I love when you do that.”

“Hmm,” Matt said, “I love how you taste.”

They stared at each other, realizing each of them had used the L word. Not specifically, more so in an erotic context, but still how it stirred Matt's cock, how it lit Anton's eyes afire, neither could escape the underlying meaning. Somehow, inexplicably, ridiculously, they had forged a connection that went beyond sex, beyond the physical. Anton reached over and kissed Matt, his lips and his neck, rubbing the hair of his soul patch against Matt's nipple. He let out a yelp of surprise at such a titillating sensation. His cock stiffened again.

“You telling me you've got time for another?”

Anton again kissed him.

“I wish...but no. It is Saturday, and the sooner I set up my little display, the better.”

“You want help?”

“As wonderful as that would be, I think you’d compromise my client base.”

“Oh? How so?”

“No offense, Matt, but you are so American, you might break my cover. Tourists, they want to be assured that what they are buying is authentic. Real artwork from a real Parisian artist. They hang their prize on the wall and show it off to their friends, they use it to remember their trip, recalling the funny little Frenchman who barely spoke English. That’s what it’s all about, a part to play. Since I’ve been hanging with you, I think my accent is slipping. I haven’t spoken this much English in years. I need to reconnect with my inner-Frenchman.”

“Got it,” Matt said. “Guess I better start working on my French.”

“Why bother? Another two months, you’re on a plane back to New York, right? And our summer fantasy comes to an end.”

Well damn if that wasn’t a mood killer. It was certainly the wrong note to end their night on, an unspoken truth between them suddenly given voice. His soul defeated, his cock deflated, Matt tossed back the thin covers, stood from the bed and went into the bathroom without saying another word, not even stealing a look back at Anton. He closed the door harder than intended. As he stared at his sleepy visage in the mirror, he was forced to admit that Anton was right. To think this was anything but a fling, a hot summertime romance filled with hot, steamy sex was pure foolishness. Their relationship was destined to end as quickly as the season waned. Maybe his friend Freddie had been right—it was naive to come abroad thinking you would fall in love. Sex was readily available, love was elusive.

A knock came at the closed door. “Matt?”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay, sure.”

A lingering silence hovered between them, the door keeping any connection between them at bay. “Look, Matt...I had an amazing time last night. And a great morning, too. I mean, I haven’t...um, spoken so much English in such a long time...such words as we said.” Even to Matt those words sounded false, like they were not what Anton really meant to say. “Okay, last night...it was the best night I can remember in a long time.”

“Me too,” Matt said, his voice flat.

He remained inside the bathroom, the door firmly shut. Not saying another word.

Seconds later he heard the front door of the apartment open, then close.

Matt waited another minute and finally emerged.

The apartment was cold, empty. A lingering odor stayed behind, the familiar scent of sex permeating the room. But was that all it was? Remnants of an unadulterated, physical release? Were they merely two men caught between their desire to escape loneliness, giving in to their basest emotions? Matt felt cheap, regret washing over him, the feeling a direct contrast to the wild sensations that had ripped through him all night. That was all forgotten now; all was quiet, too quiet, as though not even a heart beat could be detected inside the Spartan room.

* * *

Three nights passed before Matt found the courage to seek out Anton Marcel again. There had

been no word, no phone calls between them, and as much as Matt rationalized that the weekend was Anton's busiest time, when Monday slipped away with no communication he knew there was trouble. What to do about it, that was his dilemma.

He could move on, admitting his fling with Anton had been just that. Time to be flung.

Or, he could seek him out and find out the truth.

After all, if sex had been all Anton wanted, why the museum date with his son along?

Option A, or Option B.

Well, considering it was Tuesday night and darkness was descending upon Paris, Matt obviously had gone for Option B. Because he was standing along the Pont Royal, watching as Anton gathered his unsold canvases into the back of the van he used to transport his belongings. These included his painter's stool and easel—sometimes, he explained, he paints a portrait of the people right then and there, the Eiffel Tower in the background or the languid waters of the Seine enhancing the portrait. Those personal portraits, he had said, usually paid the rent. Matt had been waiting the better part of an hour, not sure what time Anton closed up, or even if he kept the same hours. He was just glad Anton had not yet left.

As Anton closed the rear door of the van, Matt made his move. He didn't want Anton to drive off, leaving him feeling completely foolish by not having announced his presence. But that wasn't likely to happen, since Anton's next move entailed leaning against the driver's side of the van, arms crossed, as if he were waiting for someone. And he was.

Matt.

"What took you so long?" Anton asked as Matt emerged from the darkness to the glow of a streetlight.

"You saw me?"

“Let’s just say Interpol won’t be hiring you.”

“When did you first see me?”

“About an hour ago. How long were you there?”

Matt blushed. “About an hour ago.”

The two men stood before each other, their bodies blocking the pedestrian flow along the Quai du Louvre. A smiling, leisurely strolling couple linked arm in arm had to separate before reconnecting immediately after they’d passed them. The man muttered something foul under his breath, but turned his attention back to his girlfriend the moment they’d moved on. As for Matt, he watched the couple with envy, noting how disappointed they were about having to separate.

“So can I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“What happened...you know, that morning?”

“Not here.”

“What’s that?”

“Matt, this is essentially my office, I don’t want to do this here.” Anton smiled at him, his hand reaching out to touch Matt’s face. “I have an idea. Will you trust me?”

“*Oui*,” Matt said, his response out of his mouth before his brain could really process it.

Anton laughed. Then he went to the back of his van again, opening the door. He fished around inside before coming up with a scuffed satchel, which he proceeded to wrap around his shoulder. Closing the door, he motioned for Matt to join him. “Come on, let’s go for a walk.”

They walked east, the glow of the Louvre, the flickering light show that was the Eiffel Tower disappearing behind them. The Seine flowed easily, numerous boats cruising along, most of them filled with tourists. The Bateaux Mouches, Matt recalled, thinking how nice it would be

to travel on one of those rectangular boats, the light breeze ruffling his hair while he sat beside the man who stirred his emotions, who made his heart beat and his body react with such vital, viral heat. He was glad not to have suggested such an obvious tourist trap, not when the chasm that existed between them had to do with Anton's Parisian lifestyle and Matt's naïve Americanism.

Anton kept the dialogue to a minimum as they journey along the river, passing bridge after bridge until finally reaching the expansive Pont Neuf. He pointed out a large, darkened structure before them, explaining it was the former flagship store for the Samaritaine department stores. Matt had seen pictures, the red and yellow and green glowing lights the adorned the building giving the Right Bank its own nightly attraction. It was closed down, to be remodeled into a hotel with new shops, cafés, etc.

"Until it's reopening, we will have to be content with the riverbank's offerings," Anton said, leading Matt down a concrete path, "and actually, for most Parisians, we far prefer hanging out by the river. See?"

Indeed, both banks of the river were populated by countless people, most of them kids—teenagers and students. They were laughing and talking, drinking, enjoying life as only the French can do, without a care in the world. Others were positioned on the *pont* itself, pointing and laughing at the tourists who passed beneath them on the boats. The tourists simply waved, and Matt again blushed. Okay, he was getting Anton's point without him having to say it. If you want to live here, embrace it. If you want to visit, make sure you have a return ticket home. And while Matt had the latter, what he had to decide was did he really want the former? Did he even have the guts to admit it?

Anton picked an empty slab of concrete located away from the crowd. From his satchel

he withdrew a ratty old blanket, which he spread out before sitting down. Matt remained standing, why he wasn't sure. Anton was a series of mixed signals, loving and sweet, distant and cool, and now he seemed to be a combination of the sweet and cool. It made him uncertain how to act. At last he sat. The river had decided it for him. Go with the flow.

"It's nice," he said, thinking the setting was more than nice, it was romantic.

The romance was stepped up even more when that satchel revealed one last touch.

A bottle of red wine.

"Again, nice touch," Matt said.

Anton busied himself with uncorking the bottle, taking the first sip directly from the bottle.

"No glasses in that magic bag?"

"I cannot think of everything," he said, handing Matt the wine. "Besides, I like to share the bottle with the man I am with, the fruit of the vine mixed with our own individual tastes. It makes for a unique flavor—special because no other people in the world would taste the same. A flavor that belongs only to us."

Matt paused before drinking. "Wow, Anton...you're good."

"Drink. We will talk."

So Matt drank, his fingers wrapped around the narrow neck. The wine was dry, smoky, and he had to believe the latter was Anton's contribution. The heat he emanated, that sizzle that bounced off their bodies, he could taste it. He gave the bottle back and again Anton drank.

"Sweet," he said.

"That's not what I tasted."

"Then that must be the flavor you have added," Anton stated, his eyes locked on Matt.

“Yeah, you’re real good.”

A hand upon Matt’s face, a gentle caress. “As are you. In bed. Matt, the passion I felt the other night, I cannot remember a night such as that. We parted earlier in the day with such desire hovering between us, we both knew the only thing we wanted was to return to my garret—yours, really—and indulge ourselves. I wanted nothing more than to taste your kiss, to feel your cock deep inside me.” He paused to kiss Matt in the shadow of the twin towers of Notre Dame. The way his touch curled Matt’s toes, he thought he might just climb the church himself, give the Hunchback something to talk about. “But Matt, as much as I wanted to be with you, you have to know that my priority is my family...my boy. Henri, as you’ve seen, is special. He can be the kindest, most caring child in the world, but when he feels threatened—and that means meeting someone new, someone who is important to his mother or father—then he can be truly awful. I wanted you to meet him, and him to meet you, because I wanted to see how you both reacted. To be in a relationship where you are not the priority, many men cannot handle such a thing. Me first, they say, son second. I cannot allow that.”

“I would never think to come between you and Henri. I liked him. People just have to understand that, as mature as he can seem, he’s still a kid and maybe even he doesn’t understand why he’s reacting the way he is.”

Anton nodded. “Very astute, Matt.”

“So then, I don’t understand what happened...you know, the next morning.”

Anton sipped once from the wine bottle, then again. Staring forward, oblivious to the antics of the kids gathered by the river’s side, Anton appeared deep in thought. Matt felt like they were alone together, no other soul able to penetrate their enclosed world, and as such he let his hand drift over, clutch Anton’s. The man gripped it, Matt feeling his blood pulsing through his

veins. Whatever was going through Anton's mind, he was obviously troubled, or confused. When Anton turned back, a tear had slipped down his cheek.

"Matt, what you said about Henri. Not understanding why he acts the way he does? You are right, but you must also know we adults also feel such...confusion, isolation."

"Isolation?"

"When you have a boy to raise, your world can threaten to consume you. You work, you care for your boy, and as a result you lose yourself. Of course I have dated, and even managed to hold onto a relationship for a while...but nothing long-term, not since Henri was born. Trust me, I have no regrets, I adore my boy like nothing else in this world. But as he finds his own way in life, school and friends, my role will lessen. It's just the natural course of life. It's how it should be."

"So then what's the problem?"

"The idea of being alone."

"Hah," Matt said, a gentle laugh escaping him. "We all feel that way. Hell, Anton, what do you think this whole foolish venture of mine is about? I'm tired of being alone, of going to sleep by myself and waking up by myself, sharing breakfast with the morning newscasters. So I decided to make a change, and...here I am."

"Your friends who convinced you...don't you think it was more peer pressure than anything?"

"No...well, maybe. I mean, my friends are not like that. If I had decided to remain home while they went gallivanting in London and Rome, then I'd be happy for them. Me, I saw it as a unique opportunity. I had nothing going on in my life, I had the money to do this...and...oh, I think I know where this is going."

“Yes. And when the three months are over, it is back to New York.”

“That’s the problem.”

“For me, *oui*,” Anton said, briefly looking away. “My life is here in this lovely city of lights. The brightest light is the one of my life, my son, and he is here. I would not deny him his French heritage. I don’t think I could return to the States, not for something permanent.”

“Wow...are we getting ahead of ourselves, Anton? I mean, it was one night...”

“An amazing night. And besides, Matt, from the moment I saw you walking with your bitchy friend Simone, I knew there was something special about you. You were too nice to be her boyfriend, and so I had you pegged early on as gay. When we met again...”

“Through Gavin...”

He cleared his throat. “Uh, yes, through Gavin Simon...our meeting again under such circumstances was serendipitous. So I decided to run with it, see where it took me. The way you interacted with Henri...it made me start to wonder about the future. The morning after our love making, it all came rushing back to me. You don’t speak the language, you are here temporarily, and as much you claim to have come to find love...how realistic is it to expect that you’ll find a love so deep that you will want to change your life.”

“Are you saying you don’t want me to leave Paris?”

“What I am saying is this: if your heart is set upon a return to the States, then perhaps it is best we no longer continue what has developed between us. I like you, Matt, so much it scares me, and the idea of losing you after what we have already shared...I am not sure I could bear it. There, I have spoken the truth, and it...us, is now in your hands.”

Matt reached for the bottle of wine and took a healthy swig. When he drank, he thought the wine had a new taste, one more bitter. As though near the bottom of the bottle the wine had

turned.

“I’m not sure I can answer that now, Anton. I mean...”

Anton pressed a finger to Matt’s lips.

“I understand, and I am sorry if I put pressure on you.”

“No, no, you’re right to question this...me...us. Honestly, it never even entered my mind that I wouldn’t return to New York at the end of my trip. I mean, it’s one thing to look for love in a foreign land, it’s another to completely change your life. Me, living in Paris. The idea is laughable...I mean, like you said, there’s the language issue. And then there’s a little thing called a job. I don’t even know what I would do.”

“What are you good at?” Anton asked.

“Not much. Raising money, I guess. At least, I was, until the agency fired me.”

A hint of a smile crossed Anton’s face. “Do you believe in passion, Matt—not for people, I mean—but for what your inner self desires?”

“Sure. For some. Not me. I never had much talent.”

“You sell yourself short. We can deal with that later. For now,” Anton said, a broad smile widening his face. “May I show you something?”

“Of course, what is it? Anton, why are you smiling like that? What’s gotten over you?”

“The something I wish to show you, but you must come with me.”

“Are you taking me to meet someone?”

“Yes?”

“Who?”

Again, that smile. “The real Anton Marcel.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Anton's apartment was located in the Eleventh, a good distance from the major touristy parts of Paris, just two blocks from rolling the lawns and concrete paths of *Père Lachaise* cemetery. It had been Gilly's choice to live near the famed resting place, Anton had said, confessing that "Once you meet her, you'll understand." Matt sat in the passenger seat of Anton's van, feeling strangely comfortable. After a few weeks of walking, of taking buses, and the rambling Metro, to be in a car gave him a sense of normalcy...that he truly lived in Paris as opposed to be one of its many visitors.

Some called such an idea dreams.

Others called them delusions.

Matthew Donovan, living in Paris, permanently. It was unthinkable, right?

Oui.

But after Anton's heartfelt confessional back along the Seine, Matt's emotions were a jumbled mess, mottled more by the effects of a bottle of wine and no food. As Anton drove with steadfast concentration, Matt stole continual looks at his lover, wondering just what he'd meant by "the real Anton Marcel." Wasn't the real Anton actually Anthony Fisher, of Dayton, Ohio? Or was there a third person lurking deep within him, not who he once was, not who he was now, but who he truly wished to be. This, Matt decided, ought to be interesting.

They had taken side streets the entire way, and at last the car turned onto the wide Boulevard De Menilmontant, named after the *arrondissement*. Passing the high, closed walls of

the legendary cemetery, Anton made a right turn and then a sudden left, ending their trip on the picturesque Rue Houdart. Anton slid into a handy parking spot, the engine sputtering to a stop as he turned the key.

“We are here.”

“So, I get to meet the famous ex-wife, huh?”

“If you are lucky, you will meet Biker.”

“Gee, with a name like that, I’m sure we’ll have tons in common.”

“Drop the ‘gee’ and you’ll have a jumping off point.”

Matt laughed. “Bitch.”

“No, that’s Simone. Now, come on, help me bring my canvases upstairs.”

Together, Matt and Anton unpacked the van, carrying supplies and unsold paintings up three flights of stairs, leaving them outside the door to his apartment. When they were finished, Anton turned the key and stepped inside, Matt following. They were immediately met by a woman dressed in black tights and a black T-shirt hanging loosely over small breasts. An unlit cigarette dangled from her twisted mouth. Her face was pale, but pretty, and she wore no make-up, unless you counted a single black line under each eye. They highlighted already darkened irises, as well as her jet-black hair. Okay, Matt, though, she liked things dark. The cemetery comment made sense now.

“Well, you must be Matt,” she said in heavily-accented English.

“Yes. Gilly, I presume?”

“Not Mrs. Livingston, for sure” she said, twirling the cigarette in her long fingers before putting it back between puffy lips. “Okay, Anton, I’ll admit, he’s cute all right. Way too white, but hey...nice body, strong arms...I’m guessing an attractive smile if he managed one...I’d have

given him a second look. Of course, that second look would have told me he was gay.”

“Uh, Gil? Matt’s right in front of you.”

She seemed confused. “And?”

“Probably not the best to talk about him in the third person. You could address him personally. Maybe that might get him to smile.”

“You’re doing it, too.”

“What?”

“Acting like he’s not in the room.”

With that, she bit down on the cigarette and wandered into a tiny kitchen, where she sat down in a seat and grabbed her half-empty glass. Matt didn’t think it was water. On the kitchen counter was a half empty bottle of Stoli. He wondered when it had been opened.

“Sorry about her mood. She and Biker must have had a fight. Like always,” Anton explained to Matt. “Let me get you a drink. More wine, or do you want something stronger?”

Matt took another look at the surly Gilly and opted for something stronger.

“How about a martini?”

Gilly snorted. “We don’t do those in Paris. Just drink your vodka like a man. Like me.”

She drank from her glass, downing its clear contents until barely a drop remained. The cigarette continued to dangle out of the side of her mouth. Girl had talent, that’s for sure.

“So, are you going to light that cigarette?” Matt asked.

She shook her head. “Nope. Can’t. Sucks.”

“It’s one of our house rules,” Anton explained. “She doesn’t smoke inside the apartment. It’s not good for Henri.”

“Smoking anywhere isn’t good for anyone,” Matt said.

“Oh Christ, you picked up a fucking American boy scout? Are you serious Anton? I bet he folds his underwear. You sure you can handle vodka, kid? Or Anton?” She grinned. “He’s a fucking beast in bed—not that I remember it much, but I’ve heard him through the walls with his boyfriends and pick-ups and God is he loud when he comes.”

“Okay, Gil, that’s enough,” Anton said, handing Matt a glass of chilled vodka.

“Fuck,” she said.

She got up from her chair, grabbed her mobile, and opened the window. She stepped out onto a narrow ledge, a wrought-iron railing providing just enough safety. She had room enough to stand, the streetlights that lined the perimeter of *Pere LaChaise* like a nighttime postcard of a seedier Paris. She ruined the image for Matt as at last she fired up her cigarette. Matt heard a sigh escape from her that could have rivaled one of Anton’s “loud” orgasms.

“She’s sweet,” he said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“And like Henri, her English is very good. I would have expected her to be spewing French—intended for you, but directed at me.”

“Oh, Gilly’s very much like her son. Very deliberate in her actions,” he said, “She only spoke English tonight because she wanted to make sure you understood every insult she could hurl. She only swears when she’s been drinking, and judging from this bottle...well, she started early. Hopefully she’s done with us. No doubt Biker will call shortly and they’ll make up and she’ll disappear.”

As if on cue, Gilly’s mobile rang.

“Come on, let’s leave her to her call. She’ll either start yelling at him, or she’ll want to have phone sex. Could go either way.”

“What did you ever see in her?”

“Gilly was different when I met her. So was I.”

That statement was enigmatic enough to start off a long succession of questions, but Matt dropped it. Instead, he followed Anton out of the kitchen and down the hallway to the first of three doors. He cracked it open just enough to see his son sleeping peacefully, the light streaking in from the window and crossing the boy’s face. He looked all pure and innocent. Matt knew better. After closing the door, Anton grabbed hold of Matt’s hand and led him to the last door.

“You ready?”

“I’m nervous suddenly,” Matt said. “Is this where you keep your mother, Norman?”

“Haha, Matt. No, this is no scene from Psycho,” he said. “Rather, enter through this door and you are privy to my deepest desires. Few people are permitted entry, but I think it’s important that you see it. I think you’ll get a new insight into Anton Marcel—not the painting peddler, but Anton, the *artiste*.”

With that, Anton threw open the door, stepping aside to allow Matt first entry.

At first the room was completely darkened, but then Anton flipped a switch, bathing the room in a fast, quiet glow. Matt eyes took a moment to adjust, and when they did, he mouth opened in delight, in surprise.

“Anton...oh, wow...wow...wow.”

A broad smile covered Anton’s face. Matt turned back to his lover, pressing lips against his, the brush of his goatee sexy and alluring. Desire had flooded his loins, not just at what he’d seen, but at the rare privilege afforded him. That Anton had opted to share such a personal piece of himself, something so utterly captivating...it was unreal. Surreal. They kissed again, and when their lips separated, an unspoken message hovered between them. Yes, they wanted each other, right now, right this very moment, heat flooding them to the point where they wished to rip

their clothes off and amidst all that was in this room, make wild, passionate, all encompassing love. An erotic journey, perfectly complimented by the eroticism that permeated this room.

“Anton, these are...yours?”

He nodded. “All mine. Like I said, the real Anton Marcel.”

Anton closed the door behind him, leaving the two of them encased inside the crowded room, alone but not really, not with the dozens of images, faces and bodies, surrounding them. Some were framed, some hung loose along the walls, other were gathered in corners or laid out along the bed, the artwork Matt saw was among the most impressive he’d ever seen. Not that he was an expert in art, but Anton’s clear vision, his broad palate, his attention to detail—not to mention his overall theme—was a feast for the eyes.

“These are nothing like what I’ve seen you selling at your stand. I mean, those are good, I remember my first day, I almost bought one. But...”

“Ah, *oui*, those other paintings—they are mere trinkets, what tourists expect us peddlers to sell at such locations. We are as much a part of Paris as the attractions; myself and my fellow artists along the Seine. We all paint the same things—lovely street scenes of Paris, the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame, the bustling boulevards and outdoor cafes, they are our bread and butter, and yes, they provide me my income. But fill my heart they do not. This project of mine you see here...I have been working on it for many years, and my dream is to show them in a gallery and be considered a great artist among the glitterati in Paris. I sign my tourist art with the name Anton Marcel. These...my treasures, I sign them with a simple, flourishing ‘Anton.’ It is how I separate myself from...well, from myself. Like I said, I am several people, and as much as I am content with who I am now, to be who I wish to be would truly be a dream come true.”

Matt stepped further into the room, wanting a closer look at the art.

Here's what he saw:

Men, men, and more men. Each man was represented on a triptych of canvases, the first a literal portrait awash with color, another done in an oil abstract, the third a charcoal black and white, all shadows and angular curves. The one thing each and every canvas shared, what each and every man had, was the fact that there were no clothes to be found anywhere. These were all young men, muscled or slim, smooth, trimmed, hairy, all of them in various poses, some erotic and some more thoughtful, but all of them seemingly representing the personality of the individual model. What Matt detected was the beauty within each man, attractive faces and fine, youthful bodies, jovial smiles on some, serious expressions peering through canvas, lifelike even on the abstracts. As Matt encircled the room, he figured there were nearly twenty sets, which meant nearly twenty different men...

He turned to Anton. "Who are these men?"

"Please, do not judge me, but they were all, at one point, my lovers."

"All of them?"

"It is not like I have painted all of these in the past year, Matt."

"Sorry...no, that's not what I meant. We all have a past. We all have former lovers."

"Just not everyone paints them."

"Not everyone has such talent," Matt said. "What I find most interesting is the variety of men here. And not just blonde and brunettes, that kind of thing, but a black man...an Asian man, one who looks like he could be Middle Eastern. Some of these men look so exotic, makes me feel self-conscious—Gilly's right, I'm too white bread for you. You know, Anton, most of us gays have a certain type, and we keep responding to the same features, we go back to the same well time after time. You seem so open to experiment..."

Anton laughed. "I don't deliberately set out to find any type of man. But the result does help with my project. Do not misinterpret, Matt. I do not look at my collection and wonder what type of man I need to paint next. That is not how I choose my lovers, or my subjects. It all just happens...it's all rather organic," Anton said. Setting his vodka down on a nearby table, he placed a hand over Matt's heart, then his other hand upon his own chest. "This is how I decide whom I wish to paint, which man best suits my life's work. It's what beats inside the man."

"How does it happen? Do they pose for you?"

"Depends. Not all of them know about my collection, and I suppose if I ever do get a gallery to show them I'll need to clear some permissions. Not everyone wants their privates hanging in a gallery for all to see."

"I bet that guy won't mind," I said, pointing to the first set of paintings on the wall. A big muscled guy, his cock flaccid but impressively long and thick. "He's already well hung."

"Ah, yes, Jacques. Very big cock, but dumb as a doorknob, as you Americans say."

"Anton?"

"Yes, yes, Matt, I know I am American, too, but when I show my artwork I am but a struggling French painter. You play the role long enough, you believe it to be the truth," he said. "Those details I'll have to worry about when the time comes. But to your earlier question, some of these men have sat and posed for me while others I photographed. Some of the others...if the relationship has gone on for a time, my mind has a way of remembering every detail, the crooked smiles or a strange angle of a finger, the swirling pattern of a man's chest hair or the tilt of his penis, it's like my brain sees them even after they have left my heart."

"How poetic."

"Painting is poetry, Matt. The fluid movements of my hand, the gentle brushstrokes, it's a

mystery how my body knows where to paint on the canvas, what detail is missing, or whether I need to edit myself. It is one of the great joys of my life. I find no more solace than when I am at my stool, a brush in my hand. Gilly has said she has watched me for hours and I don't even look up. Time means nothing when Anton is behind the canvas."

"Now you're doing it."

"What?"

"Talking in the third person."

"Speaking of, let me check in on Gilly," he said. "You stay here, out of her line of fire, just enjoy my art. And perhaps when I return, I can enjoy you."

A lingering kiss followed, which left a swooning Matt staring after his lover as the man left the room. Matt smiled, realizing he was falling hard for this man. So fast, so quick, so deep. He was sexy and charming, and he had drive and ambition—and the talent to back it up. As a lover he was patient but passionate, and just the touch of him against Matt's skin sent sensations shivering throughout his body. Yes, it could just be the rush of new romance, but Matt felt not just his cock swell, but his heart. Even the hopeless romantic in him knew this was something more than fantasy.

Feeling like he's been left alone inside Anton's temple, he began to survey the room further. The paintings might be representations of the men Anton had dated, but they were also windows into the soul of the man who created them. These were men he had shared nights with, he had shared dreams with, and as such, he knew them, he knew how to look deep into them, each brushstroke unveiling clue after clue of their personalities. There was one man who Anton had painted facing backwards, a tight white buttock the main focal point, his face barely visible. Was the man a bottom? Or was he emotionally distant? That's what Matt liked about the art, the

fact each man was subject to interpretation.

On the floor in the back of the room, Matt came to another set, intrigued why it seemed to be hidden, or perhaps discarded. An early attempt? The first he'd created, maybe he wasn't as pleased with this one as with the others. If that was the case, then he had also would see one of Anton's earliest lovers, and that intrigued Matt even more. When we're young, we're foolish, and we can be taken in by any man who oozes charm. Often it turned to smarm, and indeed, as Matt got closer, that's exactly what he saw painted on the model's face.

The representation was clear. One hand rested against a chest covered in thick dark hair, the man's second hand was settled in his crotch, holding an elongated cock. If Matt had to guess a personality trait from this one, it was one of self-love. The man's affection for his own body was obvious. From an artistic perspective, Matt could appreciate the detail. It could not have been easy to paint that chest, because all that hair could have come off as just a black blob on the canvas, but each tuft was stroked with care, the lines clear. But what struck Matt the most was the familiarity of this man. Because of course he knew him. Because of course he was Gavin Simon. The smug expression on his face was as noticeable, as memorable, as his chest. Matt had tasted that self-satisfaction on Gavin's lips, he'd run his fingers through that fur, and both had left him with a feeling that nothing penetrated Gavin beyond the surface. His smugness left you cold, the chest hair blocked entry to his heart. Matt had to admit Anton had nailed him.

Which meant, of course, that since Gavin was part of this collection, he'd nailed Anton.

It was a question Matt had been avoiding: just how well did Gavin and Anton know one another? Sure, Gavin had introduced Matt to Anton, helped secure his living arrangements, but that only opened up more questions. If they had been lovers, why did it end? How long were they together? And why were they still in touch? That last one lingered long in Matt's mind, an echo

he felt trying to penetrate into the ventricles of his heart, an aneurysm waiting to explode.

Just then Matt felt a hand upon his shoulder and he jumped. Literally.

“Hey, sorry, I didn’t mean to surprise you.”

Matt turned to see Anton before him, and he suddenly felt very foolish. “No, I’m sorry. Just lost in my own world, I guess.”

“Or maybe thinking of him?”

Anton was pointing at the paintings of Gavin.

“Oh, him...” Matt began, but then his voice faltered. He couldn’t help it, he wanted to know more about the relationship between Gavin and Anton.

“I figured you would find those. It’s sort of why I left, to give you time to find it on your own. Simon—as you know, that’s how he introduced himself to me—he and I were over a very long time ago, and what we shared really wasn’t anything lasting. Nothing is, with Simon. He loves himself so very much.”

“Yes, I can see,” Matt said, indicating the portrait.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Anton said. “Matt, don’t be concerned about Simon. He is one man of many, and perhaps that makes me sound kind of slutty, it is merely just a fact of life. I know nothing about your past loves, and it’s not important, certainly not the quantity. I think that’s part of the trouble, we are always searching for quality but when it doesn’t present itself, well, we have to settle for quantity.”

“Meaning, when you can’t find love, at least you can find sex.”

“Succinct, yes, Matt.”

“So, what about me?”

“What about you?”

“Am I love, or am I sex? Am I a future member of the Anton collection?”

“Would you like to be?”

“I don’t like the idea of being an ex. But I would love for you to paint me. I think that would be incredibly sexy.”

“Yes, I agree, I would very much like to paint you. But not right now,” he said. “Gilly has left to be with Biker and I must remain behind with Henri. And like the rule we have for Gilly’s smoking, we have another rule.”

“Let me guess. No sex when Henri is around.”

“Correct,” Anton said, “but like Gilly, she has figured out a way around such a rule.”

“You want to have sex on that tiny balcony?”

Anton laughed. “No. But I can do this.”

Anton’s hand reached for the zipper of Matt’s jeans, sliding inside. Holding Matt’s cock, he waited as it grew hard, and then he went down on his knees. Matt’s pants quickly fell to his ankles, and his cock sprung out, fully hard. Anton slid the thick tip into his mouth, the warmth spreading down his shaft, heating his balls. Matt gripped Anton’s hair, closing his eyes from the sudden tremor of ecstasy rocking his body. Anton took the whole shaft in, inch after inch, causing Matt’s knees to buckle. As Matt’s eyes reopened, they fell to the paintings of Gavin. The man’s arrogance stared back at him, almost like he was laughing at him. Yeah, I did that too, Gavin seemed to be saying, I sucked Anton and I sucked you, and I’ll always hover between you both, sucking dry the romance blossoming before you.

Fuck you, that’s what Matt thought.

But his body reacted differently. He suddenly felt a powerful orgasm ripping through him. Anton must have felt the pressure building, because he pulled away seconds later. As Matt

looked down, white spurts of come shot out of his cock, quickly dripping off Anton's goatee, splashing Anton's rather surprised face.

"Sorry, that was fast," Matt said.

"It's okay, Matt, really. Again, I'll take that as a compliment."

But Matt wondered, then and later, long into the dark night as he slept alone back on the narrow bed inside his garret, whether his early release was indeed a compliment. Or if there was some darker feeling working its way through his body. The devil's seed growing within him, threatening to strangle their relationship. A devil of course played with flair by Gavin Simon.

CHAPTER NINE

“Would you sit still?”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not. You’re fidgeting.”

“I’m self-conscious.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“Great, so that’s what everyone will see? That’s my personality trait?”

“You’re the one who asked for that pillow.”

Matt looked down at his naked self, at the burgundy-colored pillow positioned just so, hiding his entire crotch—his cock and his pubes, the only visible part the thin line of hair that traveled north to his belly button, just a slight touch of the erotic, a tease of what might be hidden behind the fluff of pillow. Modesty was apparently the theme of the day. If you could count being otherwise naked, revealed, draped on the bed, with a man sitting across the room from you, staring intently as he stroked, brushed, painted. Capturing his soul as image.

“Well, excuse me for being a private person. I’m amazed I’m even posing for this.”

“Hey, Matt?”

“*Oui?*”

“Can’t you stop talking?”

“*Non.*”

“Oh, now he ups his vocabulary.”

“So, when do I get to see what you’ve done?”

“Never. I mean, when it’s done...if I think it’s good...Christ, Matt, you’re throwing off my concentration. Just sit there and be a good model. There’s nothing else to do today.”

Indeed, Anton was right, it was a good day to stay indoors. Paris was drenched with rain, the second day in a row. Matt and Anton were holed up inside the tiny garret, now transformed into the artist’s studio. Matt no longer a resident, he was a mere model, the object of this painter’s fantasy. Four days had passed since Anton had proudly showed off his collection, and each day Matt had brought up the idea of being part of it, even as a part of him wondered why that was so important to him. Anton had finally relented and said, “Fine, on the next rainy day, you’ll pose for me.” The rain had begun not five hours later, as the two were making love on the narrow bed, the pitter-patter of raindrops against the window a new syncopation to their eager motions. So Anton had done as promised, taken a day off. A rainy weekday along the Seine wasn’t the ideal scenario for selling his artwork anyway. Now here they were, Matt naked and Anton admiring his strong body.

Matt’s nipples were erect, partly because he was turned on by the sexy notion of being painted, but mostly because the room was surprisingly cold. Funny, it was mid-July, halfway through this crazy summer excursion of his, and this was the first time he could recall feeling anything but warm. It had been a hot summer, and he’d sweat a lot, walked a lot, which is probably how he’d been able to maintain a steady body weight. The copious quantities of wine and cheese he had consumed certainly hadn’t helped. Okay, the physical exertions he’d enjoyed, they might have added to his general good health, from the elusive Colton from the plane, the arrogant Gavin, but mostly the seemingly endless nights of passion with Anton.

Matt’s cock stirred from behind the pillow. Self-consciously, he pushed the soft pillow

against his crotch in an effort to lessen his growing erection. He would hate for Anton to think he was having sexual thoughts when the man was trying to be serious. His days off were rare, and Matt didn't want to waste his time. Still, his cock wouldn't go down, this experience was too thrilling. He couldn't wait to see the finished product.

That's when his mobile phone rang.

"*Merde*," Matt said.

Anton laughed. "It's okay, Matt, take a break. Answer your phone."

The phone wasn't within easy reach, and so Matt stretched in order to retrieve it. The pillow fell away, exposing his erect cock. Anton just shook his head with amusement, Matt tossing him a withering look. Then he answered the phone.

"*Bon jour*," he said.

"Well, as I live and breath. It's alive—and it speaks French!"

"Hello, Simone."

"Matthew, dear, where the hell have you been hiding?"

"No where. I've been here, around, doing stuff."

"Doing stuff? Or doing some hot young thing?"

"Kind of both."

"Ooh, do tell. So there is a man in the picture? Have you fallen madly in love, and the two of you have bought a charming villa in the South of France, and you plan to invite your best friend from Peoria-via-Paris to your wedding. Can I be the best man? Or best girl, or whatever you sweeties call it?"

She finally shut up.

"Are you done?"

“Sorry, Matty. It’s just...what, been a month since I saw you last. At my charming little party? I know you and Simon got on well, at least initially. He probably bored you at dinner, I know honey, he’s not really your type, talks too much about himself. Enjoy the body, but forget whatever else he has to offer because there is none.”

“Gee, you speak like that about your partner and friend, I wonder what you say when I’m not around.

“For your information, Simon can hear every word I’m saying. Say hello, honey?”

In the distance came a garbled hello, followed by something in French.

“What did he say?”

“He said you need to drop that ‘gee-whiz’ thing you do.”

“Fuck you,” Matt said.

“You’re right, he really said that,” she said with a throaty laugh. “Okay, Matt, so why am I calling? Well, a new client of mine is a total cutie, bigger than life, and Simon and I, we just finished designing his apartment and he’s hosting this party, and I thought why not invite you along, you can see some of my beautiful handiwork, and if you’re lucky, you’d made meet someone and get to experience hiss hand work.”

“So crude. But no thanks.”

“Well, bring your new toy. I’d love to meet him, and he needs to meet me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll either approve or not. I’ll email you the details. It’s tomorrow night.”

“What if I already have plans?”

“You don’t.”

“Simone, you’re such a bitch.”

“Yes, dear, I know, we all know. And you wouldn’t have it any other way.” She laughed again, and Matt thought he could hear Gavin’s laughter too. “See you tomorrow. And bring that boy of yours. We both want to meet him.”

“Both? Who else is coming?”

“Why Simon will of course be there. Ooh, do I sense drama? You went to bed with him, didn’t you? Matty, I told you he doesn’t fuck and tell, so I was counting on you. Have you been keeping away from me because of this juicy little secret? Oooh, this party will be more fun than I could have imagined. I want a front row seat. Will there be any bitch-slapping?”

“Only if you keep needling me.”

She ended the call with a loud screech of laughter, the sound echoing in Matt’s ear even after he’d set the phone back down. Near the end of the call, Anton had settled onto the edge of the bed, caressing Matt’s leg.

“Your friend?”

“Simone. Yes. We’re invited to a party tomorrow night.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Really?”

“Sure, why not? We’ve been out together, but never together with other people.”

“So, a coming out party, of sorts?”

Anton leaned over and planted a kiss on Matt’s lips. He looked down at Matt’s exposed crotch, scrunching his face.

“What happened to your hard-on?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Simone. She has that effect on men.”

* * *

The party's location surprised Matt solely because this was Simone he was dealing with. But he supposed when it came to business, when it came to landing a big account with lots of money to spend, she couldn't be all that discerning. So yes, tonight, Matt and Anton, dressed in fine suits, were headed to the Right Bank. To the broad avenue known worldwide as the Champs-Elysees, specifically. This was a high-end party, so the invitation from Simone had indicated. No shorts, no jeans, so Anton had cleaned up and Matt had pressed the only dress clothes he'd brought, not even sure he would need them when setting out to pack but doing it anyway, you never knew.

So here they were, the cab having dropped them off at the corner of the Rue Washington, just a few blocks south of the impressive Arc de Triomphe. The time was just past eight o'clock in the evening, and the rain had washed out over the land, leaving behind a stunning sunset of fiery orange in the sky on this mid-July's night. Everything was working out perfectly, from the setting of the party to the occasion, to the weather, to the perfect man at his side. The cynic inside Matt was quieted for once, allowing his true romantic side to finally win a battle.

"Could this get any better?" he asked Anton.

"Think everything's perfect, that's when life throws you a curveball."

"Anton, if you speak such analogies at the party, they'll spot an American so fast your beret will spin."

"Bitch."

"Nice."

"Speaking of, so I get to meet the famous Simone."

"Yes. Is your suit made of armor?"

As it was, Anton's suit was very nice, stylish Prada, his one indulgence that he kept in the back of his closet for any big occasion that might come his way. The suit had needed a fast cleaning, so long had it been since he'd been to a swanky affair. But he cleaned up real nice, his dark hair slicked back, his goatee freshly trimmed. He wore a simple dress shirt and no tie, and just the hint of his chest hair detectable beneath the open collar. Matt leaned in and kissed him, telling him how hot he looked.

"You too. That suit you're wearing, it's so tight against your skin you'd think someone painted it on."

"Said the artist."

True, Matt had always enjoyed the way clothes fit him, he was lucky that way. His body was fit, from a well-defined chest to strong, muscular legs. Fabric draped easily off of him. He had gone for a tie, the only one he'd brought, and he hoped it wasn't too much. Too formal for a summer Friday in Paris, he'd asked. Anton had merely fixed the knot, smiling as he did so. It was perfect, he'd said, as was the man wearing it.

At building 15, Matt double-checked the apartment number and then ran the bell for the top floor, the buzzer giving them instant admittance. They found a small elevator, which was waiting for them. He hoped they weren't too early, the party was scheduled for an eight o'clock start and he hoped they arrived fashionably late. He also hoped that Simone was already there, to be among the first to arrive and for the person who had invited them not to be there, well, was that considered bad form? For Matt it was, because it would limit his conversation. Who knew who these people were? French would dominant the night, and Matt would have to put on his best nodding smile.

"I'll translate," Anton suddenly said.

“What? I mean, how did you know...”

“I could hear your mind working, Matt. You make noise when you’re thinking.”

“Is that your way of saying you’re getting to know me?”

“Matt, English or French, it doesn’t matter. I could read you in any language.”

“I’m not sure that’s a compliment.”

Anton was spared a response as the doors opened directly into the host apartment, and they were immediately assaulted by the din of several dozens of voices. So much for thinking they’d be early. As Matt and Anton stepped off the elevator, a waiter holding a tray filled with glasses of bubbly (the real Champagne, Matt would soon discover) nodded to them, and each man happily accepted one of the crystal flutes. With no one to otherwise greet them, they toasted themselves, then drank.

The apartment was, in a word, stunning. High ceilings gave off the impression of it being larger than it was, but size wasn’t a concern anyway. The main room was expansive, and decorated to within an inch of its life, bold colors and fabrics, solids and patterns, on the furniture and drapes, it was modern and very ostentatious. Matt knew Simone preferred more subtle approaches to interior decorating, but if she had done this work it’s because the client insisted, and he had the budget to overspend on the overstuffed furniture, the budget to pay her. Like its location north of the Seine, with this apartment Simone had obviously made some concessions to her aesthetic.

“Well, hello there you two...uh, wait...*bon jour*.”

The words sprung forth from a man who had similarly appeared out of nowhere, and as friendly as his tone, his accent was just as bad. He wore blue jeans and rattlesnake boots, and on his graying head was one of those famous ten-gallon hats. You’ve heard of a Connecticut

Yankee in King Arthur's Court? Well, the image before them was a Texas cowboy in Louis XVI's house. It was the last thing Matt had expected, but all the same, having immersed himself in the French lifestyle for the past near-two months, there was something refreshing about this very American presence before him.

"I'm Claude Handers," the man said, extended his giant paw. "From Dallas, Texas."

"*Bon soir*," Anton said, "I am Anton, from Paris."

"Matt Donovan..."

"From Peoria by way of New York. Haha, you're Simone's friend! How y'all doing, so glad you could come to our pig roast."

Pig roast? In Paris?

"Thank you for inviting us," Matt said. "What's the occasion?"

"My little girl, my little Sheeba, she was accepted at that Sorbonne school. Talented little thing, she is. All she ever talked about, and well, how is a father to deny his little angel such a dream. Starts in the fall, she does. Just bought this place for her, and we did it up right. Your friends, Simone & Simon—ha ha, I went with them just because of their name, I always loved that old TV show—they did this place up real fast, though of course I paid handsomely for the overtime, but hey, it's only money, right? Only thing we have more than land in Texas is money...and oil. Hey, guys, have a great time, the honor is all on Big Texas tonight."

And with that the big man was enveloped into the crowd, leaving Matt and Anton with stunned faces.

"I'm surprised we weren't greeted with Long Horn beer," Matt said.

"I think you may need to translate for me tonight," Anton said, taking a long drag of his champagne. "I mean, I speak English fine, but Texas talk is another language all its own."

“Let’s just go with the flow. Maybe we’ll get to meet Sheeba.”

“Yeah, wow, what a name.”

“As in the Queen of Sheeba? More like Princess. But hey, Anton, you have something in common with Daddy’s Little Girl. You’re both artists.”

“I’m an artist. She’s a kid whose rich daddy got her into the Sorbonne.”

“Meow,” Matt said. “Jealous much?”

“Come on, my glass is empty. Let’s refill. Many times.”

As Anton moved on, Matt reflected for a second on this new side of Anton—the green-eyed monster side—and then realized there was little he could do about it. Jealousy was one of those deadly sins that formed early and was nearly impossible to change. Some people were lucky enough to be born into privilege and got everything their little heart desired, while others had to strive daily for the basics, and even so still had no guarantee they would achieve any success. Happiness was a slippery slope. Settling was a far more common human trait. Which led Matt to wonder, did there come a time in life when you realized who you were and became content with that person?

An answer was as elusive as a smile on Anton’s face. The two of them wound their way around the room, knowing none of the many assembled guests, reached out to none, none reaching out to them. It remained that way for the better part of a half hour, when, after three refills and little food, Matt noticed the elevator doors open to reveal a fashionable duo who could only have been the brains behind such an outrageously designed apartment. Yup, Simone & Simon had arrived.

Simone looked amazing, in a light green dress that showed off her curves, and most of her legs, so short was the dress. With her tan skin and blood-red lips, she was the picture of

vibrancy, and people immediately flocked to her. It didn't hurt that on her arm was one of the most attractive men in the room, perhaps in Paris, and that man was, dammit, Gavin Simon. He was draped in designer clothes that hugged his body like it wanted sex, and who knows, he might have just come from fucking some unsuspecting young thing. His face was unshaven, and his stubble was thick and dark, not unlike the chest hair on easy display. Gavin in full seduction mode.

"Let me guess, Simone," Anton said.

"And Simon."

"Yeah, him I smell."

Matt scrunched his nose, wishing Anton would lose this newfound negativity. "Hey, are you okay? We don't have to stay, just say hello to them and then we can be on our way."

"Are you kidding? We haven't even met Sheeba yet!"

Anton then finished his drink. Matt wasn't certain which number that was. He didn't want to count, and no doubt Anton wasn't counting. Should make for an interesting evening. As it was, he didn't get a chance to question Anton on his drinking because Simone was making a beeline for them. They were against a corner of the room. No place to hide. She approached them, planting double air kisses near Matt's cheeks, while Simon stood two steps behind her.

"Matty, *cherie*!" she exclaimed loudly. "And ooh, who is the cutie with you?"

Matt did the introductions.

"Anton. Simone. Simone. Anton."

God, it sounded so French. So Paris.

The back of his mind reminded him that all three of them were from the States.

Illusions seemed to be the order of the day.

“Enchante,” Anton said, extending a kiss upon Simone’s extended hand.

“Oooh la-lah,” she said, emitting a faint, girlish giggle. “Very charming. And of course, Matty you remember Simon. Who I believe insisted you call him Gavin, such a brute of a name, lacks the subtlety a designer needs.”

“Uh, speaking of subtlety, this apartment?” Matt questioned.

Gavin spoke up. “It’s what they wanted. The check cleared, that’s what counts.”

“Nice to know you have a price, Gavin,” Matt said pointedly.

“Okay, boys, calm down. You fucked, it didn’t work out, let’s move on.”

Simone’s bluntness brought them out of their world, the three of them realizing there was a fourth member of their little party.

“How are you, Anton?” Gavin asked.

“Fine. Good to see you, Simon.”

Simone looked once at Anton, once at Gavin, then askance at Matt. “My, I sense a past.”

“Let’s get you a drink, Sally.”

“Hey...that’s not even funny.”

“Nor was your comment. Welcome to my point.”

“Isn’t there an old lady who needs to be helped across the Champs?” she said.

That’s when Matt realized she was already pretty well lit. The party had begun before the party. Great, Simone was borderline drunk, Anton was quickly headed that way. And Gavin was...well, he was Gavin, which meant he was busy drinking himself in. Matt decided then to curtail his own intake, one of them here had to be the designed grown-up.

“You know...Anthony...”

“Anton,” Matt corrected.

“Whatever...you look familiar. I don’t know from where, but I think we’ve met...”

Anton’s eyes widened, and Matt took that moment to escort his friend out of the thick of the conversation, get her a glass of bubbly. Who knows, maybe she’d just pass out. If she remembered Anton from the kiosk at the Seine, there was no telling how she might react. Not that Anton was embarrassed by his job, but among these rich Americans, the last thing he needed was to be reminded of his failures. Matt turned back to give Anton a shrug, saw him engaged in a quiet talk with Gavin. Fear struck his heart, he still didn’t know the extent of their relationship, and now that he was stuck dealing with Sloshed Simone, he had to leave his new lover with a former lover, two men who shared their own version of something called a past.

So they circulated, Matt and Simone, the two of them who once upon had grown up in Illinois and had made the decision together to apply for the French exchange student program, and who knew both would be accepted, who knew that years later they would be reunited at some swanky, Texas-themed money-dripping party above the fashionable Champs-Elysees? But here they were, drinking expensive Champagne, meeting people from all walks of life, Americans with money, French folks with influence, Simone dropping names as quickly as she handed out her business card, Matt simply along for the ride. When they asked what he did, he said he was in between jobs, enjoying his summer in Paris, and while some were impressed with his blasé attitude toward life, others pushed him, and finally he confessed that he worked in philanthropy. He encouraged people with money to give it to people who didn’t have any.

“I don’t have any money, but I ask Daddy and suddenly...boom, I have it.”

That was the squeaky voice Matt heard behind him, and he spun around and was face to face with the previously alluded to Sheeba Handers. She was about five feet tall, seemingly was as wide as she was tall, if you dared use that word, and her face was pretty, if you thought a large

mole on her nose was alluring. Matt couldn't help it, he took a step back the moment he saw her.

"Oh my," he said, "You must be the famed Sheeba."

"*Oui, oui*," she said, smiling to reveal crooked teeth, slightly yellowed.

Couldn't Daddy's money fix all that? Especially that mole?

"You have an amazing name," Matt said, "I mean, some drag queens would kill for such a moniker."

"You know about drag queens? Are you one of the gays? Daddy said there might be some at my party, but I've never met one, not that I know of, and I've so wanted to, because, you know, I'm going to be living in Paris and doing arts stuff, and aren't all gays really creative? Wow, do you have a boyfriend?"

Matt wasn't sure how to respond, and luckily he didn't have to. Simon interjected.

"Sweetie, stick with me, you'll meet all sorts. This is your chance to see the world, break out of your shell," she said, embracing the girl but tossing Matt a look that said: get out while you can.

Matt realized Simone was still working. Perhaps Daddy still had another check to write and Simone needed to ensure it was delivered pronto. So he begged forgiveness, saying he needed to check on his "boyfriend," and while Sheeba clapped excitedly over such a concept Matt was able to slink away. Grabbing another glass, he downed his champagne in one gulp before setting out to find Anton.

He made his way outdoors. Seems every apartment he encountered on this trip had some sort of balcony, from his rooftop garret to Simone's office building to Anton's apartment, but what he saw here took the cake. It was a full deck, replete with furniture, a second bar, and had room enough for more than a dozen people. But what was most special was the view, two angles

actually. As Matt leaned against one side, he caught a perfect view down the Champs-Elysees, the wide boulevard awash with light and with cars, with people filling up the tables at outdoor cafes, stores still open on this weekend night servicing those who wished to shop or browse. And from the other direction, the majestic Arc de Triomphe rose up before him. He had visited the Arc during his second week, climbing up its stone stairs so he could appreciate the view of the city it afforded. And now here he was, six weeks later, staring back at it.

“Wow,” Matt said, the light breeze catching his word, carrying it over this city of dreams.

“It’s why I’ve never left.”

He knew the voice, but still Matt didn’t turn around. Instead, his guest leaned against the rail beside him. Matt looked to his right at Gavin Simon, realizing all dreams don’t come true. How he wished it were Anton at his side. Instead, it was the man who had introduced him, and on his face he wore a smug expression.

“So, Matt, I guess I did you a couple of favors.”

“How’s that?”

“Meeting Anton. You got an apartment for the summer, and apparently a lover, too.”

“And?”

“Just commenting.”

“I don’t believe you ‘just’ anything, Gavin.”

“Matt, why so hostile?”

Matt wasn’t even sure how to answer that one. He didn’t really have much reason to dislike Gavin, but he did nonetheless. He had some kind of past with Anton, he had used Matt for quickie sex which had left one of them satisfied. He might be good-looking, but the arrogance he wore on his sleeve was his least fashionable accessory.

“Look, Gavin, I appreciate what you did for me. But I think I paid for it already.”

Gavin nodded knowingly. He drank from his glass, letting the silence grow cold between them. Then he said, “So, has he offered to paint you?”

“Excuse me?”

“For his so-called ‘collection.’ I’m guessing he’s already showed it to you. My question is, has he offered to make you part of it? Because if he has, that means he’s already written you off, you’re just another conquest. All Anton cares about is getting some rich gallery owner to take notice of his stuff so he can stop peddling his wares outside the Louvre. He’s not a happy man, and only success will make him truly happy. Certainly another man won’t do that, even one as handsome and charming as you, Matt.”

Gavin turned to him, leaning seductively against the rail. Sometime during the party his shirt had opened further, revealing more of his hairy chest. That enticing thicket of blackness was just inches away from Matt, and he knew it was supposed to turn him on but knowing the character of the man who displayed such a sexual feast, he was easily able to hold back.

He said nothing else to Gavin, he just moved back inside.

It wasn’t any better there.

Because a very drunk Simone was pointing at Anton who was calmly seated by himself across the room. “I know where I know you from. You’re one of those peddlers outside the museums. Yeah, I met you...Matty, where are you, Matty, did you know, honey, your friend Anton...he works along the Seine, he paints those awful scenes of Paris, and then overcharges for them. Hey...hey, where’s our little Sheeba...Sheeba, don’t take a page from this guy. You stay in school and do everything your art teachers tell you.”

Matt hung his head, feeling awful for Anton, wanting to slap Simone.

Wow, she really was a bitch.

He bypassed his friend, making his way toward Anton. His lover had taken a fresh glass of champagne, and he downed it fast, reaching for another before the waiter could serve others. Matt wanted to grab that glass, but in the end he allowed Anton the indulgence, figuring that after what he'd heard Simone announce to these tacky guests—and that's what they were, people without tact, these people with money—Anton was entitled.

“Come on, let's go.”

Anton didn't put up any argument. Matt led him toward the elevator, and after he pressed the button the doors quickly opened. They stepped in, Matt praying for the doors to close. They didn't, because someone had put a hand up to stop them. Matt looked up and noticed the ugly visage of Sheeba. She was staring right at Anton.

“Are you really one of those artists we see all the time around the museums?”

Anton nodded. “I am.”

“Wow, that is so cool,” she said. “Want to know a secret? I wish I could do as you do, just paint, be happy. But I have no independence. Daddy controls everything. Hey, you want to know an even bigger secret?”

“What's that?”

Sheeba grinned like an ugly Cheshire Cat. “I have absolutely zero talent. Attending the Sorbonne is just my way to get away from Daddy and his over-protectiveness. Hey, maybe I'll come visit you by your stand, I could use some fun artwork for this overdone apartment. Bye guys, thanks for coming. You're my favorites. I never met any gay guys before, but I always knew I'd love them.” Then she held out a business card. “That's my number, maybe you guys can give me a call. Tell me where the lesbians hang out. Sshh. Okay, bye!”

The doors closed.

Matt looked at Anton, who looked at him back.

Who knew the ugliest person at the party would end up the most beautiful?

CHAPTER TEN

“You want to talk about what just happened?”

“No.”

“Are you upset?”

“No.”

“You want to go somewhere and have a drink. It’s been a few weeks since I’ve been over here on the Right Bank, a cozy drink at one of the cafes along the Champs would be nice. Romantic, yes?”

“No.”

“Got anything else you want to say?”

Eyes glared at him. “*Non.*”

Give him credit for consistency. Maddening consistency. If Matt had learned one thing about Anton Marcel, it was his ability to shut completely down when something didn’t go his way. Evidence the morning after their first night together, and now this...whatever this was. So what, Simone was drunk and she made a fool of herself—at Anton’s expense. But Matt wanted to tell Anton that no one cared he was a “peddler,” the people at that party were clueless Americans who’s first connection they made when they heard “French” was “Fry.” Why Anton should be bothered by anything that happened, Matt wasn’t sure. But here they were, Anton upset and not talking, Matt feeling useless as he walked beside him.

So he said nothing further, and the two of them headed back down the broad avenue, its

lights so bright it might have been daytime. Instead, it was nearing midnight, and the crowd was finally starting to thin, cafes closing down the further away they ventured from the tourist areas. They came to the enclosed Place de la Concorde, the traffic quiet, the towering obelisk at its center bathed in soft light. In the distance the Eiffel Tower flickered, and for Matt, he was torn. What better surrounding was there than Paris on a summer's night with the man who'd stolen your heart at your side, but when that man would not hold your hand, would not let you inside his mind, to say the image was spoiled was understatement.

Finally they wound their way to the river, walking along a near-deserted Quai des Tuileries. With its expansive gardens on their left, the Seine to their right, Matt decided to chance it, a romantic gesture, hoping enough time had passed to allow Anton a chance to calm down. As Matt's fingers touched Anton's, he felt slight resistance, but only for a moment. At last the man allowed Matt's hand to fully grasp his, and that's when Matt gazed over with a look of love and support. Thankfully the desired affect was achieved, as Anton put his head on Matt's shoulder. They walked that way for a time, ignoring the looks of occasional passersby, drunk teenagers, conservatively minded tourists. Love was love, Matt wanted to say, his heart swelling with the idea that he had found what he'd come for in Paris.

"I'm sorry," Anton finally said, his voice strained still with emotion.

"It's okay."

"I walked this way on purpose," Anton confessed.

The reason dawned on Matt like a splash of water upon his face. He was shocked awake, and not happily so. They had come to the Pont Royal, which of course meant they were at Anton's place of work. Tonight the Quai was quiet, with only a few die-hard peddlers gathered, and even they were beginning to close up shop. Anton broke from Matt's embrace and stood

before the empty spot which usually he occupied, and what he did was sudden, unexpected, sad. He spit on the cobblestoned sidewalk.

“Anton...don’t.”

“Your friend is right, I am but a lowly painter. I am no one special.”

“No, don’t you ever think that. I’ve seen your work...my God, Anton, the collection you showed me...it’s so impressive. You have a remarkable vision, its completely unique.”

“And completely unshowable. No gallery would ever touch it.”

“You don’t know that.”

Anton looked up at Matt, his eyes a mixture of anger and sadness. “Please, Matt, I know you are only trying to help. I have been in Paris for over a decade and I am no closer to achieving my dream than the day I stepped off that plane. The youthful artist is now just an aging dreamer. My priorities have shifted—it is all about my boy. Henri is my dream now, and he is my dreamer.”

“I don’t believe you think that. Anton, you want Henri to be proud of you?”

“Of course.”

“Then never give up on your dream,” Matt said. “Look, I’ve been doing some thinking. About what you said to me the other week. You asked me what my plan was—how would I support myself, you know...if I stayed beyond summer. If I made Paris my home.”

“Matt, don’t you play dreamer, too. I admire your practical nature.”

“Yeah, except it’s not me. My heart usually controls me, it’s just held back on this trip, too scared to beat fast. Because my brain knows the possibility exists that I may never leave Paris, it has captured my soul...you have captured my soul. Anton, I can stay, and I can use my abilities to raise money for your gallery show. If one of the commercial galleries won’t take a

chance on you, my God there have to be plenty of independents, those who appreciate your avant garde sensibility. I can find them. I can convince them to take a chance.”

“Matt, you first need to learn the language,” Anton said, the first hint of a laugh hitting his lips. “They will not do business with you otherwise. We French, we are quite xenophobic, especially when it comes to Americans.”

Matt resisted telling Anton he was one of those dreaded Americans.

“Besides, Matt...to get involved with my personal life is difficult enough, you have met both Gilly and Henri, they don’t take easily to change...to new people in their lives. I couldn’t ask you to further involve yourself in my life, my business.”

“I am involved with you, Anton. Don’t you get it, either. I’ve fallen in love with you!”

Anton smiled wanly, not exactly the reaction Matt expected. As his lover pressed his hand against his cheek, he said, “Matt, what you are feeling is a natural affectation of the city. To be in Paris is to fall in love, and to fall in love is to be in Paris. You are not alone in feeling such things, but trust me, a week back in New York and you will realize what’s real and what’s fantasy.”

“You’re wrong, Anton. Why are you doing this? I thought you loved me.”

“I do, Matt. That’s why I’m doing this.”

“This...? What is...this?”

He kissed Matt beneath the moon, with all of Paris seemingly watching them, crying for them. The city knew what was transpiring long before Matt did, and as the realization dawned on him at this change to midnight, lights began to flicker off. The city grew darker. Anton pulled away from his kiss, wiping away a tear.

“It is for the best, Matt.”

“Anton...”

“Good-bye,” Anton said, and with that he ran, ran far and ran fast, his shape swallowed by the enveloping night. Not even his shadow remained behind to comfort him. Matt realized he’d been dumped, ironically left alone at the very location he and Anton had first met. Or perhaps done on purpose? Had Anton been planning this all along?

Artists, they were temperamental, hard to predict. If Paris was poetry, it was no wonder so many poets died young, hearts broken by words given voice.

* * *

The first day, Matt attributed the silence to the impulsive actions and emotions of the night before. To absorb all Anton had expressed, it would require more time, and as the weekend was upon them what demanded his attention was concentrating on his business. Selling his paintings, providing for his son. Even though he had spat upon the place he worked, Matt knew that with the rising on the sun would come a dawning realization, rational thought would prevail.

By the second day, paranoia began to creep beneath Matt’s skin. Had Anton been serious about ending their relationship? Was the funny, charming, smiling artist with the goatee and the beret really gone from his life, almost as quickly as he’d entered it? Would they kiss no more, no more feel the heat emanate between their naked selves as their passion exploded. His touch, his taste, Matt could still sense them, and he wanted nothing more than to turn his memories into fresh experiences.

On day three, Matt decided he wasn’t going to give up without a fight. He had come to Paris to fall in love, and by some miracle he had. So to let go now...well, no way could Matt

allow that. And suppose he convinced Anton to try again; did lightning strike twice? One strike could jolt the heart; a second could silence it. So, he awoke early and was on the streets by nine o'clock, joining the bustling fray as they embarked on a new work week. Gee, Monday already. How had he survived the long weekend by himself? He wasn't even sure he'd had a single conversation with another one than himself.

He hopped the Metro, wanting to get to the riverbank fast. It was an oppressively warm day, the humidity causing him to break out in a sweat almost immediately. The train wasn't much better, but as they traveled through the underground tunnels he could at least enjoy the breeze blowing through opened windows. He took the Metro one stop behind his destination, not wanting to appear on the Pont Royal, where Anton had so easily spied him. Getting off at Tuileries, he made his way to the *jardins*, grabbing a croissant and café au lait. He pondered the words he would say to Anton, deciding none sounded right. Too rehearsed. Just go with your gut. You see his face, you'll know just what to say.

Except that's not what happened.

He crossed the Quai, making his way to Anton's location.

It was empty. Bare. No paintings, no easel, no stool.

No Anton.

"Damn," Matt said.

His fingers curled into his fists, anger coming over him. What the hell was going on? It was one thing to break up with him, but to sacrifice his livelihood? Over what? Some stupid comment made by a woman overwrought by her own pretentiousness and too much booze? Matt wanted to charge right over to Simone & Simon's office and give his friend a piece of his mind, let her know the damage she had done. She'd probably laugh it off, tell Matt he was better off

without such a loser for a boyfriend. Like Gavin Simon was any better of a catch. Matt would take real over rich, passionate over passionless, sweetness over arrogance. But unleashing his anger at Simone could wait.

Anton could not.

A determined Matt returned to the Metro, and though it required several transfers, he emerged an hour later back into the sunlight, an ironic condition considering where he was let off. *Père Lachaise* cemetery, the final resting home of world-renown singers, playwrights, and yes, famous artists and painters. Matt chose not to think of the irony, an artist, a cemetery, and a relationship on life support. If Anton had his way, he'd pull the plug, bury it right here amongst the other ruins. Matt had other plans.

Bypassing the high cement walls and the throngs of tourists gathering to locate Jim Morrison, Oscar Wilde, Maria Callas, so many others, he turned the corner and made his way to Anton's apartment. He stopped in his tracks. He was faced with his first roadblock.

"Bon jour, Matt."

"Bon jour, Gilly," he said.

She was outside because she was smoking, and by the collection of littered butts around her she was enjoying a smoke-a-ton. Leaning against the wall, either dressed in the same black she wore the other night or maybe her entire wardrobe looked like this, she had an air and attitude about her that said "don't piss me off." Was she waiting for Biker, or...maybe Matt? Anton's line of defense began with his ex-wife, she probably knew him better than anyone. She had seen him through other break-ups. She had watched him crawl into himself, only to emerge with another set of paintings for his prized collection. For the first time, Matt wondered if the collection had a name. Certainly a theme was prevalent, but a theme...that would give greater

insight on the inner workings of Anton Marcel's heart.

"I've come to see Anton," Matt said.

"I didn't figure you wanted me," she said, puffing a thick cloud of smoke toward him.

"Will you let me upstairs?"

"He's working."

"No, he's not. I just came from the Seine. He's not set up today."

"I know. He's upstairs, locked behind his door. Completing a new piece, no doubt."

"Me?"

"I'll give you that, Matt. He rarely showed anyone his collection. But you, he did. And quite soon after meeting you, too. You definitely had an effect on him, but whatever happened, and no he didn't confide in me, whatever happened cut him deep. He's been locked up there since Friday night, emerging only for food and bathroom breaks and to read Henri a story at bedtime. I can't let you disturb him."

"Will you give him a message for me?"

She lit a fresh cigarette. "Depends."

"Tell him I'll be home...at the garret. He can meet me there at eight o'clock tonight, but if he doesn't show, I'll pack my bags. Move back into the hotel. If it's truly over, he has to tell me himself."

Gilly nodded. "I'll tell him. That's all. No guarantee."

Matt thanked her, started off. But something made him turn back. A feeling that Gilly had something else to say, and he was right. She'd even stubbed out her cigarette before it had burned down to her fingertip, a gesture unto itself.

"Let me tell you something, Matt."

“I’m listening.”

“You rattled him. You changed him. He’s been a different man these past few weeks. I thought for sure you were the one. But then he characteristically shut down. He does that, and it takes him sometimes months to emerge. Tortured artist thing, I guess. Maybe it makes him feel closer to his work, who knows what really goes on inside his mind. I’ll give him your message, and I’ll even encourage him to go. What he’ll do, I have no idea. Maybe he’ll surprise us both and pull out some romantic gesture that will have the two of you living happily ever after. Or maybe he’ll do something truly awful to ensure you get the point. To leave him alone, fly home to America and forget all about him.”

Matt nodded several times, absorbing each word, feeling he was gaining great insight into Anton’s character.

“Thanks. I’ll be waiting.”

As Matt wound his way around the corner, he turned back to find the street empty. Gilly had gone back inside, presumably to deliver his message. Could he trust her? She’d been nothing but a bitch to him the night they met, but there was something in her tone that made him think she was on the up and up. He headed back to the Latin Quartier, somewhat satisfied, but somewhat disturbed. Gilly’s words rattled inside his bones like pinballs.

He could sweep Matt off his feet.

Or he could cut him down.

Time would tell which one it was.

* * *

Seven o'clock, an hour till his appointed time with Anton, assuming that he'd even show. Matt had eaten a nervous dinner, ordering a third glass of wine as dessert. So he wasn't drunk but he was buzzed, and truthfully it felt good amidst the humid Paris night.

He came to his building, fear taking hold of him.

Friday night might have been a battle.

Tonight felt they would decide who won the war.

As he walked mindlessly up the stairs, Matt was struck by a loud noise coming from somewhere upstairs. A hammering sound, as though one of his neighbors was doing home repairs. At this hour? Who would be that inconsiderate during the dinner hour? Nearing the top floor, the wine slowing his progress, the sound intensified, and a fearful realization washed over him. This wasn't home repair, this was the very clear sound of two people having sex, and the problem was, rather than fading into the background, the higher up Matt climbed the louder it became. Of course it was coming from the top floor.

From the garret.

From his place.

He stopped on the top step, almost afraid to complete his journey. Perhaps he should just turn around, whatever was going on was not his business. Anton, by his silence, had seemingly made it clear that whatever he and Matt had shared was over. Gilly had confirmed his fears. And how his ears were confirming them, too. A banging against the wall was a familiar sound for Matt, he knew that when he and Anton had fucked, the headboard was constantly doing battle with the apartment wall.

He moved down the hallway, pressing his ear against the door.

Grunts could be heard through the thin wood, eager thrusts accompanying them. Matt

could detect heavy breathing, recognizing Anton's wheezy patterns. Matt's heart felt torn, like it had dropped from his chest, disappearing into some deep chasm. Anton was just beyond this door, and someone was with him, and that someone...he was fucking him. Hard, from the sound of it, and Anton, from his pent-up pants, he seemed to be enjoying himself. So the only question facing Matt was simple: who was fucking him? Did he dare unlock the door and catch them? Did he wait for their climax?

His hand touched the doorknob, nearly slipped off. Sweat coated his palms.

His cock was slightly hard inside his pants.

He wished he could have been the man in bed with Anton.

He wished it was him behind that energetic fucking.

But in a way, Matt was a full participant. Both men were fucking with him.

Just then he heard a cry escape from Anton's mouth. Matt knew that sound so well. He was close, the pressure was building inside his cock. The banging against the wall increased, his partner no doubt responding to his cries. Without another thought, Matt slowly, quietly turned the lock, the door unsurprisingly opening with a slight squeak. Regardless, he was sure neither man would notice his intrusion. And he was right. The sight before him held him in place, even as both men plunged further into their acrobatic motions.

Anton was on top, bouncing, bucking, riding hard the naked man. His body was sweat-slicked, like they'd been going at this for hours, his shoulder-length hair damp, stringy. The man below him was receiving each buck with a powerful thrust all his own, his strong arms holding Anton's ass tight against his body. Anton was grunting loud, his panting like staccato bursts of raindrops against glass. His hands were planted hard against the man's virile chest, fingers laced in, grabbing at thick tufts of black hair.

Matt would recognize that hairy beast anywhere. Gavin Simon.

“Yeah, man, ride that cock...give it to me, yeah...”

“Oh, oh, yes...harder, more...hurt me. Hurt me. Hurt me.”

Anton’s words shocked Matt to his core. What the hell did that mean, hurt me? And the way he was pleading for pain, did he mean physically, or was something else happening here? A form of punishment for Anton? Was this guilt mixed with some form of misguided passion, was he sweating out the love he’d felt for Matt?

Gavin lifted Anton off of him, throwing him onto his back. He repositioned himself, and quickly thrust his cock deep inside Anton’s ass. It was amazing, really, how oblivious they were to their audience. Or maybe they weren’t? Maybe this was all part of it, literally driving home the point. Matt suddenly turned around. He’d seen enough, and he’d heard enough. He quietly stepped back, closing the door behind but not latching it. The banging continued, grunts louder still as each man neared his desired orgasm. Matt tried to close his eyes, but that was worse, the images coming to him flickered brighter than reality, heightened by the color of betrayal. He saw Anton’s legs in the air, his fingers threaded through the thick hair on Gavin’s back, while the beast just fucked him like he was more animal than human, his language guttural, unintelligible.

Matt somehow made it back to the street before his knees buckled and he went down. The sidewalk was cool at this time of night, but it felt good, it reminded him he was alive. That his heart still beat, despite the emotional shattering it had just suffered. Where to go, what to do? He sat still, watching several people wander past him, none of them curious why a man might be sitting on the cobbled stones of the sidewalk, probably just drunk. It didn’t help that he felt sick to his stomach, the acid churning his dinner and wine into a mush of emotion.

More wine. That sounded good, getting drunk.

Forgetting all he'd seen.

Forgetting all of this. Forgetting Paris.

He finally got up, and he started to walk. He needed to walk, all the way back to New York if such a thing were possible. Anywhere but the Rue Saint Jacques, anywhere but the kiosk along the Seine, anywhere in Paris that reminded him of Anton, of Gavin, even Simone, all Matt wanted was to get out of Paris altogether. Tears of regret spilled down his cheeks, and he didn't bother to wipe them away. They fell to the sidewalk, staining them. As though Paris cried for him, too, allowing his sorrow to seep into its soul. As though Paris was saying good-bye.

If Paris wanted to embrace him one last time, Matt was going to the place where he could see the city laid out at his feet. Hopeless romantics, they felt deep, they fell hard, and they also wept hard, and Matt was determined to do all while towering high above the world.

He made his way, of course, to the metal skeleton that was the famed Eiffel Tower. He paid his admission, waited on the line amidst both families and lovers, and made his way to the first level, continuing to the next elevator, which shot him up to the narrow point near the top. Once there, he ventured outside, the warm breeze hitting him in the face. It was just what he needed, a wake up call. Matt made his way to the railing, his eyes scanning the beautifully lit city, its wide boulevards awash with colorful streaks, its attractions bathed in soft glows. He ignored all those around him, preferring to think he was alone, alone on the Tower, alone in this world, and then he began to think.

What to do next?

Where to stay?

Was there anything in his arrangement with Jake and Freddie that prevented him from going home early? What could be accomplished in six weeks time? And did he even want to try?

He'd fallen in love, and he'd been burned...scorned. To find Anton in bed with Gavin, to watch them as they grunted like uncaged animals, Matt doubted he could forgive him. If this was his attempt to hurt Matt—as Gilly had warned—then he had succeeded wildly. Freddie had poked fun at the idea of love, at the possibility of finding love. You weren't supposed to look for it, it was just supposed to find you. Pierce you, Cupid's arrow a phallic precursor.

Matt whipped out his mobile phone.

Who to call?

Jake, in London?

Freddie, in Rome?

They were his best friends, but even so he couldn't deal with the humiliation. Wait until September, when they would again gather at their agreed upon Gaslight bar and over beers tell their varied stories. No contact until then. So then why had he taken out his phone? Calling the airlines? Get me on your first flight out of this beautiful city, a city where the lights filled your heat but where rain-slickened sidewalks pulled the world out from under you.

Reaching for his wallet, he noticed a business card tucked behind some Euros.

He pulled it out, almost laughed with irony.

Impulsiveness had him dialing the number. There was no way he would answer.

"Hello?" Matt heard on the other end.

"Oh, uh, hi...I don't know why I called, sorry..."

"From the plane," the deep voice said. "Matt, right?"

"You remember?"

"Have you fallen in love with Paris?"

"Yes. And it has suddenly fallen out of love with me."

There was a pause on the other end, and finally Colton Abbott said, “I know the perfect solution. Tell me, Matt, would you like to take a little trip? I’d love some company.” His voice grew deeper still as he said, “I’d love your kind of company.”

Matt knew what that meant. Sex, sex, sex.

But such a scenario was just fine with him. More than fine. Matt could shut down. Matt needed to shut down, to quiet his wounded heart. If Anton could so easily move on, why the fuck couldn’t Matt?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Matt stood near the edge of the high-dive, looking down at the crystal blue waters, contemplating taking the big plunge. Above him, bright golden sunshine beamed down on him, heightening the tan he'd been working on for the past week. The weather had been ideal, allowing him to fall into a bit of a routine with each passing day. Sun up, a light breakfast, laps in the pool followed by an enjoyable roll in the hay, lunch, a nap, dinner and drinks, followed by an even longer, more satisfying fuck upstairs in the huge master bedroom. This was the good life, he thought, standing high above the canary-colored villa, the glistening azure waters of the Mediterranean like a giant-sized postcard. No worries, no attachment, no emotion, and as such, no heartbreak.

"Every day you threaten to jump from that high board, and every day you chicken out," said the man's booming voice from beside the pool. "Come on, Matthew, let's see you change things up for once."

"Are you challenging me, Colton Abbott?"

The man guffawed. "I think it's you challenging yourself. No one put a gun to your head forcing you to climb up there. Matthew, your mimosa awaits you, and so too do I."

Matt stared down at his handsome host, sitting on a lounge chair, wrapped in a light white and blue striped robe, sipping at his daily treat of champagne and orange juice. It was only ten o'clock in the morning. Matt saw his own glass on the marble tabletop calling to him. To take the plunge, he would have to as well. His hesitancy came from not being much of a diver, but to just leap into the water feet first seemed like a cop-out. But he'd been playing it safe since his arrival,

and for once he felt like he was starting to emerge from the cocoon he'd wrapped around himself. Go ahead, it's just twenty little feet, the water is certainly deep enough to catch him. So, just do it...take a chance. Like Paris, the summer had all been about chance, and yes he'd gotten hurt but sometimes wounds healed, time let you move on.

Matt eased forward, his toes curling around the edge of the fiberglass board. Out on the salty sea, boats floated, bobbing in the water. He thought he could detect someone waving to him from the horizon. To his left the Alps began their slide beneath the Mediterranean, its rocky bluffs majestic against the sun's heavenly rays. All around him nature bloomed, people living amongst such beauty with relaxed concentration. Go ahead, it all seemed to be saying, open up, let the world back in. Let the heart feel the rush of living. And that's when he leaped, his body rushing into the open air, and for a moment he felt like he was flying...flying...

Ten days ago he had taken another leap. He'd boarded a morning train out of Gare Lyon, watching out the window as Paris disappeared behind him, the five-hour journey to Nice giving him plenty of time to forget his troubles. He still couldn't believe the invitation he'd received, as unreal now as when it had been offered while on the phone at the Eiffel Tower. That Colton Abbott had remembered him was compliment enough, but for him to take pity on him and invite him down to the South of France for an unspecified amount of time, well, it was even more surreal than any part of the trip so far. Saint-Jean-Cap Ferrat, he'd said, easiest way was to train to Nice, cab it from there. He'd provided the address along the winding Chemin du Roy, his classic villa painted white and yellow easy to find. From the moment of his arrival, Colton had been an able host, not pressuring Matt to say anything about what had happened between he and Anton, instead just letting nature take its course. It was the second night, after much wine, that Matt agreed to Colton's offer of sex, and accompanied him upstairs to the master suit.

“Certainly larger quarters than our first time.”

“Tucked inside a tight airplane bathroom, rolling around a king-size bed, both work for me,” Colton had said. “Intimacy finds a way. We can be as close as needed, then afterwards have as much space as needed. You do not need to spend the night, your room is your sanctuary, and I urge you to take advantage of it. But later, first take advantage of me.”

So that had been the second plunge Matt had taken, indulging his passions nightly with a lover who expected nothing more beyond a physical release and some companionship.

Now that Matt had released himself, falling through the air, his heart beating faster by the rush of having finally taken to the air. The howling wind in his ears was quickly followed by a watery crash, his body splash-landing in cool, translucent waters. He surfaced, water rushing off his face, his hair smooth against his head.

“Nicely done,” Colton said, standing at the edge of the pool. “Now, how about that joining me in our morning mimosa?”

Matt’s palm hit the patio, his strong arms pulling himself up over the edge. He noticed Colton watching how his biceps bulged, noticed those weren’t the only muscle bulging. Colton’s cock was peeking out of the folds of the robe. Standing tall, he was directly facing Colton, their bodies separated by mere, uh, inches. A kiss came his way, the taste filled with the tangy goodness of orange juice and bubbly fun of champagne. As he pulled away, Matt downed the proffered glass in one enthusiastic gulp, the empty glass quickly taken from him. Colton came at him again, and Matt accepted the second kiss. He grabbed hold of the robe’s belt, loosening it. He could already feel the man’s impressive cock pressing against his tan leg. Matt opened the folds, pushing the robe back over his shoulders, where it easily fell to the ground. Colton kept himself fit, something Matt hadn’t been able to discern that night on the airplane, but seeing him

now, naked, his skin burnished gold by the wicked sun, he admired how well he looked. Matt knew Colton was forty—at least—but his hair showed no sign of gray, not on his head, not on the generous blanket on his chest. Matt ran his fingers over the man's chest, ruffling the hair as he followed the whirling trail down his belly. Down on his knees he went, taking the man's hard cock inside him. Like his plunge from on high, he just leaped in with gusto, sucking the man's entire, vein-thickened length. He sucked deep, long, rubbing the sensitive tip against his scruffy chin. Sending shock waves along Colton's spine, Matt eased the man down on to the lounge chair, lifting his legs into the morning's warm air. He bent down, licking the tight sac, tasting the salty sweat produced by the early heat of the day. With one finger, he pressed deep inside his ass, massaging him, opening him, before pressing his tongue between the man's cheeks.

“Oh, yes...lick that ass...”

Matt's stubble scraped against the tight, tan skin just as he felt Colton's hand grip his hair. Forcing Matt's face deep into his warm hole, he groaned loudly while Matt's eager tongue darted in, out, in...deep now, an eager thrust.

“Ooohh,” Colton exclaimed with surprise.

Matt had never ventured this deep, he'd always been reticent about rimming, and right now he wasn't sure what will had taken hold of him. His morning was a continual assault of new plunges, literal, figurative, sexual, and he felt his body awakening, as though the dream-world he'd been living in for the past week-plus had popped, and this was the new reality, heat, sun, sex, desire, champagne, and he let them all consume him. He pulled his tongue out, pushing Colton further up against the chaise. With minimal effort he grabbed hold of a condom from the breakfast tray, sliding it down his elongated cock. He could already feel it pulsing, pre-cum leaking from the tip.

“Yes, take me this instant...”

Matt did, plunging (there was that word again...), plunging deep inside Colton. His cock met little resistance when it pierced its host, pushed deeper still. Matt thrust, once and then again, pushing his entire length against the man's furred ass. Holding his legs high at the ankles, Matt pumped, pumped, his hair flopping in the wind, dried now by the sun. He stole a look down, watching as his cock worked with piston-like motions, and he was struck by how tan he was all over, the privacy he was afforded here giving him the confidence to sunbathe nude, to fuck outside here by the pool, and the combination had smoothed out his color. The look made him smile, one he exchanged with Colton.

Matt continued his breathless, eager fucking, Colton taking each full-bodied thrust with pleasure. Desire bubbled up within each of them. Releasing the man's legs, he waited for them to wrap around him, to keep his cock from slipping out of his ass. Matt leaned down, hands placed on Colton's chest for support. He fucked him, hard, hard, harder still, fingers getting lost within the dense hair. His eyes blurred with sweat, the images in his mind providing more visual than what he could actually see happening beneath him.

“Uh, uh, uhhhhhhh,” Matt vocalized, his grunts swirling in the breeze around them.

Just then Colton's cock twitched, hot, ropey spurts of come shoot out of him. Milky white drops splattered across the dark brown hair of his flattened belly. He let out a cry of relief as his hand wrapped around his cock, urging every drop to seep out. Matt continued to screw him, his pace quickening, the slap of skin against skin loud now. He was close, so close.

“Fuck me harder, don't stop Matthew...oh yes...”

Matt pushed himself more, wanting to give this man all he asked for, why not, what he had done for him was beyond words. Thrust, thrust, thrust, grunt, grunt, grunt, it was all inner

power fueling him. He was amazed at his own prowess, the fact that his cock had yet to explode, and that's when he finally felt the pressure build. Deep inside his core, he felt his juice begin to boil before raging over, shooting through his shaft, strangling him momentarily with its desire to escape its hold. Then his come shot forth, massive spurts that wracked his body, emptying him to his core, leaving him utterly, completely drained.

"Oh. My. God."

Those were Colton's words as his ass reacted to each spurt, each dying drop.

Matt, breathing heavily, could only manage a "yeah," and a smile.

That seemed to satisfy Colton, as he allowed Matt to pull out.

"Go, take another dunk in the pool, cool off that hot body," he said. "Then you can enjoy your breakfast while I make some necessary calls. Perhaps we can enjoy some laps afterwards, before we head out to lunch."

"Out to lunch?"

"Yes, did you forget? My sister is in town. She's flown in from Rome."

"Oh, right. That's today. Sure, sounds good."

"You'll like her, Matt. She loves the gays. She understands what makes them tick." Then he paused. "And perhaps you'll discuss with her the business plan you told me about."

Matt looked up. "No, no, I couldn't do that. Besides, it won't happen."

"Oh, Matthew, you're still nursing a broken heart. Don't let it rule you. There's only one thing that will help you heal, and that's to do what you really want. This...trip to the villa, my hospitality, you and I both know, as wonderful as it's been, is but a temporary respite from the world. You have another life to return to—and not the one in New York."

Matt decided he didn't want to talk about that. He wasn't ready for such a dangerous

plunge. That one was just too big, too scary. So instead he made for the edge of the pool and he took the simple route, just leaping off from there. The water was so close, his impact immediate. It cooled his body, but somehow his heart remained warm, beating. It had been reawakened.

* * *

The Grand-Hotel du Cap Ferrat was a Five-Star hotel situated on a verdant bluff that overlooked the gleaming blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Certainly the priciest, most beautiful establishment Matt had ever had the pleasure to grace, he felt intimidated by all the grandeur—from Colton’s sporty black Porsche which got them there, to the valet parking and private escort through the crystal lit foyer of the massive lobby, then back outside to a poolside restaurant. A tastefully adorned table awaited them at the Club Dauphine, as did their tastefully adorned guest.

“Colton, darling,” the woman said, rising from her seat.

“Patsy, my God, look at you. Like a million bucks with interest,” said Colton, warmly embracing the woman. He turned and indicated his companion. Matt. “I’d like you to meet my friend, Matt Donovan...Matt, this is my chameleon of a sister, Lady Patricia Voigner, nee Abbott.”

“Call me Patsy, won’t you Matt?”

“Okay,” he said, still surprised by the title of Lady she carried.

Just what kind of family was this? One an international lawyer who owned a villa in the South of France, the other some kind of royalty—or at least privileged aristocracy. What kind of parents produced such high-achievers, and were there any others? Probably had a brother who was President of some small island nation, another one a race car driver who dated the world’s

most beautiful women. Matt found his mind swirling at such luxury, leaving him nearly dizzy. Or was that from the expensive perfume that wafted off Patsy.

“Sit, please, won’t you? I’ve ordered us all some wine. I wasn’t sure what I wanted, red or white, you know me, Colton, how I much prefer my bold Burgandies, but it’s such a lovely day and all...so I went with a crisp, dry Champagne! A fair compromise, and a fun one. Just perfect for toasting new friends, and who knows...new business possibilities.”

As they sat, Matt stared daggers at Colton, who offered up nothing but an innocent shrug. Matt wasn’t fooled, Colton was far too shrewd a lawyer not to have cooked something up, and it wasn’t the sea bass special Matt saw listed on the menu. This luncheon smelled of more than a chance for a family reunion, he doubted the Abbott children did anything without a motive. Still, as they were getting settled and the waiter filled their crystal flutes, Matt had a chance to really assess Patricia Abbott.

She was probably around his age, perhaps thirty-eight, but maybe that was money and privilege keeping her young looking. Dressed in a turquoise striped cocktail dress, there was something nonetheless pricey about it. Simple elegance usually came with a hefty price, and the pearls she wore around her neck were obviously real, like they’d only recently been plucked from the sea. She was also tall, probably five nine, but those might have been the pumps on her feet. Even so, she had long, silky legs that most men would find alluring.

Most men. Here she was with her gay brother and his...what was Matt? God, was he a boy toy? Thinking back to this morning...hell, all of the mornings and those nights too since his arrival and that’s just what it made him. Spoiled rotten by a rich man, servicing him with sex whenever he wanted it. But yet, Colton had never made him feel cheap. He was just being generous. Why, though?

“So, Matt, what shall we toast?” Patsy said, her glass raised.

Breaking free of his reverie, Matt realized they were both staring at him. “Oh, sorry. It’s just...wow, this place is incredible. The pool doesn’t seem to have a fourth side, the water looks like it plunges off the side directly into the sea.”

“We’ll take a tour later. For now, why don’t we toast just that...to taking a plunge.”

Matt found it strange that his morning theme was being carried over into lunch, here with two people who seemed unfazed by the excessive wealth surrounding them. Guess when you’re used to it, it lessens its impact. “To new ventures, and to risk-taking. To plunging in head first, and damn there better be water waiting below,” Patsy said.

“Here here,” Colton said.

Matt smiled and nodded and clinked his glass and then he drank, and then wondered when the hell am I going to awaken from this dream? Colton and his sister shared a comment in French, followed by a laugh. Matt shifted in his chair, feeling like a third wheel suddenly. They spoke their own language, and Matt was once again left to his own devices while staring at a menu devoid of prices. He wished Anton were here beside him, holding his hand. No, he didn’t, Anton was gone, this trip was an unexpected treat, a healing process, and then it would be over and so would the summer and Matt would return to New York and his old life.

“So, Patsy, tell us, how is Rome this summer?” Colton asked.

“Dreadfully hot. So humid the men are walking around town without their shirts on.” She paused. “Not that I mind, and nor, I suspect, do either of you. Save for a sojourn in Tuscany a couple of weeks ago, I find myself wishing I’d not taken this challenge on mine. We will see how it plays out. But Rome is far better than London, if Walker is to be believed.”

“Ah, yes, our wayward brother.”

“Don’t get me started on him,” Patsy said. “I’d rather talk about my new friend. You see, like you, Colton, I met this particularly naughty boy on the plane to Rome...well, before really—he had me do shots at the airport bar. But anyway, it was an airport friendship, born from delay.”

“Of course you met someone, Pats...”

“Let me finish, please. Like I was saying, like you both, he was of course gay.”

“That’s what I meant.” A grinning Colton turned to Matt. “My dear sister Patsy is the world’s biggest fag hag. Attracts them like flies.”

She waved away his comment with panache. “Anyway, my new friend Freddie is cute as they come, and funny. My God.”

Matt’s ear perked up. Could it be? “Did you say Freddie?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Wait a minute, that’s my friend...is his name Freddie Markson?”

Patsy tossed Matt a querulous, curious look. “Really...well, holy shit, of course, he’s told me about you—you’re the idealistic one of the group. Matthew, the one who went dashing off to Paris to fall hopelessly and madly in love. How absolutely remarkable. Freddie has spoken of you several times, and of...oh, what’s his name. Jason? Jacob...oh wait, that’s close...Jake. He’s the one in London, right? Well, you boys are certainly having a time of it this summer. That big world out there and here we’ve gone and made it rather small, haven’t we?”

“How is he, Freddie?”

“Oh, I don’t want to spoil the fun, it’s his story after all. But I will tell you this: Freddie Markson has made his mark on Rome, for sure. Gotten himself in way over his head, but he’s having a total blast, mostly. I can’t wait to learn how it all turns out for him, because it will have a major effect on my business. But enough about Freddie, I need a break from the drama of

Rome, so I'm here to talk to you because Colton has told me some of your situation, and I am here to listen to the rest. You see, what you need to know about us Abbott children, we've got a lot of money and we just don't know what to do with much of it. Colton indulges by having his lovely villa here on Cap Ferrat, and I...I have houses in London and an apartment in New York, and my many investments turn a healthy profit. My ex-husband died before remarrying and kind man that he was hadn't changed his will, so I was left a bundle. So, if I like what I hear from you, I might just be willing to become a silent investor."

Matt looked at Colton, then at Patsy, his mouth agape. "Are you serious?"

"Tell Patsy what you told me. I've got a couple calls to make."

With that, Colton excused himself from the table, his mobile phone newly attached to his ear. As for Matt, he felt suddenly nervous being left alone with her, so he took a healthy gulp of his champagne. The glass was instantly refilled by the hovering waiter.

"Before we continue dear, let me assure you of one thing."

"Okay."

"Colton. You don't have any designs on him, do you? I mean, of a permanent nature?"

Matt looked over at Colton, so handsome, so wealthy, so obviously committed to himself. That's when he chuckled. "No, no, I understand Colton. I have no illusions of anything permanent happening between us. He told me clear out, August is his holiday month where he get to spend time at his villa, and he's always got a different lover to take along with him each year. Why he picked me this year, I don't know, but I'm grateful for his hospitality. And his friendship, something I needed. But no, once he goes back into lawyer mode there's no room for a relationship, that's not who he is."

"And you, on the other hand, that's exactly what you want. A relationship."

“I want to meet someone, fall in love, and remain that way the rest of my life.”

“*Bene*,” she said, “Good. So, you think this plan of yours, it will get you that?”

“I’ve got to try,” he said with surprising intensity. “Anton...he’s the artist I fell for. He’s so talented, but so infuriating, both secretive and sensitive. He’s carrying so much around, an ex-wife whom he still lives with, a young son who needs both of his parents, the paintings he sells daily along the Seine. And then there’s his dream of being a renowned Parisian artist, which he doesn’t seem to have time for. When I came along, perhaps I was too much, that last straw that broke the camel’s back. When Gilly—that’s his ex-wife—when she helped arrange a meeting between me and Anton after he’d broken up with me, she said he would do one of two things. He would do something grand to demonstrate his love for me, or he would hurt me so bad I’d run far away.”

“And here you are hiding on Cap Ferrat, albeit in the arms of an older and wealthy man.” Patsy leaned in, rubbing Matt’s hand in sympathy, in support. “So, let me guess. This Anton pulled the big hurt, and now you want to stage the grand gesture that will assuredly sweep him off his feet. Win him back, let him know his dream can become a reality, and all because of you. Matt, I love a good romance, even more a good romance between two good men. Consider me in. How much do you need?”

“Excuse me?”

She opened her purse and withdrew her checkbook. “How much? One hundred? Three hundred?”

“Patsy, I couldn’t ask you to...”

“You’re not asking, Matt. Colton is, and he knows his little sister. Come on, let me help. They say you can’t put a price on true love, but that’s romantic hogwash. I’ll help you get what

you want, so your heart can be free to love your man again. Besides, Freddie is a good pal of mine now, and if I can help one of his friends, well, doesn't that make me an honorary member of your group?"

Matt laughed, and then finally, reluctantly named a price. After all, he was a fund-raiser by trade, and he knew that when an open checkbook was presented to you, that last thing did was tell them to put it away. You asked, they wrote, and that's exactly what happened here. Patricia Abbott Voigner wrote out a check with a flourishing signature, ripping the paper across the perforation. She slid the check across the table, a subtle and classy touch. Matt scooped it up, folding it into his pocket without looking at the amount she'd decided upon. That would be tacky.

Colton returned just then, smiling as he sat back down.

"So, all that nasty business taken care of?"

Both parties nodded.

"True romance, fully funded. And as good an investment I've made all year. So far," she said with a hint of mystery.

"Wonderful," Colton said. "Happy to facilitate. So, what do we say, let's have us some lunch, so we can get on with our day. Patsy has a dinner in Monte tonight, and Matt, you and I have some celebrating of our own to do. After all, these will be your last nights in Cap Ferrat. I believe Paris is calling you back. So, yes, the sea bass looks divine, doesn't it? Oh, and definitely more champagne...another bottle? Matt, you are flush enough now for footing our little luncheon, yes?"

The sea bass, thirty-seven euros. The champagne, one hundred seventy-two euros. The expression on Matt's face? Priceless.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“How do I thank you?”

“I think you already have—about four times last night by my count.”

Matt smiled, playfully pushing Colton away.

They were standing in the driveway of the villa on Saint-Jean-Cap Ferrat, Matt saying his good-byes as the cab idled nearby.

“Seriously, Colton, I don’t even know if my crazy plan is going to work, but all I do know is that taking this chance, going back to Paris, isn’t even possible without the generous help of the Abbott siblings. Your friendship, Patsy’s investment. How can *Passion* go wrong?”

“Passion?”

“It’s the name I’ve settled on.”

Colton nodded approvingly. “Very appropriate, I think. Thanks for telling me. Matthew Donovan, it’s been an absolute pleasure meeting you. You are one of the nicest guys I’ve met at any airport, in any city. Truthfully, I don’t give my card to everyone. You, I sensed we might meet again. I’ve enjoyed your company here on Cap Ferrat, truly. You are a passionate lover, very giving. Sometimes I grow weary of the men I meet, especially when they think they’ve hit the jackpot with me. For one month of the year I allow myself this retreat, and if the man I’ve invited to join me is fine with that, great. If he’s expecting more, he’s out of luck. And out of my life. Cold, I know, but it works for me.”

“Someday, I hope that will change. For you. You deserve someone also.”

“Kind of you to say, Matt. But I’m just not wired that way.”

The cab honked, and Matt turned to indicate one more minute. Turning back, he leaned in and kissed Colton deep on the mouth, letting his tongue dart in for one last taste of that expensive bubbly they’d been drinking these past two weeks. They had shared on last bottle this afternoon while lying naked in bed, basking in the glow of one last fuck between buddies before the two went their separate ways.

“Go. Don’t miss your flight.”

“You know, Colton, a part of me will love you, too.”

“But your heart belongs to Anton. Go find him. Go surprise him.”

Matt hugged him, enjoying the warmth that spread between their bodies. The heat this man generated was special. He was hot and sexy, a very attentive lover, and Matt had enjoyed every moment exploring their desires. His kisses, the taste of his come sweetened by his adoration of the vine, the rough feel of his sexy chest bristling against his back as they lay entwined on the bed. It had been a true fantasy, living like a king on this exclusive peninsula, indulging in all the finer things in life.

“I’ll send you and Patsy both an invite.”

“Can’t wait,” Colton said.

They parted, and Matt quickly grabbed his bag and tossed everything, himself included, into the back seat of the cab. He waved once, the cabbie honked, and then they were off. Matt watched out the rear window as Colton’s smile caught the bright gleam of the sun. Almost like nature had winked at him, letting him know all was right in the world. That the journey awaiting him was one meant to take. Finally, Colton was gone from his view, and he leaned back against the seat, an expressive sigh escaping his lips.

Two hours later, he had made it through airport security, and he was settled in his seat on board the 7:35 pm Air France jet destined for Paris's Orly Airport. Ninety minutes from now the plane and Matthew Donovan would touch down once again in the city of lights. How he hoped someone had left all those lights on, a blazing path of love for his heart to follow.

* * *

Matthew Donovan awoke back inside his same hotel room at the Hotel du Louvre, feeling as though he was beginning his trip all over again. He had come full circle, only now rather than feeling like a tourist without a game plan he felt like a businessman with a purpose. Summer had begun without a hint of the future. Summer was ending on a note sent by destiny.

There was much to accomplish today. It was already mid-August, leaving him only two weeks to secure everything. But really, if all went according to plan, he wouldn't need any day beyond today. While still on Cap Ferrat he had set some early plans into motion, first and most importantly setting up a local bank account with Colton's help. Then he'd made two necessary calls to his Parisian friends who could assist him. So now, on his first full day back, his plate was fuller than a hungry man's at a buffet.

Ready to attack the day, he stepped outside the hotel.

"Matt! Hi, over here...across the street!"

Squinting against the sun, Matt made out his pint-sized friend and smiled at her. He dashed across the street, taking up beside her at the crepe cart. She was waiting for one with chocolate and bananas, and Matt ordered one as well. Before he said anything else, she hugged him, her short body barely coming up to his chin.

“I still can’t believe you called me. I mean, I don’t know a soul here.”

“Well, you gave me your card. We Americans, we have to stick together in this city.”

The crepe-maker frowned at them both, quickly finished off his concoctions. Taking their crepes with them, Matt and Sheeba Handers made their way across the busy Rue de Rivoli, taking up on a bench inside the *Jardin des Tuileries*. The day was almost an exact mirror of his initial day back in June, with the notable exception that his breakfast companion was someone other than Simone Richelieu.

“So, how’s it been going, Sheeba? Getting acclimated?”

“My father finally went home to Texas, problem with one of his gushers. Not gushing enough I guess. Anyway, school hasn’t yet started, but I’ve been hanging all around the Latin Quartier, just learning my way around, trying to meet some other kids. I’m not having much luck. Skinny bitches and glassy-eyed guys, that’s all I see. Man, where are the angry lesbians?”

“Easy tiger, don’t try and do everything—and everyone—the first month.”

“Right, sorry. So, you said maybe you had a job for me? That’s great, but that’s crazy, too. Daddy would flip if he knew I was even thinking about working. But what else am I going to do? I love art, don’t get me wrong, but like I said, talent and I were never bosom-buddies. So I’m going to concentrate more on art history and appreciation, the business side of things.”

“That’s perfect for what I need.”

“Which is what?”

“How about working in an art gallery, right here in Paris?”

“No shit! Really? With who?”

“With me.”

“Shut up! You own an art gallery?”

Matt smiled. “Not yet. Now come on, eat up that yummy crepe before it gets cold, banana only tastes good when its drenched in warm chocolate. Meanwhile I’ll tell you what I need you to do this morning. See, there’s this artist I’m interested in...uh, in his talent.”

“Yeah, right, you want to get in his pants.”

Matt would have to get used to Sheeba’s forthright nature. Probably no one had ever taught her the tactful art of self-editing...or keeping things to herself. Still, she had a refreshing, disarming charm that would be useful when putting some of the overly snooty French in their place. She was from money, and with money comes its own attitude. He smiled at her. “Well, yes, there’s truth to that. In truth, getting back into his pants, and his heart too.”

“Oooh, so romantic.”

“Yes, I’ve been accused more than once of being one. And after today, I may just actually have earned that reputation. Though this time, perhaps not so hopeless. So, you remember my friend, Anton? I need you to check on him—he sets up right across the Quai just above the Seine’s banks. Let him see you, get him talking, ask about his ambitions—but with subtlety. Does he paint anything beyond those typical Paris scenes he sells? Oh, and this is real important: don’t let on that you’ve been in touch with me. You can play it cool, right? For all Anton knows, I’ve gone back to New York and long forgotten about him.”

“Not you.”

“No, not me. I couldn’t forget Anton even if I wanted to.”

“I love this, a real Paris romance. Leave it to me.”

“Good. I’ll check in with you later.”

Sheeba Handers went waddling on her way, blithely licking at the empty crepe wrapper. Matt trailed after her, keeping himself hidden behind the large trees within the *jardins*, then

behind the oversize Louvre Museum. The quai was long and straight, so keeping track of her was as easy as, well, eating a French crepe. Cars blew past him, pedestrians looked curiously at him as they walked on by, but Matt paid them no mind. He was focused on what was happening across the street, because his eyes had landed squarely on Anton's being.

He looked good, his blue-colored beret as jaunty as he remembered. He was engaged in conversation with a couple of people, smiling and being demonstrative, his French alter-ego in full charm mode. Matt was pleased to see him make a sale, and the young couple wandered off with their new conversation piece. Just then Sheeba made her initial approach, and even from his location Matt could hear her unique squeal when she pretended to stumble upon him. She hugged Anton, and he hugged her back. Contact made. Perfect.

Matt could head on to his next appointment.

But not before he stole one last look at Anton. His heart beat just that much faster at the sight of him. He wanted nothing more than to run up to him and take him in his arms, whisk him away and take him home to his bed. Their passion would have to wait. Another kind of passion awaited Matt, and so off he went.

He found a taxi stand back on the Avenue de la Opera, and luckily an idling cab. Fumbling with a bit of French he had learned while lounging at Colton's villa, the cabbie finally got him to his destination in the Marais. Right Bank, which surprised him, since the person he was meeting with was Simone. But perhaps this was her way of apologizing for the way she had treated Anton. Was she conceding that she'd been wrong, about Anton and about the Right Bank? Well, maybe not both, baby steps with a delicate flower such as Simone.

She was waiting in front of a small shop along the Rue de Thorigny, just down the street from the Picasso Museum. Tapping her toes against the sidewalk with impatience, speaking

quickly into her mobile, she acknowledged Matt with a quick nod of her head. As she ended her call, she gave Matt a big hug.

“God, I thought I’d scared you away for good.”

“Nah, just had to figure out a few things.”

“In Cap Ferrat?”

“Yeah, it was sweet.”

“What’s his name?”

“He’s gay, sweetie.”

“Of course he is. Does he must have a brother.”

“Not sure, I think so. But he does have a sister, and actually it’s because of her that I’m here. Speaking of, where are we?”

“Darling, Matt, we are in Le Marais, one of Paris’s trendiest *arrondissements*, and the home to more art galleries than there are artists, if such a thing is really possible. And this little place, it’s vacant, available, and in pretty good shape. I’ve got a couple others on the list that I’ve already checked out, but I’ve been assured this is ideal for your purposes—one hundred twenty meters of big, open space.”

“Sounds good so far. How’d you find it so quickly?”

She shrugged. “In Paris, all it takes is one call, and you’re off and running. See, one of Simon’s—don’t get mad, he’s useful even if he is a prick—anyway, one of his ex-boyfriends or lovers, or maybe it’s some guy he wants to fuck but hasn’t charmed his pants off yet, well, he knows a friend whose sister works in real estate, and so we were put in touch and here we are.”

“Gee, one phone call, huh?”

She smiled, her face losing its edge whenever she did that. “Welcome to Paris.”

“You should smile more often.”

“Why?”

“Maybe you’d open yourself up, fall in love, too.”

“Matt, dear? One relationship at a time, okay, and right now it’s yours we need to fix. Come on, that was Jacquie on the phone and she’s running late. Fortunately she messengered me the keys yesterday just in case something like this happened.”

One minute later, the door unlocked, Matt and Simone stepped into the stuffy little gallery. It was empty, save for some wall hangers remaining from whoever had previously rented this space. Instantly Matt’s mind filled with the possibilities as he toured the shop. The main room was ideal for displays, with high, vaulted ceilings, wide corners, a large plate glass window that would give passersby a look at what was on offer. In the back, a tiny bathroom. But what Matt most liked was a circular staircase that led to a second balcony that overlooked the main floor; perfect for an office. Drapes covered the window, and as he pulled them open the Paris sunlight drifted in like an old friend.

“My God, Simone, could this be any more perfect?”

“I don’t know. Just what are you cooking up? Who are you scouting this site for?”

“For me.”

“Uh, earth to Matt? Last I knew, you lived in New York, you hated art, and you can’t speak French.”

“I never said I hated art, and besides, maybe I’ve developed a newfound appreciation for it.”

“You mean for artists. Or one in particular.”

A broad smile crossed Matt’s face. He couldn’t help it.

“God, you really are a hopeless romantic.”

“Except I’m not hopeless anymore. I’ve been blessed to find a fairy godmother investor who has given me more than enough money to start this gallery. She sees the potential, not just in this venture but in Anton and his future as an artist. Anton and his fellow gypsies out there along the Seine everyday. At The Passion Gallery, they are all welcome. Sheeba and I will see to that.”

“Sheeba!”

“Why not. She’s an art student, and she’s fun. And she speaks French—useful until I’m up to speed. Not to mention she’s an oil heiress, so if Patsy Abbott’s money dries up we have another, well, another well to tap.”

“Cute.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Matt, this is the craziest gesture I’ve ever heard of. Man, he must be good in bed.”

The room darkened, or maybe that was Matt’s mood. He spun his way down the circular staircase back down to the main floor. He was about to scold Simone for her crassness, but it was too late: they had company. Matt was going to need a translator, and he pissed off Simone she wouldn’t help his cause. So he dropped his anger for now and allowed Simone to take over. She shook hands with Gavin’s lover’s sister’s friend, a sexy, stylish woman of thirty who introduced herself in French as Jacqueline DuPaul. Matt happily shook her hand, even though he didn’t catch what else she said.

“She’s sorry she’s late,” Simone said to Matt.

Matt, with Simone help, was able to lay out his proposal, and the three of them went back and forth, a bi-language exchange of ideas, counter-proposals, smiles, nods, and once a shaking

of her head. When he pressed Simone for what she was disagreeing with, she said not to push it. But Matt did, and finally Simone turned and said, “She’s worried. Renting to an American who doesn’t speak the language, hiring a young assistant from the States to help you run the place. She’s worried about her reputation. An art gallery in Le Marais, and none involved are French?”

“There’s Anton.”

“Also, American,” Simone advised.

This was ridiculous. Was she really not going to rent him the space because he didn’t speak the damn language? Is that how his dream went up in smoke, because he said ham and not *jambon*? *Mon dieu*, to make an omelet you still had to crack a few *oeufs*. Then he remembered the basic ingredient of any business deal.

“Tell her I’ll pay two years rent. In advance. Right now.”

“Are you crazy?” Simone said.

But it was what Jacquie said that mattered. “Deal.”

Apparently money talks, the ultimate international language.

So they settled on the monthly rent, Matt whistling but accepting it without further complaint. Matt wrote her a deposit from his new bank account, and Jacquie stated she would prepare the necessary paperwork, have it ready for his lawyer by the end of the week. When the realtor finally departed, Simone was shaking her head.

“So, this Anton, he’s really that talented?”

“Yes. I told you about his collection—they’re so amazing, so erotically-charged...”

“And you say one of his series is of Simon?”

“Yes.”

“I think you’re a pretty shrewd businessman, Matt. Because I think you just made your

first sale off of Anton's upcoming show. Imagine Simon's expression when he discovers those paintings hanging in the offices of Simone and Simon? He'll blush like a school boy."

Matt smiled knowingly, picturing the painting of Gavin spread-eagled on the bed, his hands doing little to disguise his cock, not even all that hair on his body could disguise such a thing. Then he remembered the smug look on his face, left for eternity. "No, he won't."

"Bitch. Another one who doesn't fuck and tell. God, I hate you gays."

"Look at the bright side, Sally, you won't have to wonder anymore," he said.

Then suddenly she slapped him on the arm, playfully but not really. "Matt, I love it that you're planning on staying in Paris indefinitely, but seriously...you better learn French real fast, my dear. And don't ever call me Sally again."

Matt dismissed her comment just as Patsy Abbott had waved off her brother's cynicism.

"What's in a name, Sal...Simone? A kiss is just a kiss, right? A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet."

She rolled her eyes. "*Mon dieu!*"

Matt exclaimed, "Hey, I understood that!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Paris. City of lights, city of dreams, city of love, and tonight, city of heat. A gorgeous, moonlit Friday eve had fallen over the broad boulevards, its bustling crowds, and on the grand, sparkling Eiffel Tower that drew millions to its iron feet year after year. There was magic in the air. Glowing moonlight also found its way down upon a shop located in the heart of the Marais, illuminating bare walls through freshly washed windows. Just three days had slipped away since Matt had made arrangements to secure the location for his proposed art gallery, and right now he was locking the door behind him, his hands filled with packages, intent on making final preparations for a night to remember.

This was his D-Day. His future was now, or it was never.

He heard his phone buzz, and, setting down all he'd brought with him he checked the text message. From Sheeba. ON OUR WAY. HE SUSPECTS NOTHING. LOVE BEING PART OF THIS. SHEEBS.

How fortuitous had that crazy party they attended on the Champs-Elysees been? True, it had led to his sudden break up with Anton, but Matt had convinced himself that would have happened regardless of the turn of events, so fragile was Anton's psyche. The moment he even sensed trouble, that's when he ran, anticipating the worst before seeing if something good could play out. Matt had seen that first hand. But if not for that party they would not have met Sheeba, and Matt knew for certain he never would have been able to pull this off without her help. She'd duped Anton, unknowingly playing him into Matt's hands. That Sheeba, she was good.

Truthfully, his entire experience in Paris was not possible without all of the people he had met. From that serendipitous tryst with Colton Abbott on board the airplane. From Simone's embrace the moment he arrived. To her introducing him to her business partner, Gavin Simon. Even Gavin had played his part, allowing Matt to easily get over his attraction to the man once they'd slept together, to introducing him to Anton and helping to secure the garret. Anton, too, had played his own part, the way he had initially taken Matt into his life, meeting Henri, Gilly, the nights they had shared, the experiences, the intense love-making, all of it had contributed to the most wonderful feeling that was falling in love. And when trouble had reared its ugly head, new friends had helped out. Sheeba, Patsy, Colton, once again, and now, Simone coming through with the gallery space. And Gilly, he'd spoken to her yesterday and she was in on it, too, she'd dropped off her contribution just hours ago. Matt felt lucky to be surrounded by such supportive friends, all of whom had one thing in common: ensuring the enduring love of Matthew Donovan and Anton Marcel.

Matt flicked a switch, lights illuminating the spare room. He had bought small white lights one might wrap around a Christmas tree, but Matt had taken them and wound them around the wrought iron of the circular staircase. Those lights now cast a shadowy glow about the room, heightening the romantic mood Matt so desired. In other corners around the room were tall candlesticks, adorned with red-colored candles. He busied himself lighting those, and finally the gallery was perfectly lit, dancing flames emitting flickering shadows upon the walls. Matt spun around, pleased with the look. That's when his eyes fell upon three frames on the wall, each of them covered by brown paper. It took all of his will power not to sneak a peek.

Removing a chilled bottle of champagne from the tiny fridge, Matt carried it upstairs, where he set it in a waiting ice bucket. A tray of cheeses and grapes accompanied it, as well as

six plush red and white pillows that he'd purchased, now scattered haphazardly on the floor of the office. Checking his watch, he realized Sheeba would be here momentarily with Anton at her side. He wound back down the staircase, dashing into the bathroom. There he gave himself the once over.

He'd paid a pricey salon for a nice cut of his thick brown hair, and they'd even given him a professional shave. He was spiffily handsome from head to toe, light colored tan slacks draped beautifully against his legs, a blue Oxford shirt clinging to his strong chest. He looked good enough to undress, or so hoped.

A ringing at the front door snapped him from his Narcissus moment.

Flicking off the bathroom light, he made his way into the main room, where he saw the shadow of a man standing before the darkened entrance. He knew the body, he recognized the shape, he'd touched it and caressed it so many nights he knew its contours. Anton had arrived, and remarkably he was alone. Somehow Sheeba had pulled a diversionary tactic, managing to excise herself from their reunion. She already deserved a raise.

Matt unlocked the door and drew it open. Warm, cloying air filled the room, and for a moment Matt was reminded how humid the air was outside. The air-conditioning inside wasn't yet working. For now, the temperature was fine, but if all went well, the heat would envelope the room, those inside it, too.

"*Bon soir, monsieur,*" Anton said, stepping through the foyer. What he said next were a series of words in French that Matt didn't understand, and so all he could do was smile. That's when Anton realized to whom he was speaking, and his tongue, no matter which language it spoke totally failed him.

"*Bon soir, monsieur,*" Matt replied, closing the door behind his guest.

He turned the lock, sealing the deal. Sealing them inside.

Anton gazed about, his eyes widening, his smile remarkably firm. “Matt? Is that you?”

“The lights aren’t that dim. Yes, it’s me.”

“You are...here?” He looked around, at the white light, at the flickering candles. “I am afraid I do not understand.”

“Your accent, it’s working overtime.”

“I am confused. Sheeba, she told me I was to meet a wealthy, philanthropic American, someone her father knows. Said I was to be my charming French best, but to speak in English. I messed up when I arrived, I am nervous...and now... Why are you here, and why am I here, and where exactly, are we?”

“We are in the Marais.”

Anton frowned. “Matt, do not be obtuse.”

“Fine, you wish to know where we are? Well, when you stepped over that threshold, you took a step toward your future. Perhaps mine as well. Our Sheeba, although she was improvising just a bit, she wasn’t far off. I am an American her father knows, a bit of a stretch but meet we did. Wealthy? Not myself, but my investors have unlimited resources and if need be, we can always find others. But philanthropic? Yes, I guess you could call me that. But I am also a businessman, and my business is art.”

“Art. What is this place?”

“It’s my new gallery.”

Anton nearly laughed. “Gallery? You? But Matt...you can’t even sit still for a portrait, and now you are going to surround yourself with willful artists and their crazy visions, all for

what? It is nearly September, and soon you will be going home. I thought you had already left Paris for the States. So, forgive me if I am confused, but certainly you can understand.”

“Yes. I know. I’ve orchestrated all of this.”

“This. The gallery, the lights, the candles...”

“And so much more.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Anton, you did your best to push me away—just as Gilly warned me you might do. She said you would do your best to hurt me, and you succeeded. But once I had a clear mind I knew you had hurt yourself too. What you roped Gavin Simon into doing made no sense. I saw the two of you in action, and you know I saw you. A deliberate staging to what effect? To chase me away? To make your life less complicated? To keep you from admitting to yourself what you really wanted? Me?”

“Matt, what happened between us. It was too fast, too perfect. I was scared.”

“You don’t think I was?”

“Yet you were leaving—me, Henri, Paris. Your real life was calling you back. A summer fling was coming to its natural conclusion. Me, I would be left wandering these streets, selling my paintings, afraid to meet that next man, wary of strangers with charm to spare.”

“Except you didn’t give me enough credit, Anton. I had no real life, not back in New York, I tried to tell you that. There’s nothing waiting for me back home, certainly not a job or a lover. In Paris I had found both. Purpose, love, friends, opportunity, but mostly, I found you. You filled my heart and you filled my life, and to think that I could lose all that, no, I wouldn’t entertain such a thought. Yes, I left Paris for a spell, but only to regroup, to figure out what I really wanted. And as luck would have it, I found some new friends who were willing to help me

restart everything. Anton, this gallery we stand in, it is mine to run, and Sheeba will assist me, and you...you and your beautiful, inspiring, personal collection, it will be the first to hang upon these walls.”

“Me? My work to be displayed in a gallery? Not possible.”

Matt nodded. “More than possible. And that’s just the beginning of my vision. See, as the newcomer to the Paris art scene, people are going to think of me as some American eccentric, and you know what, I’m kind of looking forward to having such a reputation. That reputation—as well as the money from my benefactor—will afford me the opportunity to showcase those artists I like, commercial consideration aside. Perhaps some of your friends along the Seine have secret collections too. That will be up to you to advise and for me to check out.”

“This still makes no sense. I am not ready to show my collection.”

“You are. With one notable exception.”

“I do not understand.”

Matt pointed to the covered frames hung upon the wall. “I had Gilly bring those over. Sorry if she violated your studio space, but I wanted to see them, if only to make a point. Because as much as I want to show your collection—we need to come up with a name—the ones hanging on the wall will not be a part of what we show.”

“Well, at last we agree upon one thing,” Anton said. “Because I do have a name for my show. For all those paintings I showed you, the portraits, the abstracts, the charcoals, they represent the men I have known, the past I have shared, the life I no longer wish to know. If we show my work, and that’s a big if—we call it HEARTLESS BY ANTON.”

“Heartless? That seems almost...empty.”

“Exactly my point, Matt,” he said. “My art glorifies the body, it represents the beauty of a man’s surface. It does not reveal what lies beneath skin, muscles, cock, hair. There is no heart in my work, even though I painted them with all of mine. Look, I will show you, and tell me you do not agree.”

Anton made his way across the room, Matt watching not just his body but his body language. Since his arrival he had been tightly coiled, talking with Matt but exchanging nothing of a physical nature. His defenses were heightened, only now showing signs of weakening. He approached the three frames and without hesitation he ripped the brown paper covering off one frame, then a second, finally the third.

Matt stared, not believing his eyes. Was it the poor lighting, or did he just not want to admit what he saw? The first painting, the largest, represented the portrait. It was clearly unfinished, Matt recognizing his body’s shape, the muscular lines of his chest, the frame of the pillow covering his private parts, but otherwise there was nothing to the canvas. No color, no form, no completion. As for the other two, they were completely blank. Matt didn’t understand. Why would Gilly have brought paintings that didn’t even exist? He tossed Anton a look of confusion and only then did he realize that as much as he’d attempted to fool Anton, the fool had played him.

“You knew?”

“I had a sneaking suspicion that something was going on,” Anton said, coming to Matt, finally...finally, embracing him. His touch was alive and electric, like a thousand suns branding his skin with white-hot heat. “As conniving as Sheeba is, Gilly is the exact opposite. She didn’t even know what she was delivering, because I had wrapped them up. She claimed some gallery owner wanted to see my work, and she insisted—poorly, I might add—that I send over my most

recent work. That made me think of you, and that's when I started to think you were behind all this. But what this was...that is what I could not imagine."

Matt smiled. "Seems there's been a lot of conniving going on, all of it well meaning."

"For you," Anton said. "For me."

"For us," Matt said, allowing himself to kiss the man he'd once lost, the man he hoped he'd found again. Anton accepted his sweet kiss, their mouths lingering over the sizzling heat, their tongues learning how to taste each other again.

"My collection..." Anton began.

"Heartless, you call it. Yes, what about it?"

"Why did you want your series taken from it? Why hang it first?"

"Because I didn't want it to be part of your past. I don't want to be a part of your past. I thought if we hung it up now, we could let it have its private showing, and then retire them."

Anton nodded, smiling, touching, kissing again the man who, ironically, had not inspired him with his life's art but with life. He gazed again at the unfinished portrait, at the empty abstract, the forgotten charcoal. "That is exactly why I did not complete them. Why I could not complete them. Matt, the last thing I wanted was for you to be a part of this...it would mean you were one more lover in a string of them. We can leave them up for now, because the very fact that they remain unfinished means you are still here, in my life, and most definitely in my heart."

Matt smiled. This was working out perfectly.

But he had one more touch, one more detail.

"Will you follow me?" he asked.

"Anywhere," Anton said.

Matt hugged him, his laughter loud in the echoing silence of the room. “You make that sound like the most wonderful thing in the world, but right now I won’t hold you to it. For now, join me upstairs.”

“Upstairs? What else have you been plotting?”

“Like I said, follow me. Our night awaits us.”

* * *

The balcony level was awash in the glowing candlelight emanating from below. Matt escorted Anton up the winding staircase, encouraging him to settle down against the soft pillows that littered the floor. Anton didn’t comment verbally, but his eyes said everything. Which was fine, because Matt’s expression was filled with a come hither seduction to the point where he could see Anton’s cock respond. A thick, enticing bulge in his pants provided Matt with all the encouragement he needed. He made his way to the ice bucket, where he withdrew the chilled bottle of bubbly.

“Champagne?”

“The good stuff,” Matt said. “From a friend of mine. He sent me home with this. To be consumed on such an occasion.”

“Your new friends. They have good taste, and apparently, much money.”

“Anton, I told you, my business was fund-raising. Consider this my latest project.”

“I like, I like.”

Matt popped the cork, pouring them two glasses of the frothy, foamy gold. As they each held a glass, the flutes catching the light of a candle, they cheered, toasted, kissed, all before they

drank, and when they did their eyes locked and words faded away. They sipped once from their own glass, then from the other.

“My God, I think I’ve gone to heaven,” Anton said. “This is the most delicious champagne I have ever tasted. Matt, where were you these past couple of weeks? You seem different...you’ve returned to Paris with a new confidence, and apparently dripping with money and taste. And you’ve done all this for me? You have my dream in your hands, and my heart in my throat. I don’t know what to say. What to do.”

“Then don’t say anything,” Matt said.

With the drapes closing off the outside world, Matt and Anton were free to explore their inner desires. Setting down his glass, Matt dropped to his knees, playfully toying with the zipper to Anton’s pants. A quick pull and they were down around his ankles, Anton’s sprightly cock pressing hard against his briefs. Grabbing the material with his teeth, Matt slid the shorts down Anton’s hairy legs, an inch, then another, finally bringing them down below his knees. Then he kissed, licked, tasted his way back up, his tongue swirling around the tip of Anton’s cock. He took it into his mouth, sucking down the shaft, licking one way, coming back up underneath it. Cupping his balls, he smiled when he heard Anton’s breath escape him.

“Matt, my God, I’ve missed you, missed you so...”

Anton positioned himself on the floor, opening wide his legs. Matt’s head bobbed down, then up, a slick coating of spit covering Anton’s pulsing cock. He went down again, sucking hard, harder, harder still. Anton groaned with ecstasy, his voice like an echo. At last Matt felt Anton’s body constrict, hesitate, and then explode. Matt held the cock deep in his mouth, feeling each shot hit the back of his throat. Warmth spread down inside him, the taste of Anton sweet

and delectable. At last he pulled free of his cock, and he smiled up at a lover he'd thought gone, a lover since returned to him.

"Matt, I love when you swallow me," Anton said.

"It's only fair, you've swallowed me whole, my self, my heart, my life," Matt said. "Now, shall we indulge our feast? Champagne and cheeses await us, and while we dine we can start to plan our next step. Your show, I figure we can debut in the fall season. That's going to take a lot of planning, and of course first we have to redo this gallery. Painted, decorated...I was thinking of hiring Simone & Simon, what do you think? And before you say anything, I don't care what happened that night with you and Simon...I mean, I know why you let him fuck you, it was your only way of driving me away. But I knew you didn't mean it, I know you had staged the whole thing for my benefit."

"How could you know that?"

"Because when I stumbled upon the two of you, even though you ignored me the words you spoke...well, you were speaking English. Something I'm sure you and Simon would not have done had you really been feeling the moment. But Anton, don't ever let me hear you asking to be hurt again...I can't tell you how much those words broke my heart, more so than the physical exchange I witnessed."

Anton leaned over, kissing Matt. "That's a promise, Matt. From now on, all I will ever ask is to be loved. Love me, Matt, love me all night long, and for forever. Because I love you."

Smiling, Matt said, "*Je vous aime.*"

* * *

Paris. City of lights, city of dreams, city of love, and this morning, city of new dawn. Inside the garret, Anton slept, exhausted from their long night of love-making. Matthew Donovan couldn't sleep, not when his mind was buzzing with ideas, excitement, and purpose. He stood out on the balcony, watching as Paris came alive on this Saturday morning. Though he faced west, to his rear he could see the early morning sun as it came up over the low-lying city, casting an orange glow over the rooftops.

Below him, shop owners prepared for a new day. Washing the sidewalks, airing out their stores, setting out fresh baked croissants, the wafting smell of coffee brewing upwards, it was the sign that a new day had arrived, another chance at opportunity, at fresh starts and a thing called the future. Matt smiled as he imagined seeing this sight every day. Part of him could not believe the commitment he'd made, to Anton and to their new gallery, but mostly to himself. Beginning a new life in a new city, he was like a child on Christmas morning, waiting eagerly to open each gift.

He thought about Freddie in Rome.

He thought about Jake in London.

He hoped they were enjoying themselves, that their respective trips were all they had hope for or even more. Matt's certainly had been. August was waning, September was fast approaching, Matt could feel it in the cool morning air, the first hint of a seasonal change settling upon them. Labor Day would arrive, Freddie and Jake would meet at Gaslight, and they would raise a glass in Matt's honor, wishing him well in his new life in Paris. The hopeless romantic had done as he'd said, fallen deeply in love. He had a family already, Anton and his boy Henri, extended members like Gilly, Simone, Sheeba. They would say "Only in Paris, only for him could such a fantasy come true." Matt would toast them back.

“To you, my dear friends,” Matt said to the Paris morning, sending well wishes across the sky to the rolling hills of Rome, across the Channel to the narrow confines of London. “Jake, Freddie, I can’t wait to hear what adventures awaited you both.”

With that, a happy Matthew Donovan returned inside the shadowy garret, snuggling beside the love of his life.

Now, he knew he would sleep.