



ADAM CARPENTER

Rapture
In
Rome

ra^venous
romance

Rapture in Rome

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication

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www.ravenousromance.com

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ISBN-13: 978-1-60777-365-8

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

Chapter One

“Son of a bitch.”

That was Freddie Markson’s reaction to the delay flashing on the monitor. In his mind the word “fuck” echoed like twelve times; that’s how pissed off he was. He wasn’t alone in his grumbling. It seemed half of his fellow travelers were watching the changing screen like it was a porn movie, unable to look away but knowing what they were seeing was all a big lie. There was no passion, no truth, and certainly no fun. The Alitalia flight had already been delayed two hours, and now it looked like they’d be hanging around Terminal One at JFK another hour.

The airline was blaming the weather, but didn’t they always point the blame somewhere else? Sure, it was raining outside, big deal. Freddie could see beads of water dripping down the plate glass windows of the terminal, as though the airport was shedding tears for them. Yeah, yeah, screw your sympathy. Get us our plane and get us out here. Didn’t planes fly through thunderstorms all the time? What was a little drizzle? He’d had enough of New York and its summer humidity already. If he was going to sweat through his clothes every day he may as well do it in some place far more exotic. Like, well—Rome, Italy, would do. If they ever fricking boarded the plane.

Frederick Richard Markson was a man not known for his patience. At thirty-six, he was a tight coil of a man, his lithe body ready to spring into action the moment the gun went off. He was of average build, and had brown hair so thick people called it his thatch, worn in a modern, tousled style. His trim self was achieved by constantly staying in motion, which usually drew guys to him like a magnet. That, and his inviting, toothy smile. One of his former boyfriends had

claimed Freddie never stopped moving, even when he was asleep. Couldn't fault him there; sleep annoyed him. He loved the race and the challenge of life, and if he didn't win at anything, well, at least he had fun along the way. You couldn't have much fun sleeping, could you?

Which is why he was so anxious to take to the skies. Sitting around had never been high on his list of activities. He'd done enough of that already while waiting at the gate for this flight, and the fact he would have to wait out another hour or so in addition to the nine-hour flight to Rome's Fiumicino Airport made for a case of antsy-pants. As he retook his chair at the crowded gate, just another dissatisfied flyer, his knees bounced with frustration. This was not how his trip was supposed to start, and it had better not be an indication of how things were going to go once he got there. *Fall in love, my ass*, Freddie thought. That was the supposed mission, wasn't it? While his friends Jake and Matt—Matt especially, hopeless romantic that he was—might think they were going to find their one true love during their fanciful summer sojourns, Freddie knew differently. He hadn't pretended with them, and he certainly wasn't fooling himself. His plan was to happily and lustily screw his way through Rome, and when he ran out of the Romans, maybe he'd conquer men in other cities. Isn't that what those feisty Romans did, conquer? And as the old saying goes: when in Rome. He thrilled at the idea of lots of bone-rattling sex.

"Easy, tiger."

He turned skeptically to his immediate left. A striking woman about his own age was sitting beside him. She was tastefully dressed in expensive clothes, her blond hair done all proper in a tight, constricting bun. She was pretty; ruby red lips highlighting her aquiline features. Not bad, but she wasn't his type. Main problem? She was a she.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"You look like you're about to leap out of your skin."

“Yeah, well, waiting sucks.”

She nodded demurely. “That is does. I’m Patricia Abbott. Patsy to my friends.”

“Oh, uh, hi. Freddie Markson.”

“Freddie, hmm. Not Fred? Not Frederick.”

He shook his head emphatically. “No way. Fred just sounds nerdy. Frederick like I have a stick permanently shoved up my butt. Freddie...he’s more fun. Freddie’s your pal. He’s the kind of guy you invite for one drink but end up doing shots with. That’s me. That’s who I like to be.”

“Sounds ideal. I’ll buy the first.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, you’re awfully polite, you get credit there, Freddie. Your mother must have raised you right. Look, we’ve got an hour—or so that’s what the airlines folks are telling us. So why not join me over at the terminal bar? Maybe you can convince me of the merits of doing shots. I prefer wine, red mostly, but on a hot summer day I’ll settle for a crisp white. What do you say?”

“Uh...”

“Really, it’s just a harmless drink,” she said, patting his knee into submission. “Trust me, Freddie, I’m not interested in anything romantic, and I know you’re not.”

Freddie crossed his arms, the coil tightening. Feeling a bit defensive about that remark, Freddie wondered if she’d just admitted to seeing through his macho façade and into the window of his well-appointed gay interior? “Come on, let’s get that drink and then we can survey the rest of our fellow passengers, maybe pick out a cute boy for you to boink on the plane” she said. “From what I’ve seen, there’s a couple of good candidates...oh, don’t act so surprised, Freddie. Have I shocked you?”

“Yeah, but in a good way. First drink is on you, huh?”

Both fliers had checked their larger suitcases, so with only shoulder bags to trudge around, they wound their way down the corridor, taking up seats directly at Terminal One's bar. Two napkins were slapped down in front of them, the server asking what it'll be.

"Heineken," Freddie said. "Jack chaser."

"Merlot, please," Patsy said, then with a conniving smile said, "Jack chaser."

The bartender was obviously amused at the unusual order, and he went about his business preparing drinks. Once they were set before them, Freddie lifted his amber-colored shot, Patsy following suit. They clinked, they drank one quick gulp of the fiery amber. Freddie smacked the glass down and said, "Now that takes the edge off." Patsy's face hadn't yet recovered from her squashed look. A few of the men around her applauded her efforts. She merely nodded in their direction.

Matt and Patsy moved to a high table near the edge of the bar, giving them a decent view of the activity happening inside the quiet terminal. It was past ten o'clock at night, and most of the overnight flights had already departed. A few still remained, theirs included. Still delayed that additional hour. No other updates available.

"So, tell me Freddie, what's your type? Flamboyant or masculine?"

"I guess somewhere in between. He doesn't have to be draped in the gay flag per se, but he should be comfortable in his own skin. Some of the straight-acting ones, sometimes I think they believe they are straight...or that they want to be for socially acceptable reasons. They're only gay when in a darkened bedroom. But the swishy ones...you can keep those as far as I'm concerned. Some of them think they're women, and if I wanted a woman..."

"You'd be straight."

"Right. So...yeah, a guy who knows who is he but doesn't have to show it all the time.

But he's got to be hot. Call me shallow, but I work out and keep my body in great shape and I want to be with someone who shares the same healthy attitude. You're gonna indulge in energetic, mind-blowing sex, you want someone who can keep up, right?" Freddie paused, taking a large gulp of his beer. "Sorry, TMI?"

"Oh, no. It's fascinating. So let me guess, you're not the relationship type."

"Uh, no."

"So, you're not looking for love? For the ideal companion to share your life?"

"Nope. Not now, not for quite a while," Freddie said. "Though actually, that's what this trip is supposed to be about."

"How intriguing. Do tell."

So he did. He told this perfect stranger all about his friends Jake Westbury and Matthew Donovan, both of whom had already left for their trips to London and Paris respectively, and while he was sure Jake was acting like the dog he was, Matt "is probably already married and has his second child on the way. And he's only been there two weeks."

"Sounds like you don't think much of your friend, Matt."

"Oh, quite the opposite. I admire the fact he knows what he wants. He's the sensitive one. Me, I'm just not wired that way."

"Now you sound like my brother. Big-shot international lawyer. He's gay and he loves sex—I've heard more about his antics than I ever wanted to, which is probably why I'm the fag hag he insists I am, and hey, if I am it's because he made me that way, you know, nurture versus nature, ha, ha. But he's afraid of commitment, or so he thinks he is. Anyway," she went on, "we have this ongoing game. Since we both travel a lot, we meet a lot of people. How many men Colton has bought membership into the mile-high club I don't know---but it's a lot. Me, that sort

of sordid sex doesn't interest me. That doesn't mean I can't help further the cause. So, Freddie, have you found any boys here to your liking? I saw some queen walk by with a pink carry-all and quickly dismissed him. Another guy had his baseball cap worn backwards, another no-no I'm guessing. Hey, what about that one?"

Freddie looked to where she was pointing, his eyes zeroing in a guy flipping through cyber pages on his iPad. He was blond, trim, tall, could have been straight except for the limp-wristed motion he used on his tech device. Patsy had picked up on it, raising an eyebrow as she sipped at her red wine.

"He's not even sitting near our gate."

"Doesn't matter. Few other flights remain tonight, could just be stretching out. Look at his legs, nice and long. Damn iPad is blocking his package. Still, he's got potential. Cute in a preppy way, but I don't think that's much of a problem for you. Once the Tommy Hilfiger clothes are off, men are men. Bodies are bodies, skin is skin."

"Yeah, okay. I'll keep him in mind," he said. "Hey, what about that guy?"

"That guy" proved to be one of their flight attendants, a dark-haired, dark-skinned man of thirty-something years waiting around for the arrival of their plane with a gaggle of coworkers. He was nattily dressed in tight dark-green slacks, a white shirt that hugged a fit, if short-ish, body. His blazer was draped over nearby luggage. He spoke excitedly with his fellow coworkers, arms flailing with passion. Ooh, a fiery personality, and no doubt annoyed as well at the delay. Probably had that much energy in bed, too, Freddie thought.

"Okay, I'll give you him."

"Please," Freddie pleaded.

"So, we've got our choices narrowed down. The tall blond tech guy, or the short, hunky

African-American flyboy,” Patsy said. “Let’s see what happens when we board. Come on, kid, put on your best gay, let them know you’re here. Freddie Markson is on board, and he wants to play.”

“Damn, girl, you’ve known me thirty minutes, already you’re a better wing man than either Jake or Matt. Plus, you don’t represent any kind of competition, in case the guy likes star-crossed lovers like Matt, or sneaky whores like Jake. With me, it’s fun in the sun, on your back in the sack, a cock and a suck, a lock and a fuck.”

“My, my, dirty poetry. Freddie, I think you’re going places.”

He grimaced. “Not really. Look at the monitor.”

Another delay. One more hour. Shit. The time was flashing at them, a tease, just like a stripper who never delivered on his promise of showing all his God-given goodies. They ordered another drink and waited out the latest delay. Freddie announced the second shot was on him, and when Patsy tried to protest he said he’d hear nothing of it.

“Let your hair down, hon,” Freddie said. “There’s no fun when you wear that bun.”

She rolled her eyes. “More poetry, huh?”

* * * *

Alitalia Airlines Flight 609 had been airborne for nearly four hours, with Freddie having subsequently eaten, watched a crappy movie, napped, had a couple of drinks, and now he was staring wide-eyed out the window at the passing clouds, the dawning of a new day dawning somewhere in the distance. Flying was way cool. It was like the Earth was some long-forgotten orb, leaving you lost among the stars. Was Rome really their next destination, or the moon?

Freddie hadn't seen Patsy since they'd parted ways when stepping onto the plane. A stylish lady like her, she was of course seated in first class and he was in economy, but she had promised to invite him up for breakfast once they'd broken through the morning's glare, telling him, "I want to hear every detail about your mile-high dalliance." Well, so far, no good. She'd have to wait for her next flight and her next gay pick-up to get off on someone else's sexual exploits. Because Freddie had struck out not just once but twice.

The cute preppy blond with the iPad was only five rows ahead of him, and Freddie had tried to grab his attention each time he went to use the bathroom. After the beers he'd consumed both at the terminal and on board the plane, he'd gotten up often. Thankfully he had his two-seat row all to himself, so he wasn't disturbing anyone with all that getting up. But Blondie wasn't interested. He barely looked at Freddie, and when one time he did meet his gaze, the blond guy shook his head in a disapproving way.

Okay, strike one.

The hot flight attendant was actually working Freddie's section of the plane. He'd served Freddie a beer, had asked him whether he preferred rubber chicken or soggy pasta—okay, those adjectives Freddie added, but they weren't far off—but other than a pleasant exchange of smiles with each collection of trash, their heat meter was about the same as the air temperature outside the window. Cold. He was as properly attentive to Freddie as he was to the fat guy across the aisle squeezing out his companion.

Okay, strike two.

Freddie liked baseball. It was really the only sport he could watch, and besides, a lot of the players were totally hot in those tight uniforms. Balls, bats, pitchers, catchers, watching a game was sometimes better than one of the movies from his porn collection. Call it *Ball Me*. But

all that aside, it didn't mean he was interested in striking out, sexually speaking, on board his flight to Rome. If this summer was all about flings, flings, flings, he wasn't off to a very good start. Not even the airplane—the world's biggest phallic symbol going—seemed to want to fling itself into the air, so delayed were they on this rainy night. What chance did that give him?

Christ, he had to pee again.

He should have heeded Patsy's advice: wine didn't take up as much room in the bladder as did beer, so the body absorbed more of the fruity liquid than did its yeasty equivalent. Fewer calories, too, and given how long they would be sitting on this journey across the Atlantic and halfway around the European continent, why not try and conserve where you could? Freddie stuffed the empty Heineken can inside his seat pocket, then unbuckled for this return journey to the cramped toilet.

Standing behind was Blondie, finally released from his iPad. Freddie's cock did a quick happy dance, mostly because it needed a urine release but also because as close now to the hot guy as he ever was, he was that much more attracted. He wore jeans, a red V-neck T-shirt, both of which highlighted the tight contours of his body. A frothy complement of blond hairs covered his forearms, growing thinner as they crawled up his muscular arms. Freddie felt like he wanted to lick this man's neck right now and see what kind of sensations it set off. And why not? The bulk of the passengers were passed out with long-deserved sleep seeing as though they'd crawled on board near two in the morning. No one was paying them any attention. Trouble was, hot guy barely acknowledged Freddie.

The bathroom door opened, in went hot guy. Two minutes later, he emerged, returning to his seat with nary a word. Bitch. Thinks he's so hot, can have anyone he wants, except on this plane when he sits alone, pees alone, jerks off alone, no doubt. Freddie suddenly lost interest and

took his turn for the bathroom.

As he was about to lock the door behind him, another person appeared.

“Uh, one at a time,” Freddie said on instinct.

But he didn’t really mean that, not when he saw who had made an appearance: he hot black flight attendant. He looked frazzled, like he’d just run a marathon, sweat dripping down his brow. “Oh, hi, you’re the guy in...”

“49A.”

“Right, yeah. Beer Guy.”

“Excuse me?”

“Beer Guy. Oh, sorry, my co-workers and I, we sometimes come up with nicknames for our travelers. Like that blond guy, we call him No Talk. He keeps to himself, always has, and he’s on this same flight every month. Never seen him talk to any of his seatmates, much less us, and we attend to his requests all the time. Whatever, be an unfriendly bitch—just cause you’re cute doesn’t mean you have to be rude, right? For most of our regular fliers it’s easier. We all know who we’re talking about, but you...you’re new, I’ve never seen you before, and all you kept asking for were beers. You had so many I was thinking...well, you don’t want to know what I thought. But I also saw you at the terminal talking to Patsy. We all know her, and we all know she tends to attract...well, a certain type, and so...”

Christ. Guy talks a blue streak but never finishes a damn sentence. Freddie had to shut this one up, and fast. So, door slightly ajar, the two of them stuffed into the small space, Freddie did what had to be done. He shoved closed the door and locked it pronto, planting his lips on the hot flight attendant’s mouth, his tongue finding an air pocket to explore, his actions all done in a matter of seconds. As for their kiss, that lasted almost longer than the boarding process, and

finally when they parted they could at last assess the situation.

“You were smart to do that,” the attendant said. “I get nervous, I talk. And when...”

“You want me to plant another one on you?”

“Actually, yeah. That kiss was amazing. Look, I’m on my break. I’ve got ten minutes.”

“Usually I take longer...”

“Haha, ooh, you’re a funny one in addition to a cute one. Look, I’m Len.”

“Hey, Len. Freddie.”

“I’m totally into you, but I can’t risk anything stupid, not in the skies. I’m going to be in Rome for a couple of days...maybe we can get together...”

Freddie shut the guy up again, kissing him with deep, beer-drenched passion. His hand wandered down to Len’s pants, grabbing at the growing erection Len was suffering. Freddie rubbed the cock hard through the material, kissing him still but reveling in how big Len’s package seemed to be growing. Impressive, he thought, and who knew? Len was short, not more than five foot seven, and his trim body was wiry and thin. Probably ran daily. Okay, good for him. But if he was so devoid of body fat, what the hell was this thing in his pants? Keeping alive that myth about black men? Freddie knew from experience it wasn’t true. But now, hell, Freddie decided he had to get a look at this thing. Couldn’t go back into the main cabin right now anyway; thing would block the aisle. Unzipping the dress slacks and pushing them down fiercely around Len’s ankles, he watched as a mighty, thick cock sprung loose from its hold. Its thick shaft was smoky dark in color, but the tip was blacker. And the whole thing was big—no other word for it, like one of those taller beer cans. Had to be ten inches, easy. Christ. Like out of a damn porno, right here on board flight 69...uh, 609. *Big Cocks, Little Spaces* could be title.

“Shit, what have we here?”

“Really...Freddie, not now, I can't ...”

Too late for protestations, pathetic as they were. Freddie had already taken half the cock deep into his hungry mouth. The tip pushed hard against the back of his throat, threatening to gag him. But he'd watched enough porno to know how to handle such a thick piece of meat. He slid the shaft out, keeping only the tip locked between his lips. He sucked, licked, sucked again. Len had long given up on telling him to stop, and no wonder, Freddie could feel him quickly readying an orgasm. Freddie took the cock into his mouth again, opening wide to feel the thick shaft stretch his jaw.

“Uh, uh....oh...”

Freddie took hold of the big cock. He watched as the head expanded as it spurted its hot juices. Len's cock jerked once, twice, his come shooting up, only to land in the sink of the tiny bathroom. He was panting, drained, leaving Freddie smiling. He'd brought this guy to a pretty quick climax, and he was pleased to have been so found so attractive. He was good at blow jobs, especially with cocks you could really wrap your lips around. What Freddie wanted most was a reciprocal suck. But when a nervous guy like Len had already shot his load, there was little chance he'd follow through with his end of the bargain.

“Once we land,” Len said, “like I said, I've got a layover. What you did to me, well, we can do that again, and a whole lot more. How does that sound?”

“As long as you suck me off eventually, I say it's a deal.”

“Sucked. Fucked. You name it.”

Len disappeared from the restroom, leaving Freddie to his own tortured desires. His cock was hard inside his own pants, and why shouldn't it be? It was starved, and had gone ignored, and damn if he was tired of delayed gratification: from the airlines, from uptight flight

attendants. So he grabbed some soap and he unleashed his cock, and rubbed, rubbed, rubbed, his motions rocking along with the sudden turbulence they'd encountered. But that helped. Life was dangerous, full of excitement and surprises, and those were what truly electrified Freddie Markson. He shot his thick load into his hand, imagining the summer of sexual exploits awaiting him.

His hot flight attendant was just the start.

Next stop, Rome.

Look out, men, Freddie Markson was soon to arrive. Gentlemen, cock your engines.

Chapter Two

Leonardo da Vinci Airport-Fiumicino International Airport was the official name, but it was too long and unwieldy so everyone just shortened it to Fiumicino. Freddie's flight landed at eleven thirty in the morning, three hours later than scheduled. They'd made up some time in the sky, but not a lot. Freddie decided not to complain. It was only the third of June third and he had the entire summer to look forward to, plenty of time to explore the Eternal City's ancient treasures, not to mention its modern marvels. And by marvels, he meant Italian men.

He'd already gotten horny like three times before he'd even left the airport.

There was that scruffy-faced bag handler he'd seen outside his window while they taxied.

There was that dark-bearded customs agent behind the desk.

There was his flight attendant from the airplane, who had given Freddie his number along with a morning croissant and a small bottle of bubbly for pre-landing mimosas. Patsy had been impressed, wanting details about what had occurred back in "steerage" while she slept the night and flight away in her luxurious first-class leather seat. Freddie had little to tell her. There was more to come—from both of them—so they exchanged numbers and agreed upon dinner in a couple of days' time, once he got settled.

A tired Freddie made his way into central Rome via the Fiumicino Express, arriving into the main train station called Termini at just after two o'clock in the afternoon. With his bags dragging behind him, people rushing and bustling all around him to catch their trains to all points throughout Italy, nearly knocking him down in the process, he followed the signs to the cabs, and at last settled into the back of one.

“Buongiorno. To para inglese?”

“Certo,” said the cabbie pleasantly. He twitched his thick salt-and pepper mustache. The smell of cigars permeated the small vehicle.

Freddie thought a moment about what the old man had said, realizing his response was in the affirmative. “Ah, very good. *Merçi...*” Shit, wrong language, God, don’t try too hard, speak English; he said he understands. *“Via Colosseo, per favore.”*

“D’accord,” the cabbie said agreeably.

“Grazie.”

Hey, not bad with this language stuff, Freddie thought, as the cab took off into the midday Rome traffic. Those few pages at the back of his travel book he’d scanned on the plane had come in handy. The cars were certainly smaller than they were in New York, which he guessed had everything to do with the narrow streets that made up this ancient city. Still, the grizzled cabbie was experienced in their intricacies, and he spun his way around the busy traffic circles around Termini, down a few narrow streets until he settled onto the larger Via Cavour.

Having had more than four weeks’ notice for his Rome adventure, Freddie had turned to his computer to do some online research. One of the first details he’d been able to secure was an apartment in which to live. He hated hotels—they were cold and impersonal. Though he wasn’t adverse to hotel sex, which was always fun, fucking and grunting as urgently as you wanted. Banging that headboard as hard as you could, screwing your neighbors, getting off real good and loud. But the idea of living in a hotel for three months, forget about it. He wanted a home, an apartment, a kitchen to cook in, a refrigerator in which to store cheeses and wines and fresh fruits and all those other goodies that the markets of Rome afforded you. So he’d luckily found this charming—by the pictures, anyway—apartment along the via del Colosseo, within sight of the

famed amphitheatre.

Freddie was busy looking for his first-ever glance at the Colosseum when the cabbie made a brave turn against traffic, sending him sideways in the backseat. Weaving his way down the claustrophobic via Cardello, two blocks later the name changed to via del Colosseo. The cab finally came to a stop in front of a brown-painted building just as another car rounded the bend at a non-recommended speed, Freddie exhaling as they came to a safe rest. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath, but as he'd quickly discovered by the crazy driving, pedestrians beware.

He paid the cabbie and unloaded his suitcases while enjoying the feel of the warm sun upon his skin. Damn if he didn't need to tan himself. Right now his pasty complexion threatened to expose him as the tourist he was. But not so anymore, not with this residence awaiting him. But first things first: that tourist in him wanted its glimpse of the Colosseum. Leaving his bags in full view on the sidewalk, Freddie made his way to the edge of the road. The via del Colosseo was built above a hill that looked down on its famous namesake, so the sight afforded was nothing short of spectacular. Leaning against the stone railing, he gazed out at the crumbling ruin, still as majestic as ever. Photographs of it had intrigued him, but seeing the Colosseum this close, Freddie felt transported back in time. For a moment he could hear the thrill of the crowd as hunky gladiators made their way into the arena, set to do battle with whatever enemy came their way: lions, tigers, shirtless warriors. Oh my. Of course in Freddie's mind, after the battle, the winning gladiators went into the steam baths and screwed each other. He thought his porn collection might include such a scenario. *Impaled* could be the title.

For now, a yawning Freddie wished to settle in. He could explore up close the Colosseum later. So he gathered up his bags and made his way to the mocha-colored building, depressing the buzzer for Number Ten. On the top floor, the website had promised expansive views of the city,

including the Colosseum.

“Mr. Markson?” a voice called from the intercom.

“*Si*,” Freddie said, again impressed with his command of the Italian language.

The door buzzed and Freddie made his way inside a wide courtyard. Staring upwards, he saw that each apartment opened out into the flower-drenched courtyard. It was slightly cooler inside here, despite the exposed roof. A few scattered chairs littered the courtyard, and from one of the open doors he could hear the chatter of several people. He made his way to the elevator, finally emerging onto the top floor. Slipping past a couple of other apartments, he at last found his door at the end of the passageway. Wrought-iron railings with curlicue designs in them adorned the open balconies on each level of the building.

Just then the black-painted door opened and a friendly blond smiled back at him. She was probably late forties and matched the description of the person he’d been told would meet him and hand off the keys. She welcomed him with a singsong, “*Buongiorno*.”

“*Buongiorno*...uh, thanks.”

“You are working on your Italian, I see.”

“Not very well.”

“You will do fine,” she replied, her heavily accented English charming. “So, you may place your bags in the room in back—that’s the bedroom, not very spacious, but the bed is quite a good size for Rome. Sometimes we must live in a cramped style to have the pleasure of our city at our footsteps.”

Footsteps. Cute malapropism. A grinning Freddie did as she suggested, placing his bags in the bedroom before returning. She proceeded to give him a quick tour. The kitchen was nice, with stove, fridge, a washer and dryer—details Freddie hadn’t even thought of when booking the

place. Yeah, he'd need to do a wash sometime during the three months. A small bathroom was just off to the right of the kitchen, and the only other room was the living room, adorned with a blue-cushioned futon, a table and two chairs, as well as a television. The apartment did come with Internet service, but the TV offerings were limited, she explained.

"That's more than okay, I didn't fly all this way to watch television all summer. Thanks, this place is just perfect."

"With pleasure. And as a welcome to you, we have provided you this bottle of red wine," she said, indicating the bottle Freddie had seen placed on the dining table. It was surrounded by a bowl of fresh fruit. Nice touch, and he said as much. "I will leave you, Mr. Freddie, and if there is anything you need you have my number. Enjoy your stay. You have...friends here in *Roma*?"

Freddie shook his head, but thought about that big bed in the back room. "Not yet."

As she departed, Freddie contemplated the bottle of wine. Might taste good now after the long trip. But he realized even one glass might just put him to sleep, and that was the last thing he wanted right now. He was too excited to do something as passive as sleeping. The trip had gone well enough, the flight delay notwithstanding. Patsy had been a hoot of a companion during the wait, and Len—well, sucking that big cock on the plane had been an unexpected treat. And they were scheduled to meet up later at a pub Len knew just up the block from Freddie's apartment. He knew what that meant: why go too far when they were only going to end up back here? Freddie's cock did its happy dance at the idea of a healthy sexual romp to get his trip started.

He plopped down on the futon, sinking into its soft cushions.

And promptly fell asleep.

* * * *

“Aha, there’s my wayward passenger,” Len said, rising from his stool at the far edge of the weathered wooden bar.

A chagrined Freddie offered up a quick apology. “I swore to myself I wasn’t going to take a nap, and before I knew it my eyes had closed and somewhere along the way, night fell. Did I keep you waiting long?”

“Not at all,” Len said politely, the half empty pint of Guinness indicating otherwise. “I’m not surprised, though. You were kind of restless on the plane, and using that amount of energy when you’re trapped on board an airplane for nine hours can really affect your body. No doubt you were running on adrenaline when you arrived and didn’t even know it. Let me guess, you sat down for a second...”

“Yup, and I was out before I even knew it.”

“Come on, let’s get you a drink. What’ll it be?”

Freddie looked at the waiting bartender, who looked completely Irish and not the least bit Italian. Had they somehow landed in Dublin? “Uh, I’ll take a Bass, that’s fine. So, Len, an Irish pub in Rome?”

“Oh, they’re all over the place. I like this one. It’s off the beaten path, attracts locals.”

Indeed, the bar was plenty busy. There was a front room with stools positioned along the main bar, a few tables and chairs as well, most of them occupied. A larger back room with more tables and was awash with young kids, all of them loud, laughing, drinking. A large banner advertising Guinness draped over the far wall. Several flatscreen TV hung in the corners, all of them playing soccer matches. *Futbol*, Freddie reminded himself. He was in Europe, speak the language.

Freddie's beer arrived, and the two men clinked.

"Come on, there's a table outside."

Following his new friend, Freddie settled on one of the creaky wooden chairs as Len took up opposite him. The air had cooled noticeably as the sun had begun its descent into the west, leaving streaks of orange painted in the translucent night sky. The time was eight twenty, and for the first time since take-off, Freddie felt relaxed, content. He was here, finally, in Rome. His summer of flings could begin in earnest. Given the fact that the very hot, well-hung, mocha-colored Len was sitting opposite him meant it was all off to a good start.

Len was a career flight attendant, he said, who had earned his wings for the European legs of American after nearly a decade of domestic service. "Then I applied to a few international carriers and I lucked out with Alitalia. I love it. Think about it: Some people wake up, sit in their office for eight hours, then return home. Me, an eight-hour shift gets me halfway across the world. I mean, serving drinks and meals and picking up trash is not my favorite part, but knowing I'm going to be landing in some European capital once it's all over, hell, for that alone I can put up with the rudest passenger. And occasionally I meet someone nice, someone who..."

"Who blows you in the cramped bathroom?"

Len nearly spit out his beer. "Man, you don't hold back, do you?"

"Did I on the plane?"

"Good point."

"If I'm remembering correctly, you didn't exactly hold back either."

Len smiled as he got up to get them a fresh round. When Len returned, his foot brushed against Freddie's leg, and when Freddie gazed up he realized there was no accident there; that

was pure, unadulterated intent. They exchanged a knowing, sexy grin, each taking a large gulp from their full pints. Freddie got a chance to explain the purpose of his trip, each detail making Len that much more jealous. “I’m kind of lucky to have this opportunity. But it did not come without cost...personally. My mother passed away a few months ago. She left me some money and told me I had better do something fun with it.”

“Your mom sounds like she was a great lady. She okay...you know, with the gay thing?”

“Happier than if I’d been straight,” Freddie said. “She went fast...I miss her. But hey, let’s not get into that. I don’t want to bring the mood down. In fact, I’d really like to heighten the mood.” He drank from his beer, nearly taking down half of its contents. “So, my place or...your plane?”

Len laughed sexily. “Oh, your place, definitely.”

Freddie could practically hear the heat crackle between them. Along this narrow street, the sky had darkened, shadows dancing against the sides of the apartment buildings, allowing hidden desires to surface. Both men knew the moment was soon upon them, sex in all its mind-blowing glory. Both of them finished their beers. Both men realized few words were needed at this point.

As they silently made their way down the via del Colosseo, Freddie’s thought was this: first night in Rome and already his bed and body would be on the receiving end of a good sexual workout. Fantastic. Up the elevator they went. Freddie unlocked the door and allowed Len in before him. He closed the door, their bodies touching immediately, passion practically bouncing off their skin. They purposely kept the lights off—why spoil the mood with a harsh glare, why delay the inevitable? Both men connected immediately, mouths kissing, bodies pressed tight against the other. Freddie grinded his hips against Len’s crotch, wanting to get that big cock

hardened as fast as he could. No need to—it was already pushing back at him.

Len took the lead, dragging Freddie over to the plush cushions of the futon. He pushed him down, kneeling before Freddie's legs. They both looked at the bulge in Freddie's jeans.

"I promised you..."

"Yeah, you did."

"I keep my promises."

He unzipped Freddie's jeans, the snap, pulling the pants down. Down went the boxers, too, leaving only Freddie's cock exposed, happily pointing upwards through a thick patch of wiry brown hair. It bounced, like a mini version of Freddie himself. Wasting no time, Len went down on him. Freddie's cock was decent-sized, but he'd never win any length or thickness prizes. Unlike Len. But he knew how to use it, and right now his hips bucking against Len's face, helping him suck, suck, suck his hot cock.

"Yeah, suck it, man. It's been a patient boy, waiting for your mouth..."

"Hmm, yum," Len responded, allowing the cock to slip out of his mouth. "God, you taste great. You spray cologne on your pubes or something?"

"All over. A hot musk that gets the boys going, yeah. Right before I left to meet you."

"Got me going," Len said.

"Hey, Len, you gonna talk all night?"

The black man smiled at his new friend, revealing pearly white teeth that moments later were nibbling on the head of Freddie's cock. Then he licked the shaft, down, up, down, pushing it deep into his mouth. Freddie's musk-scented pubes tickled at his nose, which seemed to drive him in to a sucking frenzy. Generous slurps filled the dark room, heightened by Freddie's loud moans. Spreading his hairy legs wide, Len dove down deeper, his lips sucking at Freddie's balls,

at his crotch, nearly lifting him in the air to get at his ass crack. His tongue plunged in, causing Freddie to cry out with pleasure.

“Ooh, oh, don’t stop. Harder, yeah, thrust your tongue...”

His hand wrapped around his cock. Freddie jerked it, passion overwhelming him as Len ate him out. Christ, this guy was damn good, delivering on his promise and then some. Freddie loved oral sex, but this—this feeling was amazing. His cock felt huge in his hand right now, so turned on was he. Len gazed up, his face smiling, before plunging back down, once again taking Freddie’s full hard-on into his mouth. The heat hit Freddie like a wave. Orgasm threatened to rip from his body.

“Oh, I’m coming, Len...coming so fast...”

Len pulled out, his hand milking Freddie’s cock for all its worth. Freddie let out a strangled cry as his cock burst, thick ropes of come shooting out of the tip. He felt his juice sizzle against his skin, dripping down his cock and into in his thick pubes. As he sought breath, he leaned back with deep satisfaction.

“Wow, real good. Real good. But let’s move to the bed know.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, you got my ass all worked up,” Freddie said. “All it wants now is that big pole of yours—the one making a circus tent out of your pants.”

“You think you can handle it?”

“If my mouth can, my ass can. Oh, yeah, big boy, I know I can,” Freddie said with more confidence than he felt. His ass puckered, giving its own answer.

By the time they made their way to the back room, each man had slipped out of the rest of their clothes. A condom had made its way onto Len’s enormous tool, and Freddie had applied

more than a generous slap of lube. Naked bodies re-connected on the bed, Freddie running his hand on Len's smooth skin, teasing nipples the color of dark chocolate. Len's mouth found his neck, nibbling, biting gently, before pushing Freddie down to the soft mattress. He again lifted Freddie's legs, hands wrapped around his ankles. Freddie could see the tip of that big cock just inches away from his hole.

He nodded at Len. "Go for it."

Freddie felt a sudden aggressive push at his exposed ass. Len's impressive cock made initial contact, the bulbous tip slipping in, holding. Taking a deep breath, Freddie urged the man to continue. His sphincter widened as the thick shaft began to slide further in. Len paused again, and for that Freddie was grateful. Was there more to come? His ass was just getting used to the thing inside him, and that's when he felt an additional push. Geez, any further and he might end up giving Len a reverse blow job; the thing might come out his mouth.

"You okay, man?"

"Fine. Perfect...wow, just give me a second to get used to...ohhh, oh yeah."

Len pulled back a bit, then thrust forward slowly, suddenly. Freddie's sudden cry filled the room, but so did his hungry plea, keep going, going, don't stop, and Len's body responded, answering every demand with hard, eager thrusts. Freddie's legs still pointing to the ceiling, Len thrust, pulled, thrust, his knees locking him onto the mattress, giving him traction while his thick tool buried itself inside Freddie. The bed squeaked as it banged around the wall, the hammering sound competing with their urgent grunts. If anyone was listening, there was little mistake about what was going on inside this darkened room. Plainly put, Freddie was getting his ass reamed big time by this big cock.

Len let go of his airborne legs, and they lost altitude. Freddie felt the man's body close in

on his, so he grabbed at him, pulling him closer. Len never lost pace, his cock still splicing Freddie open. Digging his nails into Len's sleek, sweaty back, he closed his eyes to better heighten his other senses. His body went into overdrive as he listened to Len's animal grunts, pain shooting through him as Len's hard body pounded him, that cock relentless in its fucking. He seemed nowhere near to coming, unlike the blow job back on the airplane, but that was fine, just fine—oh my, Freddie felt himself about to come again. Again? So quickly? No, not now, not when this pole was still deep inside him, pleasuring his ass with each and every gyration. But he couldn't help it, his cock jerked and he cried out as desired flooded out of him one drop at a time. As his balls constricted, so too did his ass, and that was when he felt the true girth of Len's cock as it pulsated within him.

“Oh...yeah...can't...breathe...wow...ooh...”

A low growl began in the back of Len's throat like the animal he'd become, just as his cock thrust one last time inside Freddie's sore ass. Then he let out of a loud bellow as orgasm rocked his body, Freddie able to feel every nerve come alive, his beating heart and the popping veins on his forehead. Len pushed again, making sure every drop emptied out of him, Freddie's legs wrapped around his body to keep him in, yeah, keep that big cock beating inside him. With his heaving chest hovering above him, Freddie leaned up and gave Len a fast kiss.

“I thought you'd never come...” Freddie said.

“Yeah. You, meanwhile, you can't stop flowing.”

“Shit man, I don't know what happened...that cock of yours, it just stirred my juices.”

“You handled it nice, I liked that.”

“You know, you're very different in bed than you are on the airplane.”

“Sure,” Len said. “Here with you, I get to do the fucking. Damn passengers, all day long

all they do is fuck with me.”

Freddie laughed, his hearty bark shaking the walls of the tiny bedroom. He thought he detected a hint of plaster coming off the ceiling, wondering if they had put a little crack in the building’s structure. Damn if the trip to Rome wasn’t off to a great start. Indeed, first night here and he’d already been fucked, and fucked damn good. A nice little fling to get things started. Their time together would no doubt be as brief as Len’s layover. And when it ended, thank you very much, time to move onto the next conquest. Why limit himself to one man when a city of hot, hunky men awaited him?

Love. Yeah, right, you can keep it. Sex, bring it on. Freddie didn’t know how it was possible after what he and Len had just done, but damn if he wasn’t still completely turned on.

As his first day in Rome came to a pleasurable end, Freddie realized he couldn’t wait until the new morning arrived. He was already figuratively bouncing off the walls, so anxious was he to explore the nooks and crannies of this ancient, time-honored city. But with a still-hard Len beside him in bed, that antsy feeling inside him might have been foreplay toward another sweaty romp. Good thing he’d taken that nap. It was going to be a long, hot, amazing night in the Eternal City.

Chapter Three

The city of Rome awakened early on this sun-streaked Sunday morning, with sweet, chirpy birdsong out Freddie's window stirring his tired eyes. Must be nature's way of saying, "Gget thee to church young man. The Pope is anxiously awaiting your presence at the mighty St. Peter's Basilica, ready to forgive you for your many past transgressions." Well, for this lapsed gay Catholic—which was all like an oxymoron wrapped in redundancy—Freddie Markson wasn't sure the bishops and cardinals were up for seeing someone who'd been so deliciously deviant of late. Not unless they wanted to join in. Blow jobs on airplanes, an intense plowing right here in this bed just days ago, a few failed flirting attempts and sloppy drunk kisses at a dance club this past Friday night. Not to mention a few necessary jerk-off sessions to help relieve the horniness that seemed to have taken command of his soul. Plainly put, he had nothing but sex on the brain, waking up each morning with a raging hard-on. Today was no different.

What to do about it, though? Big-dicked Len had taken to the skies a night after their marathon sex session, and all Freddie was left with were hot memories and a funny way of walking. He'd probably never see or hear from him again, unless he was on Freddie's return flight. But, hey, that was getting way ahead of himself. There were still more than two months to happily screw his way through Rome. No sense giving any more than a passing thought to his first one. Bye-bye, Len. Onward, inward.

Last night Freddie had gone for dinner and hung out late at a wine bar, enjoying the solitude, but right now he tossed back the covers and began preparations for his day. Time to see the world or, at the very least, Rome. His day, alas, would not include a visit to the Vatican, but

it would include a drinks date later today with the enigmatic Patsy Abbott. For now, though, Freddie could enjoy some exploring. He'd been in Rome nearly a week already, and aside from daily views of the Colosseum, he really hadn't taken full advantage of what the city had to offer.

No time like the present.

He showered, dressed, thought about his wardrobe. How hot was it outside? Adorned in his towel, he opened his front door and was met by the quiet of the courtyard. All the parties from last night had been doused, the building quiet on this Sunday morning. The air was cool in the courtyard, but it always was. But with the sun already climbing high into the sky, Freddie had to assume today would be a scorcher. He dressed in cargo shorts and a tight T-shirt that hugged his muscular chest, standing before the mirror and declaring himself ready. He checked how his package looked in the shorts, rubbing it a bit to excite his cock. Easy, tiger. That's what Patsy had warned him at the airport, and he supposed it was good advice. Don't go advertising; for a horny guy in a hot city it stroked of desperation.

Gathering sunglasses and map, he made his out of the building and into the blazing sunshine. He made his way down the hill, bypassing the Metro stop at Colosseo. He liked riding the trams because the subway made him think of Manhattan, and for sure he didn't need any reminders there. The tram afforded him the chance to watch the city above ground—if something caught his eye, he could easily hop off and explore. He waited at the stop on the eastern side of the Colosseum with about ten other people, all of them pushing their way on once the tram's doors swung open. There was no air-conditioning, just fans circulating the same hot air around them, and they were no help at all with the heat. Man, if the morning was this hot, what would the afternoon bring?

Freddie remained on the tram until it pulled into its final stop near the Piazza Navona. He

was pleased with himself for having navigated his way through the complex network, hopping off with newfound eagerness. In the giant, oval-shaped piazza, Freddie sat at an outdoor café, where he proceeded to order breakfast: pastries, coffee, juice. He sat there enjoying his tasty meal, watching as the busy piazza came to life. People strolled, laughed, stopped to admire a man painted all in silver who, for some reason, was dressed as the Statue of Liberty. Hearing the smattering of American tourists who flocked to the performance artist, Freddie supposed the guy was onto something. Giving tourists a taste of home. He supposed those same people would head off for an Egg McMuffin at the McDonald's situated at the northern end of the piazza.

Freddie finished up his quick meal, dropped down some euros, and made his way through the throngs of aimless people. He dropped a coin into Liberty's case, nodding at him with amusement. He was kinda cute, silver make-up notwithstanding. From there, Freddie just started wandering, not even sure where he was headed and not really caring. He had a good four hours before he was scheduled to meet with Patsy, and even that wasn't such a formal date as a casual catch-up. A meeting she had to take, wouldn't take long, but seeing as though she would be in Central Rome, why not meet up?

For now, Freddie's feet guided him. He followed the teeming crowds, watched for the signs pointing toward attractions such as the ancient, high-ceiled Pantheon, the cooling waters of the Trevi Fountain—not that the huge number of people gathered there allowed him anywhere near it—and finally the picturesque Spanish Steps, which offered up a nice respite for his tired feet. He'd been walking for nearly two hours at this point, so he sat. Taking out his bottle of water, he swallowed a healthy gulp to replenish lost fluids on this hot day.

A loud burst of applause caught his attention. He looked up just in time to see a newly married couple descending the expansive stairs, wide smiles capturing the glare of the sun like a

Hollywood movie. A lovely white gown swirled around the woman's thin frame, while a man dressed in a classic black tux and tails accompanied her. The guy had dark hair, slicked back, and he was tall and attractive—a total hot package. What a shame, Freddie thought. They swept past Freddie, alighting into a waiting hansom cab. The horse neighed, the driver cracked his whip, and suddenly the happy couple was off on their journey as newlyweds. Freddie watched the reactions from the crowd, the women specifically, swooning as though they had just seen a fairy tale come to life.

Love, romance, bouquets of flowers, horse-drawn carriages. Freddie frowned with the hard-earned cynicism of a die-hard New Yorker. They could keep it all. Freddie Markson wanted nothing to do with it. Love lasted as long as his steamy, sweaty exchanges with the hottest guy he could find, and yeah, that groom would do just about now. Shallow yeah, like the waters of the Trevi Fountain, and just as unreachable. But hey, that was him, shoot him. Just not with Cupid's arrow.

* * * *

Freddie's heart skipped a couple of beats when he saw the man sitting with Patsy Abbott at the small outdoor trattoria. Talk about finding a fine specimen. Patsy sure knew how to attract them, even if they were gay and she was straight and there was no hope of anything sexual between them. She obviously liked to surround herself with the beautiful people of the world, and she had scored in spades this time. Man, the day might have been hot, but it had nothing on this guy. Such was this man's sexy allure, a glow came off him even from nearly one hundred feet away.

Freddie was walking south down the winding via Vittorio Veneto after wandering around the lovely, verdant Villa Borghese, when he came upon his meeting place with Patsy Abbott, just outside the Hotel Majestic. A restaurant with an assortment of tables gathered under a series of protective umbrellas took up a good portion of the wide sidewalk. At almost four in the afternoon, most of the tables were occupied, folks enjoying a late lunch or afternoon snack, or a cool glass of wine. He'd arrived ten minutes early, and seeing how deep in conversation were Patsy and Hot Guy, he didn't want to intrude. He found himself across the street standing by the gates of an old church identified as the Santa Maria della Concezione. He had no clue about this place, but it seemed to send mixed signals to the many people arriving and leaving. The guys were grinning with either anticipation or appreciation, and the women were noticeably chilled or just plain grossed out. Freddie made a mental note to see what the fuss was about.

For now, he concentrated on what was taking place across the Via Veneto. Okay, that wasn't entirely accurate. He was mainly scoping out Hot Guy. From what Freddie could see, the guy was probably early thirties, and he wore this jet black hair short and spiky. His skin was olive in tone, his face covered with a few days of beard scruff. He wore jeans, a black-striped shirt, a black T-shirt underneath it, sleeves rolled to his elbows. Even from here Freddie could detect a healthy coating of hair on the man's arms.

Just then he saw Patsy reach out, her hand touching her companion, and he subsequently, vehemently shaking his head. Whatever was happening, it wasn't going well for dear Patsy. Which was surprising, Freddie had found her to be amazingly persuasive in his limited time with her. At last the man checked his watch, then proceeded to stand up. The meeting concluded, though to Patsy's advantage it did end with a double kiss: cheek, other cheek. A sign of hope, of further dialogue.

Freddie decided he didn't want to miss seeing this guy up close, so he hastened across the curving street, car horns blaring at him. Heck, such an action only helped draw attention to him, with both Patsy and Hot Guy and a few other diners glaring at him. Guess jaywalking wasn't socially acceptable in Rome. Still, Patsy enthusiastically waved him over, holding onto Hot Guy's arms with her other. Obviously she wanted them to meet. Oh, goody.

"Freddie, great timing," she said, rising and offering him the same cheek-to-cheek kiss.

"Hey, Patsy, sorry if I'm interrupting."

"Nonsense. We were just finishing, so your timing could not have been more perfect. Freddie Markson, I'd like you to meet the very handsome and engaging Santo Mancusi. Santo, Freddie is a friend of mine from the States, spending his summer here in Rome. Santo is an old friend, who graciously allowed me this time together."

"Welcome to *Roma*. It is a pleasure to meet you," Santo said in accented but perfect English.

"Uh, thanks. Nice to meet you," Freddie said, shaking his hand.

What, no kiss?

Still, the handshake allowed him a momentary touch, and Freddie's cock did that dance it had been doing of late. And why not? Up close, Hot Guy defied his secret nickname. He was just the most beautiful man Freddie had ever set eyes on; his features perfect, flawless really. His eyes were a rich, deep dark chocolate, darkened further by low-lying, thick eyebrows. Not quite sinister, but definitely sexy and alluring, his face otherwise highlighted by stubble covering his cheeks. What Freddie had assumed earlier was part of a black T-shirt was actually an exposed triangle of chest hair. Hmm, while hairy guys weren't a particular draw for Freddie, damn if the look on Santo wasn't totally sexy.

“I am sorry I cannot stay for a drink with you both,” Santo said. “But I have another appointment to keep. Patsy, thank you very much for the meeting. You have no idea how much I have enjoyed seeing you again, and while I will give your offer very careful consideration I doubt very much we can do business...again. As I said, it would of course be a big step for me... to return, and well, as tempting as you make it sound, it does come with certain...shall we say, risks?”

“Santo, give it time. Don’t rush any decisions. I’m in Rome for a few weeks. You have my mobile.”

“Indeed. And Mr. Freddie, a pleasure.”

“All mine,” Freddie replied, his voice getting stuck in his throat.

Unfortunately, the hot and sexy creature that was Santo Mancusi departed their little gathering, both Patsy and Freddie watching his tight ass as he walked away.

“Need a shot?” Patsy asked, indicating for the waiter.

“Ha...actually, yeah, that would be good. Wow, how did you manage to hold a meeting with him gazing back at you? Didn’t you just want to reach over a kiss him or...or do worse—which by worse, I mean better. Did he just ooze sex, or what?”

“Yes, yes, and yes. But sometimes a woman has to hold her emotions in check.”

Freddie knocked back his newly arrived whiskey. “Oh, Patsy, that’s double-speak. Let me guess: he’s gay than the day is long. But from what I can tell, he doesn’t exactly want the whole world to know. Kind of old to be locked inside that proverbial closet, isn’t he? I could loosen him up—nightly.”

That last part he said a bit too loud for propriety’s sake. A sweet-looking family of four at the neighboring table shifted uncomfortably in their seats, the father dropping money down on

the table in disgust as they vacated their table. He tossed Freddie a disparaging look, which had Patsy shielding her eyes.

“Decorum, Freddie,” she warned. “In Europe, you just never know who speaks—and understands—what language.”

“Sorry. That Santo, wow, he just got my juices...” Freddie stopped, making sure no other nosy people were within earshot. “Okay, so I found Santo hot. Crucify me. What’s his deal, anyway? Why were you meeting with him?”

”Oh, Santo’s got an interesting story.”

“I think Patsy Abbot has an interesting story too. You care to share both of them? And then tell me what clubs I can find Santo hanging out in? I think I would like to rumba with him. Which is just a euphemism for wanting to...”

“Yes, yes, Freddie, I get it. Easy, tiger. Santo’s not that kind of—” Patsy’s blue eyes widened, as though a light bulb had just gone off inside her head. *Santo’s not that kind of what?* Freddie wanted to ask. Top, bottom? Was he versatile? It would be fun to find out. Somehow Freddie managed to calm his horny instinct. His foot tapping the sidewalk, he waited as patiently as he could for Patsy to answer him. Finally, she said, “You know, Freddie, perhaps you can be of assistance to me when it comes to Santo. What do you think about falling in love?”

“You know my thoughts on that...wait a minute, with Santo? Would you settle for lust? ’Cause I think I’m already there.”

“Actually, it’s not so much you falling in love with him, but him falling madly in love with you,” she said. “The kind of crazy, can’t-live-without-you love. The type that makes you change your entire life, jump first, think later, damn the consequences. All-consuming love. Think you’re up for it? You’re a hot guy, very charming, great smile, a totally fun personality.

You could get a guy like Santo. Right?”

“Get in his pants, sure. Get in his heart...I don’t do that kind of thing.”

“Shame.”

Freddie tried to read her face, but he wasn’t getting anywhere. So he hailed their waiter again, once again ordering a shot—this time for both of them—in addition to a bottle of red wine. Patsy had intrigued him with her enigmatic talk, and if he got her drunk enough maybe she’d spill all her secrets, including Santo’s. Patsy just laughed at his order, not only at what he’d asked for but at his fractured Italian, his pronunciation worse than his accent. “At least Santo speaks English so we don’t have to worry about any language barrier.” But that’s all she would confess to until their drinks had arrived, along with a plate of cheeses to help absorb the alcohol. They cheered, then drank to new friends “and intriguing possibilities.”

“Patsy, color me intrigued already. Spare me some info?”

“Freddie,” she said quietly, leaning in to touch his hand, “do you remember an American television show...oh, maybe fifteen years ago, alled *The Exchange Student*? About a family that adopted a foreign boy, and all the ridiculous shenanigans that went on because of the boy’s lack of understanding American culture? Crappy stuff, really, but ABC made a mint off the show for five seasons before it sank in the ratings. They changed the formula in the sixth season, got rid of its breakout star.”

Freddie was nodding. “Yeah, sort of, kinda dumb show, like *Growing Pains* or *Who’s the Boss?*” but this one had this cute foreign kid...wait a minute, are you telling me that Santo Mancusi was that exchange kid? The star of the show? Holy shit, I was like, what sixteen, seventeen when that show was on? I used to think that kid was so cute, but he was only like twelve, and that would make me...well, never mind what it made me.”

“Santo was every teenage girl’s fantasy,” Patsy said. “Magazine covers, those corny win-a-date-with-Santo contests in *Tiger Beat*, the whole media saturation. As big a young star in Hollywood as you get, the son of a respected Italian-American actor who far eclipsed that of his more character-actor father. After five years of sky-high ratings and Santo’s young, innocent face plastered everywhere, it all crashed and burned.”

“Why?”

“We can get into that later. It’s complicated,” she said. “The point is, our Santo left Hollywood behind, moved back to Rome with his family, and he was never heard from again. At least, not in the States. He made a few low-budget movies here in Italy, more soft porn than anything, none to any success. He modeled for a while, hated the lifestyle, so he retreated to the family villa and, last I knew, was working as a waiter at the family-owned restaurant.”

“Wow. That’s quite a story. Rags to riches to restaurant?”

“Not unlike what happens to a lot of child stars, though at least Santo kept his nose clean. Meaning, no arrest record.”

“Which means there was dirt. He just didn’t get caught. Do you know it?”

She hesitated before shaking her head no. “Speculation only. From what I’ve learned, whatever happened, it was the reason Santo was fired from the show after that fifth season. They were a top-ten show, so why mess with success? Of course the official word was the show wanted to move in a fresh, new direction, so they sent Santo’s character back to Europe, replacing him with another young boy in hopes of keeping the show going another few seasons. The new kid didn’t work out, the public missed Santo’s charm, and by the time they realized their mistake Santo had turned his back on Hollywood.”

“So what happened?”

“Like I said—speculation. Santo was caught in a compromising situation.”

‘ “Wait, he was caught having sex? How old was he? Like, fourteen?”

“Fifteen by then,” Patsy said. “Santo matured very quickly, faster than the producers had expected. Puberty hit hard, and Santo’s hormones got the best of him. Actually, they got the best of the producer’s teenage son, who, rumor had it, was receiving daily blow jobs from Santo while on set. When the producer found them together, he flipped. The son went to military school, Santo was shipped back to Italy. How could their cute, young, girl-friendly star be gay?”

Freddie poured more wine into their glasses, chewing on a piece of brie, the rind chewy. “So, what’s your interest in Santo now? You want him to make a comeback? He’s certainly hot enough—the ladies will love his exotic nature, the gays will adore his face, body...did you see that chest? God, I thought he was wearing a T-shirt.”

“Hard to miss, darling. Yes, Santo Mancusi grew up quite nicely, but is he bankable in the States? Not anymore. Those who do remember him say he carries the stigma of TV sitcom, so if he’s to stage a return it has to be well thought out, the perfect vehicle.”

“And the gay issue?” Freddie asked. “How will you handle that?”

“Easy. Like, I said, stage a return. Santo Mancusi is wanted for a Broadway play.”

Freddie laughed aloud, nearly spilling wine down the front of his T-shirt. “Oh, Patsy, I think you’ve got to be the smartest, most cunning lady alive. Bring Santo to Broadway, the wags will assume he’s gay and no one will care, just another actor coming out before making a triumphant return. You’ll sell out every show. Hell, toss in a shirtless scene and I’ll reserve a front row seat for the entire run.”

A conspiratorial look hit Patsy’s face. “You’re good, Freddie. Marketing gold, right?”

“Who are you?” Freddie asked. “I mean, Patsy, I adore you, but I can’t figure you out.”

“Freddie, I’ve been very fortunate in life. My first husband was wealthy. He died young, before he could finalize a divorce, left me everything. And no, I didn’t kill him, ha ha. In fact, officially I’m Lady Patricia Abbott Voigner—isn’t that a sketch? Amazing what kind of doors open when you have a title. Since Clive’s death I’ve made some very smart investments. So I put my energies where I want.”

“And you want Santo.”

“Figuratively. So I’m here in Rome to convince him to come to New York to do the play. He’ll be the toast of town, and no one will care a whit about his sexual orientation. It’s a different world now. Big deal, so he likes to sleep with men. Half of Broadway is gay, and that’s not counting the ones who claim to be bi. So, Freddie, what do you think?”

“I’m amazed. But mostly, I can’t believe you want my help.”

“Why not?” she asked. “Santo turned me down flat. He says he doesn’t want to act anymore, that he enjoys the simple life outside the media’s glare. But I saw fire in his eyes this afternoon when I mentioned stage work. Film would be like working in a bubble—you don’t know what the world thinks of you until long after the production process. The nightly adulation of Broadway would be great for him in terms of building his confidence. For such a beautiful man, he’s so down to earth. You lose the spotlight at an impressionable age, it changes you.”

“So, what do you think I can do?”

“You’re here for the summer, yes?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And then it’s back to New York.”

“Again, yes.”

“Simple. I’d love for Santo to be on board that return flight with you. The play is

scheduled for a late fall opening, and September is perfect timing to start rehearsals. Bring Santo to New York, and once the curtain comes down every night, just think—he comes home to your bed.”

“And to achieve all that, all I have to do is convince the most gorgeous, sexiest Italian guy I’ve ever seen to fall in love with me?”

“*Si.*”

He tossed her a withering look. “Funny. You’re forgetting one thing, Patsy.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t want to fall in love. Remember, summer of flings? Plural, dear.”

Patsy just laughed. Laughed loud, hard, and long. Another table cleared out, and still she laughed. When finally she gathered herself together, she gazed straight into Freddie’s wary eyes and said, “Oh, Freddie Markson, you’re already smitten. You fell in love with Santo before you even knew anything about his past. Hiding out across the street at that creepy old church, you practically undressed him right there on the street, but for once you weren’t looking at his crotch. You were looking at his heart.”

Freddie turned red, her words penetrating deep inside him. She was right.

“You’re wrong. I was just staring at his chest.”

Chapter Four

“Lei amerebbe una tavola per uno, il signore?”

“Si. Grazie.”

The maître'd was tuxedo-clad, and so short in stature was he, so slight in build, that a pencil-thin mustache was the only hint that he was even age-appropriate for such a respectable job. But with his thick Italian pronunciation, Freddie merely bowed to whatever instructions the man offered up, following behind him until he was shown a seat at a small table set against the far wall. The kitchen was directly behind him, and he could already hear crashing sounds coming from within: clattering dishes, the temper of an angry cook, a woman's imperious voice that silenced everything. Okay, not the choicest of tables, but when you're dining alone and don't have a reservation, you take what you get. Freddie didn't care. At least he was in. Now he had to be on the lookout for a hot waiter. One named Santo Mancusi

The restaurant was called Mama Mancusi's, situated on the northeastern edge of the city called Piazza di Spagna, not far from Vatican City. They were supposed to serve the freshest pasta this side of Tuscany, and Freddie would have been inclined to sample their dishes no matter his motive. But given Mama Mancusi was Santo's mother, and that Santo, according to Patsy, worked here as a server, the restaurant was a must-visit. Three days had passed since his conspiratorial conversation with Lady Patsy, as he thought of her now, much of the elapsed time taken up thinking about her proposition, about Santo, and about whether there was a way to have his cake and eat it too. Or, in this case, his cannoli. Maybe convince Santo to come to New York for the play if he had to, but even better, convince him to jump into Freddie's bed at the very

least. To do either, he'd had to accidentally-on-purpose run into him. So a quick Internet search back at the apartment had led him to discovering the location of this "perfect hidden gem" known as Mama Mancusi's, or so said one of the reviews.

And now here he was.

The thing about some of the restaurants in Rome, Freddie had discovered since his arrival, was how stereotypical they were. Either the décor was how Italians saw themselves, or the walls were specifically designed to reflect how visitors expected them to look. Mama Mancusi's was no different. Chianti bottles on the tables with a lone candle sticking out of them, walls covered by cases of red wine, bottles positioned on their sides as oenophiles suggested. Fake vines of white grapes rimmed framed paintings of famous sights in Rome, from the Vatican City to the Colosseum to the Trevi Fountain. As though the delicious, mouth-watering smells emanating from the nearby kitchen weren't enough to suggest Italy, they had to hit you over the head with the onerous décor. But Freddie was in a forgiving mood, especially when he caught sight of Santo at the far side of the dining area, his tight butt slightly bent over as he wrote down orders for a table of four.

The maître'd returned with a menu and a small carafe of white wine, and poured it into a small juice-sized glass. No fancy stemware here. This was Mama's kitchen, no pretenses required. "*Grazie*," Freddie said, studying the menu. Out of the corner of his eye he continued to watch Santo, who was busy going from table to table before finally making his way to the kitchen. Freddie caught his eye as he passed, but Santo didn't miss a beat, he had orders to get into and besides, he'd spent all of five minutes with Freddie several days ago, no reason why he should remember him.

Except he did, returning to his table seconds later.

“You are...Mr. Freddie, yes? Patsy’s friend?”

Freddie smiled up at the handsome man, glad he remembered. He thought perhaps his heart smiled wider inside his chest. Speaking of, Santo was practically all buttoned up, a white T-shirt worn underneath his dress white shirt, hiding one of his sexiest features. Freddie could detect just a few of those thick hairs sticking up out of the rim of his T-shirt. He was also clean-shaven, which made Freddie think Mama Mancini ran a neat joint and wanted her boy to look his neatest. Still, handsome was handsome, and that was Santo.

“Yes, you remember, thanks,” Freddie said. “Nice to see you again, Santo.”

“You are not expecting company?” he asked, looking at the single plate setting.

Freddie shook his head. “Alas, I am dining alone. Patsy told me about your mother’s restaurant, how fresh the food is. How could I pass up such an opportunity? Can you join me, perhaps, for a glass of *vino*?”

Santo offered up his regrets. “We are busy tonight. Mama would not understand.”

“She runs a tight ship?”

“She is the commodore of the family ship,” Santo said. “You wish to order? This is not my table, but an exception can be made. Gina, my sister, she is not the quickest when it comes to waiting on tables, so you could be waiting a while. Do you know what you wish to eat?”

“Something simple. I’ve been dying for a simple plate of pasta.”

“I know the perfect dish for you, Mr. Freddie. *Spaghetti con l’olio d’oliva fiocchi di pepe rossi*. One of my Mama’s specialties. A fine starter. And for your second course?”

“Oh, no, I think the pasta will be fine.”

Santo shook his head. “Mama will never let you get away with such a small meal. To do so would be an insult. Tell you what: I will have Mama prepare something special for you and

perhaps during dessert I can join you for that *vino*, as you say.”

“That sounds great. Thanks, Santo.”

“*D’accord*, Mr. Freddie.”

As Santo headed off to the kitchen, Freddie called him back. “Just call me Freddie.”

“Freddie. It is a funny name.”

“I’m a funny guy.”

“You are a cute guy,” Santo said, and before either of them could react to his compliment Santo disappeared behind the swinging door to the kitchen. Still, it left Freddie with a bouncing knee that slapped the underside of the table to the point where silverware fell to the floor. The clang attracted the attention of waiters and diners alike, and a slightly embarrassed Freddie shrugged it off. A young, pretty woman with untamed ringlets of black hair, dressed similarly as Santo, came by and replaced the knife. She gave Freddie a suspicious look. Freddie saw the resemblance. Santo’s sister, and from the look of it, a very protective one. With good reason, considering what Freddie had on his mind when it came to her easy-on-the-eyes brother. *Easy, tiger*, he heard again in his brain, wondering how Patsy Abbott’s warning had so insinuated itself into his life. But hey, if not for her, Freddie would not be sitting in this dining room having a special meal cooked for him, served by what had to be the hottest waiter in all of Italy.

Soon Santo returned, setting a steaming plate of spaghetti before him. Laced with olive oil and spiced with flakes of red pepper, if it tasted as good as it smelled Freddie was going to be one happy customer. As it was, Santo wasn’t leaving his post beside the table until Freddie had taken his first bite, so he swirled the spaghetti onto his fork, getting a nod of approval when he reached for a spoon for assistance. He opened his mouth, he tasted, he chewed, and, gazing upwards at the handsome Santo, he swallowed.

“Perfect, delicious.”

“*Bene*,” Santo said, with a bow.

As Freddie dined, savoring each bite along with each sip of wine, he watched the activity that swirled around him. Mama Mancini’s seemed a popular choice among the local Romans, a lucky discovery for visitors. Still, as nicely as everyone was greeted, Freddie still had seen no sign of the eponymous owner and chef. He certainly heard her, shouting out orders on a near-continuous basis while her son and daughter raced from kitchen to dining room and back, plates bypassing Freddie even as he stared at empty ones. Finally Santo returned to set before Freddie a fresh plate of what turned out to be veal piccata and fresh vegetables.

“From Mama. I told her a special friend of mine was visiting,” he said.

Freddie took a taste of the soft meat, swooning over the delicate lemony sauce. “Wow, wow, wow,” he said, swallowing a second bite before repeating, “Wow. I’m no fan of veal, but I am now. May I send my compliments to the chef?”

“I will give her your regards,” Santo said, and that was that.

So Freddie would not get to meet Mama Mancini, at least not on his initial visit to her establishment. His consolation prize was more than fine, a shared ricotta-stuffed canola accompanied by a side of Santo, who had brought along a replenished carafe of white wine. They cheered with their wine before tasting the creamy dessert. Freddie was in heaven, not just from the meal, the wine, the dessert, but the company that had joined him.

Table service had slowed, allowing Santo his deserved break. He explained that Gina could pick up the slack, that he’d been working since the lunch shift and his feet were bone tired. Freddie held back an offer to massage them.

“So, Freddie, you are here, I gather, to convince me to do as Patsy requests.”

“No, actually. Patsy and I are friends. I am not involved in her business.”

“Ah, I see.”

“No, really. Santo, I enjoyed meeting you the other day. I guess I wanted a chance to see you again...that’s the only reason why I’m here. Well, now that I’ve eaten here I have two reasons to come back, assuming you don’t mind my coming back.” His unspoken words were implicit: hunger could be satiated, desire could not. Christ, Freddie thought, had his friend Matt invaded his brain, giving him thoughts of love and romance? Didn’t he just want to rip this guy’s clothes off and have wild, crazy sex with him? Fling number two was long overdue, as far as Freddie was concerned.

“You are welcome anytime, Freddie.”

Santo seemed to be shutting down, and Freddie wasn’t sure why. Did he not trust that Freddie wasn’t Patsy’s spy, or was he just nervous about being so friendly-intimate, with a man while his mother hovered nearby? Was he really a closet case, even with his family? Poor Santo, so sexy and so hot and so hairy and just so damn fuckable, it was shame he had to live in the shadow of family expectations and past regressions. If he could just let go of his tightly coiled self, imagine the life he could lead, the fun he could have. Eventually, Freddie realized he could no longer remain inside the restaurant without his behavior bordering on stalker-like. So he paid his bill, noticing the cost of the wine had been left off, then made his way toward the exit. Thanking Santo and the *maitre’d* with the pencil-thin mustache, he emerged from the cozy quarters of Mama Mancini’s and out into a cool, Italian night.

Now what? he wondered. About getting home, but also about Santo.

Did he walk for a while? Did he try to insinuate himself into Santo’s life?

Before he could decide, Santo came running out into the piazza.

“Freddie, thank you again for joining us for dinner. I’m sorry I cannot spend more time with you, but I must get Mama home. My siblings and I, we take turns in ensuring she gets home safely. As you may know, an Italian man’s first love is always to his mother, and it is especially important to be with her during this time of mourning.”

“Mourning?”

“For my Papa.”

“Oh, Santo, I didn’t know. My condolences.”

Santo nodded appreciatively. “The Mancinis are strong. It’s been nearly two years, and while my siblings and I understand the vagaries of life and death, for a woman like Mama, who knew no other man and never will again, she will mourn him forever. Old traditions die hard in my family.”

Freddie nodded with sympathy and understanding. “I, too, am dealing with the death of a parent. My mother passed away just three months ago, and as you know, a gay man’s first love is also to his mother, Italian or not. For so many years it was just my mother and I, and now that she is gone I am living a dream of hers. That is what my trip is ultimately about: honoring her.”

“So, then you being here...in Rome, at the restaurant, it is not what I suspected. It has nothing to do with Patsy. You came here tonight to see me. You have interest in me?”

“The pasta was great, best I’ve ever had, and the veal, wow, don’t get me wrong...worth the trip. But yeah, when I met you the other day on the Via Veneto, I guess you could say I was attracted to you.”

Santo reached out, his hand rubbing Freddie’s chin, the gesture titillating in its intimacy. “Tonight, it is not such a good night for any...uh, encounters. My responsibilities must take precedence. Perhaps I could interest you in going to a club with me sometime. Do you enjoy

dancing?”

Between the physical contact and the sudden invitation, Freddie’s cock was practically dancing already, so yeah, that was an affirmative.

“Yes. People tell me I dance even when I’m standing still.”

“Yes, I can tell. You could sit still in your chair. Perfect, dancing it is,” he said, withdrawing a card from his back pocket with his phone number written on it. “Saturday night, and this is the location. Does that work for you?”

“As long as Saturday comes quickly, yes, that’s fine.”

Santo looked to his left, to his right. Freddie wasn’t sure what he was looking for, and then realized he was making sure the coast was clear. Because then Santo planted a deep kiss upon Freddie’s lips, a light scrape of his heavy beard sending hot coils swirling within his body.

“So long as Saturday is the only thing that comes quickly, then it’s a date.”

Ooh, dirty talk. Freddie liked that.

Ooh, a date. Freddie liked that even more.

A smiling Santo retreated back inside Mama Mancini’s restaurant, and Freddie, well, ask him how he got back to his apartment and he would say he floated home.

* * * *

Bright electric lights swirled around them, streaks of blue and red, green and yellow, that created a dizzying rainbow of shadows upon the walls of the expansive underground club. On the crowded dance floor, sweaty bodies moved in natural sync, feeling the hard beat of the music as its tempo echoed deep inside the hollow of their chests. The night pulsed as hearts raced, hips

swiveled, legs grooved. Among the night's revelers were Freddie Markson and Santo Mancusi, who had been at the club since ten o'clock, on the dance floor since nearly the moment they arrived, and now, more than an hour later they could see the line of sweat lining their brows. Perhaps they had danced long enough; perhaps a drink was in order.

Freddie was having a blast, the best time he'd had since his arrival in Rome more than two weeks ago. Touring the ancient sights, that was great. Exploring the city's busy streets, perfect. Dining out on such exquisite meals as the one he had enjoyed at Mama Mancini's, ideal. Dancing with relentless energy with the sexy Santo at his side, it didn't get any better. Freddie felt like a tiger on the prowl, with Patsy not around to tell him to take it easy. His body had not stopped bouncing since he'd awakened this morning, so filled with anticipation was he about this night—this date. The agreement was to meet inside, but when Freddie approached the outside of Club Metro in the trendy Trastevere neighborhood he saw Santo talking with one of the bouncers behind the roped-off entrance. With his ARCIGAY Uno Club card at the ready, which had cost him eight euros and was required for all membership into any club that catered to the gay crowd, he approached the front of the line. Several men grumbled in Italian, figuring this stranger was trying to jump ahead. In fact, that was exactly what happened as Santo waved him over. Seconds later the bouncer had allowed them both entry with barely a look at Freddie.

“Wow, how'd you arrange that?”

Santo merely smiled and said, “I have connections.”

“Sounds good. Better than waiting on that long line.”

Now, after more than an hour of dancing, Freddie was saying the same thing about the suggestion of a refreshing drink. They slipped through the pulsing crowd, making their way up a few stairs to a mezzanine level, where a small table and two round Ottomans awaited them. A

bottle of chilled vodka had been placed in the center of the table, two iced glasses accompanying it. A rope circled the table, and again Freddie was impressed by the level of service at the club.

Rome's vibrant gay scene had no specific locale, surprisingly, and instead was spread throughout its varied neighborhoods. It was catch as catch can in terms of dance clubs, many of them designating certain nights of the week or one weekend a month for the gay clientele to come out, literally, and party. This Saturday was a decidedly mixed crowd, with lots of gay men and several lesbian couples, but also a fair amount of straights who liked to indulge their inner gay. The music was mostly made up of house music, all beats and pulsing rhythms, but damn if Freddie could decipher any one song or artist. A bit of Madonna, a bit of Gaga had given him a taste of home. Ultimately he didn't care about the music or the crowd; he only had eyes for the man sitting beside him as he pouring shots of vodka for them.

Freddie had worried all day about what to wear, settling on black slacks and a patterned blue shirt. He'd been working on his tan the last few days, and when he looked at himself in the mirror before leaving he'd been pleased with the result. His thick brown hair had lightened after repeated exposure to the strong, Mediterranean sun, and after running some extra paste through it he spiked it up good. He looked young, healthy, sexy, energetic. Could make for a good night. As for Santo, it didn't seem to matter what he wore. He always looked great. Tonight his pants were skintight, leaving little to the imagination, even though Freddie could imagine the package nonetheless. His white button-down shirt was almost pointless, with three buttons undone showing off his copious chest hair. As they hugged hello, as they danced, as they sat opposite each other right now raising a glass of vodka to cheer their night, all Freddie could concentrate on the hotness sweating next to him.

"So, to what do we toast?"

“To new friendships?” Freddie asked.

“If you like,” Santo said.

That was odd. “You have something else?”

“Certainly—to the possible growing out of the improbable.”

“An intriguing toast, Santo, but I’ll take it,” Freddie said, thinking his strange words were either purposely enigmatic, or carried within them a hint of something soon to come. He could only hope. He hadn’t had sex since his night with Len, and he was growing anxious, frustrated, and of course, he was already horny. Permanently horny since he’d laid eyes on Santo.

They drank the vodka like a shot.

Then they drank another.

Finally, glasses set down, Santo reached over, caressing Freddie’s hand.

“Would you like to join me somewhere?”

Freddie’s knees bounced with sudden anticipation. “Yeah, sure, of course. What do you have in mind?”

“Follow me,” he said.

As they left their VIP enclosure, Freddie caught a slight nod from Santo to the bartender. What the hell was that about? Freddie decided to forget it and instead just roll with whatever Santo planned. Guiding him through the crowded room, past the lines at the bathrooms, they wound their way down a circular staircase that led them even further underground. Santo took hold of Freddie’s hand, squeezing it, tickling it. Freddie’s cock did its usual dance inside his boxers, hoping against hope that it was about to get some action. They stepped off the staircase, Santo leading Freddie down a dark corridor to a closed door. Santo withdrew a key, turned the lock, and whisked Freddie inside the room.

It was an office, complete with desk, chair, computer, all you would expect. A framed photograph upon the desk showed Santo and a smiling woman, whom in the dim light appeared to be his sister, Gina. What really caught Freddie's attention was the out-of-place bed positioned in the far corner of the spacious cellar room, a collection of plush pillows adorning the narrow mattress. An intimate space, and one he couldn't wait to take advantage of. Freddie turned around, and what he saw nearly made him come in his pants. Shit, Santo wasn't wasting any time.

Santo had removed his shirt, tossing it aside with casual abandon.

"So, I believe you have been desiring this."

Freddie gulped at the sexy sight before him. "Among other things."

Chapter Five

“Yes? Freddie, you like?”

Hell, yeah, Freddie thought. But he still couldn't speak, not as his eyes still grazed—uh, gazed over the magnificent sight before him. The tease of that triangle of chest hair Freddie had observed all night had been just that, and now that Santo's shirt was off and his chest was displayed in all its furry glory, well, my God, Freddie could barely believe its thick lushness. Black whorls spread from Santo's neckline, broadly covering his pecs, the erect nipples fighting to get noticed beneath the dark blanket. The hair continued down his belly, as thick and expansive there as on his chest. Finally, the thicket disappeared like a taunt beneath his thin waistline. His friend Jake was the one with the hair fetish, and he'd probably be creaming his pants right about now. And Matt, he'd gone bear-hunting with Jake on a number of occasions. Freddie had been rather neutral on the subject of hairy guys, but he found himself being a quick convert. All these thoughts, they swirled quickly through his mind as his body stopped, stood, stared.

“Freddie, something is wrong?”

“Hell, no,” Freddie said. He finally got his bearings, able to take one step forward, then another. With each step he took he undid one of the buttons of his shirt, and as they stood just inches from each other, able to taste the heavy breath between them, Freddie's shirt slid off his shoulders and onto the floor. Freddie's chest was naturally smooth but strongly muscled, with big hungry nipples jutting out, eager for a night of sheer ecstasy.

Both men continued to stare at each other, neither taking that first step of intimacy. The

torture of being so close was almost perfect, heightening the electricity between them. Once they exploded, their bodies would lunge forward. Heat would explode, their passion a combustible bomb going off. Eyes found eyes, chocolate drops meeting blue sky. Smiles turned crooked, wicked, as though their minds already knew what their bodies were about to do. Transporting the effect of future satisfaction to the heat of the present.

Then they exploded. Body met body, Santo thrusting his lips against Freddie's. The force of their connection pushed them hard against the wall, the crash of something on a table barely discernable what with the steady thrum of the music beating on the ceiling, the sudden hungry groans elicited from their throats. Passion erupted inside them, urging their bodies till they were nearly one. Freddie tasted Santo's hungry lips, his ears and his neck, and his body shivered, convulsed. The scratchy touch of Santo's hairy chest pressing hard, rough against his bare skin, caused him to grab at him harder, nails digging into his back. Their mouths explored, their hands moved frenetically, so eager were they to touch all over, to touch everything. They couldn't quite settle anywhere. Skin, hair, spit, sweat, an erotic musk permeating the room.

Just then Santo grabbed hold of Freddie, throwing him down on the mattress. Standing over him, he unbuckled his belt, whipping it out of the loops with the determination of a bull fighter. Tossing it aside, he slid his pants down, finally revealing the cock Freddie had longed to see—to wrap his lips around. Santo was surprising cut, a bulbous tip pointing northwards. The shaft was thick, and of course populated with a thick bush of black pubes. Santo climbed onto the bed, straddling him, his cock just inches from his face. Taking hold of it with one hand, Freddie guided the cock to his mouth, where his tongue swirled around the heated tip, feeling its pulse, taking it temperature. Then he engulfed the entire length into his mouth, sucking hard, sucking, sucking, never wanting to let it escape its sexual prison.

“Oh, yes, ooh...” Santo cried out. “More, more, don’t stop...”

Freddie had every desire to grant Santo his wish, his mouth slurping at the cock. He felt thick pubes poke at his nose, brush against his cheeks. Grabbing hold of his firm, fuzzy ass, Freddie pushed his cock in deeper, thrust against the back of his throat. A finger found its way to Santo’s asshole, maneuvering its way through his foliage of curly hair, pushing its way into Santo’s ass.

“Yeah, give me more, more,” Santo said, his words reverberating against the walls.

Freddie thrust a second finger deep into Santo’s ass, and that was when he felt the man’s body begin to shudder. Freddie intensified his sucking, thrust a third finger inside him, and the combined effect of suck and push, of tongue and finger, of cock and ass, suddenly had Santo erupting with wild gyrations. Freddie’s mouth slid off the cock, watching as the tip expanded, exploded. Generous amounts of come shot out, hitting Freddie in the face, on his cheeks and his chin, dripping down the nape of his neck like a streak of heat lightning.

“Oh, shit, oh wow, Santo, that was a great climax. I loved how you shot your load.”

“Yes, thanks. It has been so long...”

“Are you kidding? A man as hot as you are...you must have your pick.”

“That is precisely why I do not,” he said, sliding in beside Freddie, kissing his mouth. “For me, sex is special, to be shared equally with someone as special. To go from fling to fling, that is not Santo’s style. When I share my body, I am sharing much more than skin. It is not just dicks and climax, it is what the man has found beneath the physical. You agree, no?”

He was glad the lights were down low; perhaps Freddie could disguise the guilt that was enveloping him. What Santo had said, it kind of negated the point of Freddie’s entire trip, didn’t it? His friends had accepted this challenge to find true love, but Freddie, he just saw a summer

excursion to Rome as a way to screw, screw, screw whichever man made his cock dance. And now the supposed second fling of summer had gotten complicated real fast. Freddie knew he felt something more for sexy Santo than just mere physical attraction. And Santo, he'd just given voice to such a concept that more existed between them. So, then, what was next? Did their night end with just Freddie giving him a blow job? Or did they indulge in more sex, waiting to see if their hearts grew as thick as their cocks?

“Santo, I have to admit...I'm confused. I mean, I really like you, I do...it's just...”

Santo kissed him, cutting off his words. “I am sorry. I spoke too soon, Freddie. The way you brought me to orgasm, I suppose the feelings coursing through me threatened to overwhelm me, and so rather than keep them bottled in, I spoke them. An oral release. Please forget what I said. Our night, it is young, and I very much wish to pleasure you...for you to give me even more pleasure.”

Freddie turned on his side, directly facing Santo, staring deep into his eyes. Reaching out, he slid fingers through the abundant chest hair, finding his nipples buried beneath the fur. His cock pushed against the material of his pants, and that was when he realized that as naked as Santo was, he was still partially dressed. Rising up, he undid the snap of his pants, sliding them down his legs until they found the floor. His boxers followed shortly afterwards, his cock happy to be released from its prison. Freddie's naked body slipped back against Santo, his tongue snaking down onto Santo's chest, tasting a heady mix of sweat and cologne, the odor drawing him deeper into his blanket of hair. He found the hidden nipples, the tip of his tongue encircling the red knobs, sucking them between his teeth.

Santo's body arched at Freddie's touch, and he urged Freddie down, down. His tongue taking the lead, Freddie found his way through the forest of hair, licking at the furry trail as he

made his way back down toward the tree trunk jutting upwards. Freddie licked Santo's cock, traveling further to his balls, to the perineum separating cock from ass. He was hairy there, too—where wasn't he?—and Freddie followed the thicket to Santo's fur-covered ass. Again, he went for Santo's ass, his tongue licking, exploring, gaining quick entry. And again, Santo's body stretched from ecstasy, from sudden, wild waves that hit his insides.

Freddie lifted Santo's legs, grabbing them by the ankles. His hard cock pressed against the furry entrance to his ass, teasing, building within Santo a desire that he could no longer control. He gazed up at him, eyes connecting, the windows of their souls open, ready to take the moment to its destined, desired moment. Santo indicated what they needed was kept under the mattress, so Freddie searched and came up with the condom package, which he promptly opened, sliding the rubber down his throbbing shaft. He added a generous amount of lube to Santo's ass, dampening the thick hair for easier entry.

Freddie positioned himself again above Santo. Staring at that gorgeous, handsome face, admiring the blanket of hair upon his chest, Freddie felt his cock jolt with desire, and he knew he could wait no longer. The tip met Santo's entry point, sliding in, sliding in more, more, until he had pierced him. Then he thrust once, very hard, making sure he was fully inside. Santo cried with pain, and had it not been for the pleasure written upon his face Freddie might have thought he had hurt him. But no, the message was clear: *fuck me, fuck me, fuck me*. Freddie did, his mind taken hostage by his body. He was pure energy, a fireball of thrusts and moans, the heat fueling him onward, deeper, harder, harder, harder. Santo met each crush of Freddie's cock with a push all its own, to the point where Freddie felt like his cock would forever be buried inside his ass, pounding him, pounding, pounding, the slap of skin against skin.

Freddie lost himself in the moment. His cock held back from orgasm, surprising him. So

turned on was he, he might have normally come and come already, his body wracked by uncontrollable eruptions. But that didn't happen. He just held Santo's ankles, he just continued to push his cock hard inside his hairy Italian lover, enjoying himself, enjoying Santo, the all-consuming exertions possessing them. As though Freddie and Santo had fallen away and what remained was the basest of physical desire, the power and the pain and the pleasure keeping them locked in their own, sex-drenched world. Only the eventual physical release would grant them the kind of release their souls needed.

“Ooh, oh shit...yeah, I feel it...Santo...grab me... hold me.”

Santo pulled Freddie against his body as they continued to fuck. Kisses erupted all over Freddie's face as his body continued to thrust, thrust, thrust. The blanket of hair on Santo's chest scratched at his smooth chest, scraping his nipples raw, like a massage that awakened—no, heightened every pore on his body. He felt Santo's fingers dig deep into his back, scratching him, and he screamed out with desire, with a passion he could never remember feeling. Then, the rush that swarmed his body and threatened to overwhelm his heart, his cock, deep down to his toes, it bubbled, it boiled, and finally, finally, Freddie's cock exploded, a white flash erupting in his mind, nearly blowing his circuits. Santo kept his legs locked around Freddie's ass, taking each final thrust, sucking every drop out of him.

“Wow, oh wow,” Freddie said, his body coming to a rest atop Santo's.

“Yes,” Santo said, breathing heavily, seeking air. “What you did, Freddie...that was so amazing. The way you fucked me, the way you put your heart and your soul and your entire being into that...it makes me desire you all over again. Instead of feeling spent, I feel alive, ready for more, and more beyond that.”

Freddie licked a bead of sweat from Santo's neck, swirling his taste inside his mouth.

“How you make me feel, how you taste...Santo, what happened between us...my God...what animals we were. I’m not even sure I was in control at one point. My body...it just took over. I think you’re the sexiest thing ever. God, why wouldn’t you come to New York to do that play? The city would fall in love with you. We could have so much fun.”

Oops, wrong kind of pillow talk. Heat turned cold, wide eyes darkened. Santo slid out from the bed, suddenly leaving Freddie naked, exposed. It wasn’t that the passion disappeared from the room, it just dissipated between a regretful Freddie Markson and a newly offended Santo Mancusi like a splash of water dousing a fire.

“So, this fuck session, is that all it was? A way to convince me to do as Patsy asked?”

“No, no, God, not at all. I’m sorry...Santo, it just came out. Trust me, I’m not involved. I couldn’t care less what you do for a living...whether you listen to Patsy Abbott or not. I barely know the woman. Live your life the way you want—hell, that’s how I live mine. My terms, my decisions. Call it selfish, but that’s me. I also think that’s who you are.”

Santo remained skeptical. The couple of vodka shots he’d done hadn’t helped keep his mind clear. Sitting behind the large mahogany desk of the office, still naked and obviously not concerned about such as detail, Santo’s thick eyebrows acted like a shutter upon his eyes, hiding emotion. He took another shot. Either the same chilled bucket with the vodka bottle had somehow been placed here during their sexual romp, or the club knew to provide a second bottle to the office whenever Santo was in the building, as though this was a long practiced routine of Santo’s, every detail taken care by the staff. Why did they do it, and why did Santo? For all his noble protestations of not indulging in casual sex, how else did such a scenario as this play out?

Freddie felt ridiculous, pleading his case as though he’d come before a judge, only the

judge in this case was way fucking hot. The fact that they had just shared a wild, passionate night of crazy sex, well, it seemed this court had now deemed the sweaty exchange inadmissible evidence. He looked around for his clothes, thinking he should get dressed, get the hell out of here. Instead he was suddenly offered a vodka shot, the first sign from Santo that he should stay. That perhaps he had overreacted.

“May I sit?” Freddie said, accepting the shot.

Santo nodded, and Freddie settled into the soft leather chair opposite him. He held the glass up briefly and when Santo refused to acknowledge the toast, Freddie just downed the burning liquid in one remorseful gulp. It tasted as bitter as the feeling in this room. Santo was displaying a different side of himself, and Freddie couldn’t tell if he was afraid of the man or felt sorry for him. Mention of going to New York to star in the play had obviously ruined the night, and Freddie had decided in the elapsed fifteen minutes that this had everything to do with Santo and nothing at all to do with Freddie.

He was just the conduit.

Damn Patsy.

Though if not for Patsy Abbott, he would not have just experienced one of the hottest nights of sex he could remember. Did he take the good with the bad, or did you just cut his losses, call it another of his dreamed of Roman flings, move on to the next one without even a casual thought about might have been, what could have been? No, Freddie held his ground, even holding out his glass for a refill. Santo gave him a generous pour, did the same for himself. Both of them took gentle sips, as though they knew another heady shot would threaten to impair their judgment—make it take an even darker turn.

“May I ask you a question?” Freddie asked.

“Go ahead.”

“This club...we skipped the line, we had VIP treatment upstairs. Now we have this office to ourselves. Complete with a bed. You own this place, or something?”

“Or something,” Santo said. “A family business, like the restaurant. And do not read too much into the existence of the bed. When you close down a club, it is often after four o’clock in the morning and rather than drive home, the cot provides a quick solution. It has been slept on more often than it has been made love on.”

“So, your family has a few businesses in Rome. Family obligations, I get it. Is that your objection to doing the play? To do so would mean putting on hold all your responsibilities here?”

“Perhaps. My family could help out if I wanted to do the play. But I don’t. It’s simple. I have put that previous life behind me.”

“It could be different. You were a kid then.”

“Yes, a foolish kid who had no control, who was unable to make decisions for himself. Now that I am an adult, I avoid situations where people can try to manipulate me. Without barriers, you are left with nothing, not even a soul.”

Freddie shook his head. “Actually, it looks to me like you survived Hollywood just fine. A lot of child stars end up dead, on drugs, in prison. What have you done? You came home to Italy to take care of your family—you help your mother run her restaurant, you run a popular nightclub, you are seeing her through her mourning period. From what I can see, those are the actions of a dedicated son, not to mention a man with a soul. See, you were able to keep it after all.”

For the first time since their disagreement, Santo’s eyes lost the darkness that had built up in his irises. “Thank you, Freddie. That is kind of you to say.”

“Can I ask another question?”

“Like your American game, twenty questions? Continue.”

“Is your objection to the play have to do with a return to acting—or is it the play itself?”

Santo answered quickly. “I have not read the play.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have already answered your question. And Patsy’s. Acting does not interest me. I pretend enough in my daily life. Why take to stage? Now, if you don’t mind, perhaps we just bring our night to a close. If all you wish to do is talk about what I should be doing with my life, then we have nothing more to discuss. Everyone says that I am hiding from the world, that I am afraid. Do I look like a man who would be afraid of anything? Santo Mancusi is his own man.”

Yes, afraid of your mother, letting her know you are gay. But Freddie held his tongue, preferring to keep the peace. “I’m sorry, Santo. The last thing I wanted was to offend you. Consider the conversation closed. Maybe you’re right, maybe I should get my things...”

But Freddie remained seated. He didn’t really want to leave. Despite the sour turn of their conversation, he was enjoying Santo’s company. He was sexy, especially the ease with which his naked self lay exposed, and that fuck session had been amazing. But apparently it was over. It was just a fling, right? And wasn’t that all Freddie really wanted?

Santo came around to him, extending a hand. Freddie took it, surprised suddenly by the force with which Santo used to lift him from the chair. Was he about to be thrown out? Just then Santo enveloped him in his arms, kissing him with an intensity he’d not prior felt. The man was noticeably excited, his hardening cock popping out the thicket of pubes.

“Santo...are you sure you want...”

“Sssh, Freddie. We have talked long enough,” he said with a throaty growl. “We are good at sex, and so we should stay focused on that.”

He pinned Freddie hard against the wall, strong, furry arms nearly flattening his face into the soft plasterboard. He kissed him again, slurping at the back of his neck, his cock sliding partly up the exposed crack of Freddie’s ass. He felt the sweeping brush of Santo’s thick chest hair rubbing against his back. Freddie’s cock ached as it was thrust upward against the wall, hard against his belly. Santo’s hot cock pushed again, again, wanting deep entry into his waiting ass. My God, Freddie thought, he was about to get fucked right here, impaled against the wall. With one strong arm, Santo kept him from squirming away, not that he wanted to. The game was fun, hot. Freddie continued to play along. So turned on was he, he thought his pre-come was already staining the wall.

Just then he felt a cold liquid stroke his ass, knowing it was the swipe of the lube. Then Santo’s encased cock poked fast at his hole, pressed, pushed, thrust without really waiting for Freddie to adjust, to open. Pinned as he was, all he could do was accept, receive, widen, allow the desperate cock its desired entry. Santo grunted as he pushed again, and finally Freddie felt like the entire cock had slipped in. With fast, urgent thrusts, Santo began to fuck him. With hard, furious bursts of energy, Santo buried his cock so far up him that his thick bush scratched at Freddie’s smooth ass. His fur-covered chest brushed roughly against his back.

“Yeah, harder, harder, Santo. Give it, give it all to me.”

His contorted body was rocked by Santo’s hungry pounding. Both men continued to cry out with unleashed, unrelenting power. Santo’s vocal grunts sounded like the cries of a wounded animal, with sweat pouring down his face and matting his chest hair, slipping into the sweet crack of Freddie’s ass. Santo wouldn’t stop, he couldn’t. Instincts had won the battle for the

night and fueled Santo's powerful thrusts, his body just giving Freddie's ass all it could give.

"Oh yeah, Santo...Santo...so hot...so..."

"Hairy, yes, just like you wanted. You like your hairy-chested Santo to fuck you, yes?"

"Yes, yes, you beast, you're so damn big, filling me up"

Santo let out one big thrust that sent Freddie hard against the wall again, bellowing as orgasm erupted through his shaft and out the tip of his pulsing cock, shooting his load deep inside Freddie. His body continued to convulse as each burst shot forth, and finally he came to a rest, his breathing shallow, his body drenched with sweat. Santo pulled out, finally releasing his hold on Freddie. Freddie, his face red, his body alive with sex, noticed a mingling of juices on staining the wall. His sweat and, surprisingly, his come. He barely remembered his orgasm, that's how focused he'd been on the sensations deep within his ass.

"Oh, wow, wow," Freddie said, his legs giving out as his body slid down to the floor. "I think you and I are much better when we're not talking. Christ, you really knew how to work my whole body. I can't believe what we just did. What a fucking great night."

"So we are agreed, there will be no more talk of plays, of New York."

"Hey," Freddie said flippantly, "I'm just here for the fun. And hell, that was lots of fun."

"This fun you always speak of, Freddie," he asked. "Is that what Rome is for you? Meet anyone, fuck anyone? I wonder, how many men have you met so far? And how many more will you meet? I am glad I was able to provide you with one of those fun nights."

Santo's dismissive, hurtful tone indicated he meant nothing of the sort. Words were words, though—they cut quick, drew blood. The fact that he'd slipped his pants on punctuated what he'd said. He indicated for Freddie to get dressed too.

"Oh, uh, okay."

A newly defeated, slightly confused Freddie tossed on his clothes. He was dressed, all ready to go, but Santo remained shirtless as he took up again behind the desk. Those eyes of his had darkened again, eyebrows furrowed. Arms crossed his chest, like he was covering up something he'd exposed. The fun they'd shared had shot out of him as quickly as had his come.

“Goodbye, Freddie,” Santo said, not even looking at him. “I hope you continue to enjoy your so-called fun. I’m sure you will. You are very good at it. And perhaps when you return to New York you can star in a play all your own. You are a very good actor.”

Chapter Six

Okay, so that hunky gladiator was really hot, and not just hot as in sweltering from the heat. With those strong, muscled arms and tree-trunk-like legs, he could probably hold his body weight as he plunged his thick cock deep inside his impassioned lover. He would roar triumphantly like a conquered lion, taming the man as he impaled him until finally unleashing his seed. The crowd would cheer wildly as the pent-up sexual battle came to its natural conclusion, beast over submissive man, a triumph of the body, all power, sinew, muscle.

Freddie Markson wiped beads of sweat from his brow, not sure if the hot noontime sun was responsible or the conflicting images in his mind, a mix of scenes from ancient Rome and some bad costume-clad porno from his collection. Probably called *Glad He Ate Him*. Say it fast. Truthfully, he was kind of turned off by the idea. He'd been turned off all week, like someone had flicked off a switch, a light bulb had blown. Here he was, supposed to be having the time of his life in Italy, perfect weather and hot summer nights bringing with them flings, fantasies, and fun, combined into a trip as memorable as anything he might do in his life. He'd indulged in a couple flings, he'd fed his fantasies, but that sudden, elusive thing called fun—how it haunted him, almost as though it was the one thing he would not be granted on this trip.

And for Freddie Markson to be missing out on fun, that was like not breathing.

Damn, Santo Mancusi.

The way he'd rained judgment down on that word "fun," spitting it out of his mouth with such disdain, it had deflated Freddie's tires, doused his spark. Not even the bulging muscles of the gladiator could entice his cock into doing its usual happy dance. Though did he really need to

be getting hard while surrounded by hundreds of tourists? See, he was presently exploring the ancient grounds of the Colosseum, his third such trip since his arrival to the grand amphitheatre. He'd gone the first time because he was fascinated by the sheer breadth of the structure, the amazing architectural wonder it must have been centuries ago. The second time he'd gone with more of a sense of the ruins' history, paying his entry fee and walking its wide circumference, staring down at the remains of the exits—called vomitoriums, a name with many implications—peering down its tunnels where caged animals, men, criminals were kept waiting before being unleashed in front of a bloodthirsty crowd. This third visit, well, it had everything to do with the hunky gladiator, who all day long posed in the brutal heat for pictures with tourists and acted out a battle cry with his sword and shield.

Freddie had thought him hot since the moment he'd seen him. It wasn't just the costume, but the way the sun's golden rays gleamed off his tanned muscles, his thick, smooth chest, those legs that he could envision wrapped around his ass while being fucked. He'd thought about approaching him, but trying to get him alone was next to impossible, the way he hovered underneath the Arch of Constantine attracting tourists the moment they came out of the Metro station, the nearby trams. Guy had a job to do, probably wasn't in the mood to be picked up by a depressed guy who wasn't even sure his cock worked. Sighing loudly, Freddie knew the performance artist was a poor substitute for what ailed him. He missed Santo.

Sitting down on one of the exposed stone steps of the Colosseum, Freddie grabbed a Coke from his satchel, the cold liquid relief for his dusty throat. All morning he'd been touring ancient Rome, the old Roman Forum and the grassy lawn which once was the home to the Circus Maximus, the magnificent Temple of Romulus, a veritable feast for the eyes, as though history were coming alive among these protected ruins. The time spent out of his thoughts had been

good. Now, realizing how exhausted he was, he mused about his predicament. What to do next? And he didn't mean sightseeing.

Somehow a week had slipped by since that night of sexual highs and emotional lows, and of course he hadn't heard a word from Santo. Had he expected to? Santo had overreacted to the notion that Freddie had just used him for sex, for fun, that he was just one more conquest. If all he wanted was sex, would he have dined at the family restaurant, would he have asked to meet Mama Mancusi—not that he had—or would he have really helped Santo ponder the question of whether he should resurrect his acting career? He could have just ripped Santo's clothes off, plucked his chest, sucked his cock, fucked his ass, been done with that. Fling flung, onward.

Of course, the ironic part of the situation was that was just how Freddie had envisioned his summer when he'd been planning this trip. Here he was now, a week removed from such a mind-blowing sexual encounter and what was he thinking about? Not the sex, but dammit, the guy. Santo Mancusi had issues he had to deal with. Why was he so afraid to step back into the limelight and why, if anyone in the world could convince him to do, was it Patsy Abbot who held that supposed power? Freddie never did learn what the connection was between them. Should he contact Pasty, e-mail her and ask? He decided best to leave it alone.

What he needed was to get back up on that horse. Ride it hard.

Maybe he could head back to Club Metro tonight? Flaunt himself before Santo. He could meet someone new, take him home. Do stuff, dirty stuff, wicked stuff, stuff that would put the boing back in his boink. Freddie liked that idea. But why was he proposing to return to the scene of the crime? This was Saturday; Santo would probably be there, and if he was, and if he was with someone else, it just might drive Freddie Markson directly back to Fiumicino Airport and home.

He thought of his friends. Matt walking the streets of Paris, probably wearing a beret and having grown his facial hair. Dressed in the latest couture, meeting fabulous people—oh, who was he kidding? Matt was probably nursing a broken heart, but of course, that's what Matt does. He falls in love at the drop of a beret, then picks himself back up and falls in love all over again. Not so Jake Westbury, their London-bound friend. Jake liked to think he was more like Matt, but he had too many wild nights where his behavior was more in line with Freddie's liberal attitude. Trouble was, Jake claimed to be over casual sex. He wanted to fall in love, and wasn't it that reasoning that had gotten them all in this situation? So, had Jake found love? How many times had Matt's heart skipped a beat? Were they wondering the same thing about Freddie? How often had he gotten laid? Funny, the answer was twice: Len and Santo. And damn, why wasn't he thinking about number three?

All he wanted was Santo again, again, and again.

Holy shit, Freddie thought. *What if I'm the one who falls in love?*

Well, that decided it. He was going out tonight, and he was going to redefine fun. He was going to get fucked. Time for the old Freddie to strut his stuff. No more moping, that was for lovers—uh, losers. Finishing his Coke, he made his way through the Colosseum, out its exit and back into the steady hum of Roman traffic. He was smiling over his newfound ability to reach a decision. As he passed under the Arch of Constantine, he made sexy eyes at the hunky gladiator. The man lifted his sword in return.

"Buongiorno," the gladiator said.

Freddie's cock jumped at the man's thick accent. He smiled back at the sexy man.

Yeah, a suggestive move like that showed lots of promise. A sword like that guy carried would go a long way toward restoring the fun in Freddie. So, okay, the dance had begun. Freddie

had made himself known to the gladiator; he'd made contact. Never knew what could develop from there: friends, lovers, fighters, or some wild sexy combination of all three.

* * * *

Club Metro had a line down the block, and it didn't appear to be moving. It was after eleven o'clock, making Freddie think he had missed the early call. Clubs in Manhattan didn't really get crazy until after midnight, but Rome's nightlife started sooner and ended sooner. He'd already made the commitment to return to Metro, and he didn't want anyone—Santo—thinking he could be intimidated into staying away. Truth was, he liked the club, the pulsing music and the big dance floor, the way the other boys had smiled his way, shooting him envious looks when they realized he was with Santo.

Tonight's crowd had a different buzz about it. Lots more women, their boyfriends, only a few easily discernable gay boys. Of course, Freddie recalled that last Saturday had been Metro's designated gay night, and now this week they were back to their regular clientele. Should he leave? Not that he minded breeders, but he was hungry for sex tonight. It was that simple. Too late for him to explore which other clubs might be having a gay-themed night, so he decided to remain where he was. Besides, there were a couple of cuties ahead of him on the line who had potential. He'd wait out the line, see how the night went.

The Trastevere neighborhood was hopping on this perfect, moon-drenched Italian night. Located on the western side of the Tiber River, the streets were small and narrow, its old world charm a striking contrast to the numerous trendy restaurants and bars that lined its corners. This was where older, tradition-led Romans met the young and hip; it was one part of town that made

Freddie feel as though he was far from home. Cobbled streets, passing trams, church spires—you never knew what you would uncover with each turn of the corner. Club Metro was located on a side street, just down from the Piazza di Santa Maria and its church and bell tower, rumored to be the first Christian place of worship in Rome.

He gazed upwards at the spire, sending a prayer to the Virgin Mary.

Please, get me off this line.

And please don't introduce me to any virgin Marys.

Freddie knew he was going to hell with jokes like that.

Fortunately a new distraction caught the line's attention. As narrow as the street was, a bulky car with dark-tinted windows made its way down, stopping directly before the club's main entrance. A bouncer pushed back the curious crowd, opening the rope, not unlike last week with Santo and Freddie.

Before Freddie could wonder if this was Santo arriving, Santo emerged from the driver's side of the car. He wore a sleek dark suit and an electric teal tie tonight, sunglasses covering his chocolate eyes. But his build, his body, the thick dark scruff on his face—even from back of the line Freddie would know him anywhere. Santo walked around the car, opening the door to help out a woman with dark, curly hair, her lithe body adorned in a teal miniskirt. They were a teal-dappled match set. Freddie thought he recognized her as the woman from the photograph down in the office where he and Santo had had sex. His sister, Freddie had assumed, but maybe there was more going on here. Why would he keep a picture of himself and his sister on the desk?

Santo stared down the long line, Freddie slinking back slightly so as not to be seen. He wasn't. Santo took hold of the woman's arm and guided her past the open rope and into the club. Either that or Santo had seen Freddie and chosen to ignore him.

The line moved slightly, but Freddie was still about twenty people back. Just then the bouncer reappeared, making his way down the line with determination. He pointed at Freddie, who pointed at himself with his finger and the bouncer nodded, saying something in Italian while rolling his eyes. Was he being asked to leave? Or to jump the line? Not about to argue, Freddie hopped off the line and followed the bouncer downstairs to the main entrance. Well, didn't that answer that? Santo had seen him after all, and for some reason he'd given the okay to have Freddie admitted to the club ahead of others.

The bouncer followed Freddie inside, where he was passed along to another, even larger man dressed all in black. A bald head made him look intimidating—not that he needed to, what with muscles threatening to burst through his shirt. A quick exchange of words between the two men had Freddie darn curious, and his confusion continued as the bald guy escorted Freddie away from the main dance room, denying him entry to the night's party. What the hell was going on? Freddie was brought to a staircase beyond the bathrooms, continuing to follow his scary escort. Down the spiral stairs they went, a different route to Santo's office, but still, didn't all roads lead to Rome? Indeed, Freddie found himself outside the familiar door, and that's when he was suddenly left alone. The bald guy gone so fast, it was almost as though he hadn't really existed. Almost.

Just then the door opened wide and there stood Santo, a faint light behind him casting a silhouette of his frame against the wall.

“Hey, what's going on?” Freddie asked.

“Come in, *per favore*.”

Freddie did as asked, the door closing quickly behind him. The room was exactly as he remembered: the bed in the far corner where he and Santo had enjoyed hot sex, the nearer wall

where Santo had fucked him so hard he came on the wall. The framed photograph on the desk, remained, as did the ever-present vodka bottle next to it. He was hoping Santo would offer him a drink, because he sure could have used it. But no drinks were on the menu. Santo moved in close to Freddie, his breath warm on his neck, his scruffy beard practically scraping his skin.

“Freddie, I have missed you. I was a fool...”

Just as Freddie was going to apologize, Santo planted a hard, passionate kiss on his lips. Freddie blanched at the sudden move, so unexpected after not speaking for a week. He was again pushed against the wall, Santo’s cock rocking his thigh. Freddie tried to back away, feeling this was all wrong. He’d missed Santo, hell yeah, and he’d thought about him all week, but for them to reunite under such circumstances, in a room lit so dimly he could barely see the face before him—no, something was off here. They had issues, things to talk about. But first Santo seemed to want to toss him down on the floor and screw his ass. As appealing as it was, Freddie just couldn’t—oh Christ, Santo wasn’t giving up. He wasn’t reading Freddie’s mood.

“Santo, wait...”

“No, I cannot...”

Santo removed his suit jacket, throwing it against the back of his chair. Removing his tie, he undid one button before thinking differently, reaching down and unzipping his pants, digging inside to retrieve his cock. Freddie thought that was a strange move as well. The Santo he knew would have proudly shed all of his clothes and allow Freddie to lap up his hairy torso as he had done before. That wasn’t the case here. Santo just whipped out his cock, stroking it to its full, hard length. He pushed Freddie down to his knees, positioning the growing cock toward his open mouth. Wait, something was wrong there, too. Really wrong, big time wrong. Freddie fell backwards, his back hitting the wall.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked incredulously.

“I am Santo, Freddie. Please, I want you so badly.”

Was he drunk? Was Freddie? No, he'd only had a small carafe of wine with dinner, and that had been more than an hour ago. He was sober, he was aware of his circumstances, and this was not right. This man, he was clearly not Santo. Then Freddie remembered the photograph on the desk, the man he assumed was Santo with the beautiful woman. They were the ones he'd seen leave the car with the tinted-windows and enter the club. But what if...

“You're not Santo,” Freddie said.

“And so, what if I am not Santo? From what I hear, Freddie, you are a man who seeks only fun.” The man held his hard, large cock over Freddie's face, waving it at him. “Fun has found you. You are sexy. I will give Santo points for good taste...and I wanted to see for myself what the fuss was about. Suck my cock, Freddie, have your fun, and perhaps I will return the favor.”

“You've got to be kidding me,” Freddie said.

“You do not wish to have sex with me?”

“I don't even know you.”

“But why should that matter? You are in Rome, yes, for your flings? Here is one before you. A rather thick one, yes, bigger than Santo...it will fill your mouth, and later, it will fill up more of you. You will enjoy it...I am quite a good cocksman.”

Oh my God, Freddie thought, his mind practically exploding. Was this dialogue from one of his pornos? Some stranger pretends to be someone else, convince him to have sex. Who was this guy, Santo's brother? Given the resemblance, the similar height, facial hair, but there was no denying that Santo's near-twin had been blessed with a couple of more inches in the cock

department. What would the name of this porn movie be? *Brother, Can You Spare an Inch?* ?

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on here, so how about we just forget it? I’ll go upstairs and I’ll leave the club. This isn’t really my style, okay? I’m not sure what Santo told you but whatever we shared, it certainly wasn’t...like this.”

The man who was not Santo continued to hover over Freddie, his eyes unreadable in the dim lighting. Yet the tense moment seemed to be dissipating, along with the man’s erection. He stuffed himself back in his pants, zipped up. He walked around the side of the desk, where he quickly poured a glass of vodka. Then he poured a second and dangled the glass in Freddie’s direction. The drink sure was tempting.

“Come, Freddie, have a seat—somewhere other than the floor. Have a drink.”

The man’s tone had changed. He’d lost that ridiculous, breathy, overdone sex voice. He sounded, well, almost reasonable. So Freddie got up and accepted the drink, taking an eager gulp. His throat burned, the sensation bringing clarity to his mind, to the situation.

“Who are you?”

“I am Benventura Mancusi, and I want to know what you have done to my brother.”

“Benventura...”

“My friends call me Beno,” he said. “Did you know Santo was really Santorini?”

“Isn’t that Greek?”

“Kind of appropriate, you ask me,” Beno said.

“Wait, you’re making crude gay jokes about your brother, while less than a minute ago you were swinging your cock in my face begging for a blow job.”

“Nothing would have happened.”

“Excuse me?” Now Freddie was even more confused.

“Well, the situation would have played out one of two ways. One, you would tried to do as I asked, and the moment I felt your mouth on my cock you would have been out the door, probably with a few bruises courtesy of my bald-headed friend who escorted you here.” Beno smiled at such a notion, seeming almost disappointed. He sat down behind his desk, sighing as he unbuttoned a second and third button. Freddie wondered why the man had gone to such extremes by showing Freddie his cock. A quick look at Beno’s exposed, hairless chest would have been a sure sign this man was not Santo. Beno continued. “As for the second scenario, that one is fortunately happening now. You refused my advances, and not just once. The fact that once you figured out I was not Santo you recoiled at the thought of sex with me, the fact that you knew I was not Santo just by looking at my cock...well, let’s say I find that very revealing. So tell me, Freddie, my new American friend, you have had sex with my brother.”

It was not a question. And it was delivered in such a tone, Freddie felt further confused.

“I’m still not sure what’s going on here.”

“Simple, Freddie. I set you up. It was a test.”

“A test?”

“Yes. I’m very protective of my little brother. He’s a sensitive soul, and sometimes he lets people easily manipulate him. He wants people to like him, but he can go too far. You’re familiar with what happened to him as a kid, the way Hollywood suddenly turned its back on him. They left him broken, a fifteen-year-old kid who had no choice but to scamper back to Italy and his mother’s waiting bosom—never leaving that protective cocoon since. But this week, I sense turmoil in his soul, and the only thing that has changed in the past week is his meeting you. Santo has further withdrawn into himself and he won’t talk about his troubles. I knew it was a man, and finally I got Santo to confess his pain to me. When you showed up tonight at Club

Metro, I knew I had to come up with an idea...”

“You know, you could have just asked me.”

“Ah, but what would that really reveal about your character? Words can lie, people can lie. What I did—and more importantly, what you did not do—told me more about you than a weekend in the country would have.”

“Excuse me? That’s kind of an odd metaphor.”

“It’s not a metaphor. It’s an invitation. To Villa Mancusi.”

“Villa...”

“*Si*. Our family estate in Tuscany. Ironically, bought by our father but with the riches Santo made from his silly American TV show. Now it is his sanctuary, or some might call it his prison.”

“And you want me to come for a visit?”

“*Si*.”

“Why?”

“Easy. My brother likes you...a lot, I believe,” Beno said, sounding like he approved of such a thing, a man loving a man. “He was hurt by your comment about having fun—yes, he told me what happened between you that night—and it sent him deeper into himself, sent him as far away as Arezzo. Freddie, if you really care about my brother you will come to Villa Mancusi, and you will cure him of all that ails him.”

“How am I supposed to do that? Make him fall in love with me?”

“Oh, I believe he’s already done that. No, I want you make our mother see that in order for Santo to be truly happy and move on with his life, she has to accept his attractions to men—and what better way than for her to meet the man who has captured her son’s heart?”

“Wait, this is crazy.” Mama Mancusi? Freddie had to convince her? He doubted any man had ever convinced the imperious-sounding woman of anything in life, not how to make pasta, run a restaurant, or how to raise—and love—her sons. “As much as I appreciate the offer, Beno, how am I supposed to know how Santo truly feels? Why isn’t this invitation coming from him? Besides, I’m not so sure I’m the cause of Santo’s strife. It’s Patsy Abbott’s fault.”

Beno’s eyes grew tight, dim even in such a darkened room. Hands positioned on his desk, he leaned forward with more than a hint of surprise. “Patsy Abbott? You know her?”

“Yes, she’s here in Rome. She’s met with him,” Freddie said. “That’s how I met Santo. She’s been trying to convince Santo to return to acting. Something about coming back to New York to do some Broadway play.”

Beno nodded thoughtfully. “How well do you know Patsy?”

“Not well at all. We met at the airport, had drinks here in Rome, that’s it.”

“Can you get in contact with her?”

“Yes. I have her number.”

“Good. Call her, invite her.”

“Invite her?”

“*Si*. To Villa Mancusi, it is just a couple of hours away. Please, next weekend while the entire family is gathered to honor the third anniversary of our father’s unfortunate passing. Mama always closes the restaurant during this two-week period so as to mourn. Santo was very close to Papa, and he always withdraws into himself at this time of year. But this year...it is more. Whether a struggle over a play, or over a man, we shall see. You both come for a visit, and we will see what is truly wrong with Santo. Either way, my brother’s happiness is on the line here, and I am determined to finally help him find it. So, Freddie, will you call Patsy, and will

the two of you join us for a lovely weekend in the country?”

“I have one question.”

“What is that?”

“Does Santo know we’re coming?”

Beno didn’t answer right away. He poured himself another hit of vodka, holding out the bottle to refill Freddie’s glass. Both men drank, wary eyes staring back at each other. Freddie just nodded before saying, “I’ll take that as a no.”

Chapter Seven

“So, which role do you want? How about producer? Ooh, yes, I think that would suit you well.”

“I’m not pretending to be a producer.”

“Well then, one of the stars of the show.”

“I’m not an actor, Pasty.”

She laughed cynically. “Trust me, Freddie, you already are. What do you think you’re going to doing all weekend?”

“Enjoying myself?”

“As what, Santo’s gay lover? That will go over like a lead balloon with Mama Mancusi.”

Freddie sulked. God, he hated this. He hated pretending.

“Maybe I’m your assistant,” he considered.

“Get me coffee.”

“No,” Freddie said.

“You’re fired.”

Freddie tossed a wilting, withering look Patsy Abbott’s way. “Why don’t I think that’s very far from the truth? You probably go through assistants like I go through...”

“Men?” she asked.

“Ha ha, very funny.” But was there truth to that, and what was so wrong with it? Freddie loved men, he loved sex with men, so why not share the fun? Slutty as it sounded, it was certainly better than following this pursuit of...just how the hell did he define his relationship

with Santo? Was there even a kernel of one? What happened to his flings, his summer of men? Men, not *man*. Not just Santo, anyone but—yeah, sure. He believed that like he believed Patsy was pure innocence. “Have I gone completely bonkers? Here we are, headed to a family’s weekend retreat, and most of the family has no clue we’re coming, much less who we are or what motives we’re bringing with us. Sound like a good set-up for a fun weekend? I can just see it: Mama Mancusi sees me coming out of her son’s room in the morning, you’ll all be enjoying Freddie-flavored bacon for breakfast. And once Santo gets sight of you...well, who knows how he’ll react. It won’t be good, that I know. He’s already made his feelings very clear to you, and unfortunately to me, that he’s not interested in acting again. I at least have a chance with him this weekend. For you...honey, can you say disaster?”

“Why Freddie Markson, I’m surprised at you. You don’t strike me as the type to give up easily,” she said with a wave of her well-manicured hand. “I know this opportunity...this play waiting for him back in New York is exactly what Santo wants, but it’s also something he needs. He’s hidden from the world long enough, longer than I ever thought he would. What about you? What’s this weekend mean for you? Sure, Santo is one of the most handsome men I’ve ever met in my life, and you’re certainly a charmer. You’d make an attractive couple, even taking into account Santo’s lack of desire to be an out-and-proud homo. Am I to gather you have already gotten to sample his bedroom techniques? If you ask me, I think so. That’s it, you’re along for the ride. And by ride I don’t mean this one.”

“This one” being the sleek black limousine in which they were comfortably ensconced. Once Freddie had contacted Patsy and she’d returned his call, plans were quickly set in motion for the upcoming weekend at Villa Mancusi. Patsy had, no surprise, taken charge. Leave all the details to me, she said, telling him to be waiting outside his apartment on Friday morning, a car

would pick him up. Yeah, a car. No two-plus-hours train trip for them, Patsy was funding this venture. Freddie was surprised to see the stretch limo maneuver around the tight bends of the via del Colosseo. One stop later to pick up Patsy at the (of course) five-star Hotel Majestic on the Via Veneto—not far from where she and Santo had had drinks, where Freddie had fortuitously met Santo—then they were off.

Villa Mancusi was located two hours north of Rome within the rolling hills of Tuscany and, as Patsy told him when she joined him in the back of the limo, “I can’t believe you connived your way there. You’re such a bitch. But hey, if this works out the way I hope, you and your date get two premium seats for opening night.”

“Uh, Patsy, if this works out the way it should, I’ll only need one ticket,” Freddie said, a wicked smile crossing his face as he added, “My date will be up on stage.”

So, agendas set and conspiratorial winks exchanged, the limo set off for a weekend destined to be among the most memorable Freddie had ever spent. Patsy spent a good deal of the time on her mobile with various friends, clients, and, in one instance, her brother, Colton. “Yes, dear, I promise I’ll make to your Cap-Ferrat villa before you leave...well, I don’t know when, I still have not completed my business in Rome. So, who’s your hot lover this year? Have you picked him out yet, and if so, what flight was he on and what city was he heading to? Is he young and pliable? What?...Of course I haven’t met anyone. Do I ever? Oh, Colton, those don’t count...for me the gays are just harmless fun...I don’t mean you, Freddie...who, oh, a friend, silly boy...”

Freddie closed his eyes and tried not to listen to her conversation, but short of throwing himself out the rear door, he had little choice. Maybe he could sit up front with the driver. Patsy was as brutally forthright with her apparently horny brother as she was with her gay airport pick-

ups.

So Freddie concentrated on the lush countryside. Endless rows of bushy vines gave way to innumerable carpets of sunflowers, their stalks bending sideways off the breeze-blown hills. What struck Freddie was how brightly colored the world was in this vibrant land—s though the sun's rays were stronger here than other place Freddie had ever seen, blessing nature in a Technicolor glow. It felt good to be away from the cramped streets of Rome, even more so to be comfortably seated amid cooling air-conditioning, the sweltering heat of the city forgotten. As he imagined Villa Mancusi, he saw a beautiful mansion upon a high hill, its neo-classic design like something out of a fairy tale. No, not those kind of fairies, but perhaps appropriate. He smiled widely, his first genuine grin since that strange meeting days ago with Beno. Was this trip really such a good idea? Freddie supposed there was no going back, not when a sign on the sign of the road announced Arezzo in twenty kilometers.

Wow, they'd already traveled one hundred and sixty kilometers already, the near-two hour trip almost over.

Another twenty minutes passed before the limo turned off the A1, winding its way through roads that grew increasingly smaller, narrower. Up a winding road, one switchback, then another, Freddie was beginning to doubt the oversized car would not be able to make it all the way up the mountain. But the driver continued to drive expertly, at one point having to honk his way around a particularly tight bend. Good thing: another car was making its way down the opposite side. They let it pass, and the limo continued, a short while later coming to a stop beside a closed gate.

"I think we're here," Patsy announced.

Fear struck Freddie's heart. Already? Wait, who was he? Her assistant, a producer, one of

the actors? He couldn't remember what they had decided. Did he even want to associate himself with Patsy? She had come to claim Santo's soul; Freddie only wanted his--what? Enticing images of Santo's naked self washed over him, his thick cock and his charming smile, his welcome mat of a chest. Suddenly Freddie was in those steamy shots, too, and they things they were doing—he hoped it wasn't fantasy but a sign of things to come. Freddie's cock danced inside his pants. Another porno? Call this one *Come Again, Come Often*.

The gates unlocked and the limo pulled ahead, coming to a quick stop.

Seconds later the driver came around the opened the doors to the limo, Patsy stepping out first, Freddie following her. She immediately slid sunglasses down upon her eyes, either to shield her eyes from the bright sun, or from the imminent glare of the Mancusi family. Freddie took a quick look around the grounds, discovering that the villa was quite modern and sleek in design, a direct contrast to the ancient, ornate mansion he'd envisioned. Expansive grounds were lushly appointed with plants and flowers, and the sweet smell of the countryside permeated all around him. No one was there to greet them, but that quickly changed as he heard the sound of a door opening. Freddie steeled himself for whatever greeting awaited them.

Down a smooth, cement path from atop a hill came a woman probably in her late sixties. An apron wrapped around her sizable middle, and she held a wooden spoon with what looked like red streaks covering it. My God, it could only be Mama Mancusi, and what was that she was holding—a weapon? Freddie's sunglasses were in his satchel, too late to fish them out. He raised a hand over his eyes to get a better view of the woman approaching them, not just her appearance but her mood. What he saw surprised him; what he witnessed could have knocked him over.

“Il mio caro, il Patsy, lei è più bello di ricordo. Benvenuto,” the rotund woman said with obvious affection. She embraced Patsy with warmth before separating. She held out the spoon,

and said, *“Il gusto, è la mia salsa speciale.”*

Patsy tasted what was being offered, and a wide smile heightened her features. *“Grazie, Mama, grazie!”*

“Bene, bene,” the woman said before turning an eye toward Freddie.

“Buongiorno,” Freddie said, bowing slightly in her presence. His palms were sweaty.

“Mama Mancusi,” Patsy said, *“I’d like you to meet the very fun, very special Freddie Markson.”*

“Freddie? Che tipo di nome è ciò?”

Patsy just laughed away her comment, leaving a clueless Freddie standing there looking like a fool. Oh well, might as jump in and be polite. *“I am charmed to meet you at last, Mrs. Mancusi. Thank you for inviting us to your lovely villa.”* When the woman said nothing to him, he gave Patsy a helpless look. His eyes pleaded, *help me, you seem to be best friends with her, can you toss me a little of that love?*

Then both women started to crack up, their laughter hearty, the rolls of fat on Mama Mancusi’s belly shaking with delight. Finally, she came close to Freddie, reached up to pinch his cheeks. *“Si, si, molto bello. You, dear Freddie, you are a friend of our Patsy’s, no? You are most welcome to Villa Mancusi.”* Her sudden switch to Freddie had him wondering if he’d heard her right. But when she pushed the spoon toward his face, he realized he was being offered a taste of the sauce too, and to turn her down was to insult her. So he tasted, taking the spoon directly into his mouth, wiping it clean.

“Delizioso,” he exclaimed.

The woman nodded once. Patsy grinned. *“Well done, Freddie. You’ll be just fine.”*

“So, Freddie,” Mama Mancusi said, *“your visit, you are to help Patsy? Or are you here to*

see my Santo?"

Why wasn't Freddie surprised by this announcement? Nothing got past Mama Mancusi.

"Santo," he said.

"Bene. Mio bel figlio ha bisogno di un amico."

With that, she headed back toward the house while Patsy and the driver attended to their bags. Freddie went to help, giving Patsy a curious look, a raised eyebrow. "Could you explain what just happened? Mama Mancusi embraces you like an old friend of the family, she speaks Italian and then suddenly she can speak fluid English, and then...she seems to know all about Santo and me. What's going on?"

"Oh, Freddie, there's a lot you don't know. Come on, let's get settled and then you can surprise Santo. After all, you told me doesn't know you're coming."

"He doesn't know you're here either, Patsy," Freddie said.

"Doesn't he?" she asked with a taunting, raised eyebrow.

Damn, more surprises. This was no fun. Freddie needed a drink.

He had sneaking suspicion that he wasn't getting the entire story. Not from Patsy, not from Beno Mancusi, and perhaps not from Santo himself.

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, Freddie emerged from his private room on the top floor of the villa, having unpacked quickly and changed into a bathing suit and T-shirt. He still hadn't found that desired drink and his nerves were still on edge. This weekend was shaping up to be one big joke at Freddie's expense. God, he was a long way from New York.

Freddie navigated his way through the complex corridors of the spacious villa. Outside the large window to his left was a deck which led down to two tennis courts, currently unoccupied. Back downstairs, the airy, bright living room was also devoid of people. In fact, since he'd parted ways with Patsy on the second floor, he had yet to see another soul. Wasn't this supposed to be a family weekend? Where was the family? Beno, sister Gina, or, for that matter, Santo? The sweet, wonderful smell of spices and sauce emanated through the rooms, attracting Freddie's attention. No doubt Mama, busy in the kitchen. He followed the smells, only to discover both Mama Mancusi and Patsy engaged in deep conversation at the kitchen's island, heads nearly touching as they talked. Patsy had a glass of red wine in her hand, and as much as Freddie would have loved to share the bottle with her, the last thing he wanted was to disturb them.

So Freddie bypassed them, sliding the glass doors open and stepping out on to the patio. The villa was built on a high hill, and so from this vantage Freddie could easily gaze down on the lush Tuscan land. The city of Arezzo, its culture and its shopping, was in the far distance, leaving Villa Mancusi slightly isolated. Freddie breathed in the warm air, thrilled to be away from the cloying humidity of Rome. Still, he wanted to cool off, so he started down the set of steps off the patio, en route to a lower level which contained an Olympic-size swimming pool, a series of cabanas, and, as it turned out, another person. He was swimming laps, strong arms lifting out of the water with gentle glides. Effortless but powerful, he was clearly determined in his workout, stretching muscles that left Freddie curious which brother he was about to encounter. Beno, or Santo? From his position high above the pool, he still couldn't tell.

His heart started to beat fast, nervous if the swimmer turned out to be Santo. How did he explain his presence? His nerves were not such a deterrent, not when the shimmering, sun-

dappled waters of the pool were calling. Freddie ventured down the flight of stairs, finally emerging onto the wide patio at pool's edge. He'd still gone undetected, the swimmer lost in his laps. Sticking a foot in the water, Freddie felt an instant shift in his body temperature, the cool water just what he needed.

Reluctant to jump into the pool and interrupt the laps, Freddie was uncertain how to proceed. Just then the swimmer ended his routine, lifting himself up out of the water, biceps bulging from the workout, his strong back facing Freddie. Wearing only a tight pair of blue Speedos, he headed toward a chaise longue, grabbing a fresh towel. He tossed it over his head, shaking the excess water from his hair, wiping down his front, his back, his legs while still facing away from him. Freddie just stood there, salivating at the sight of the sexy man drying off before him, hoping against hope it was the sultry Santo and not his near-twin, the beneficent Beno. *Turn around, turn around*, Freddie's mind urged.

The man tossed his towel on the chaise and ran long fingers through his wet hair, smoothing thick wet locks against his head. Apparently satisfied, he at last turned around, and Freddie exhaled loudly. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath. But oh, thank God. What spread out before him was unmistakable. Freddie had touched it, tasted it, allowed his fingers to graze the rough fur as the man hovered above him, making love to him with fierce, raw energy. Matted by the water, Santo's hot chest was easily distinguished in all its dark, hairy sexiness.

"Hello, Freddie," Santo said, a smile upon his face, nary the hint of surprise to his voice.

"Santo," Freddie said. "You don't seem surprised to see me."

"I had assumed something was up, the way Beno was acting. I finally got him to confess," he said. "It's nice to see you, Freddie. Brave of you to come all this way, not just to

endure my family, but surviving a two-hour car ride with Patsy? Did you have headphones, or just remarkable patience?”

“You know Patsy is here as well?”

“Like I said, Beno has confessed his sins. So, Freddie, shall we make the best of it?”

A smiling Santo made his way toward Freddie, Freddie growing more excited the closer he got. Inside his board shorts his cock twitched, as though it too were welcoming back an old friend. Freddie tried to douse its growing desire. The last thing he needed Santo to see was his cock poking a tent in his swim trunks. Too late. Santo smiled at him, kissing him on the mouth while his hand touched the thickening cock through the gauzy material. His kiss was tender, just as sweet as Freddie had hoped, even though he’d convinced himself otherwise. His reunion with Santo was not supposed to go this way. He’d expected heat, anger, vitriol over being manipulated, the little boy in him resurfacing as he realized everyone around him was making his decisions for him.

“Freddie, you are sweet, and you are very handsome. And loyal, from what I’ve been told.”

“Loyal? I’m not sure what that means?”

“Beno’s office...at the club. I’m sorry for how my brother acted. It’s rather an extreme way of behaving. But he’s just looking out for my interests. Freddie, there have been many men who have tried not only to get in my pants but into my heart, and more often than not I have spurned their advances. Always being told you are good-looking does nothing to cure your natural insecurities. Perhaps it is a lesson I learned young when in Hollywood, but many people are more interested in a shallow relationship, more into pleasuring themselves than others, and so of course they put their needs ahead of others. You, Freddie, the way you rejected Beno...it was

admirable. Beno showed me.”

“What do you mean he showed you?”

“Closed-circuit television, a must for any club,” he said. “It’s amazing what we catch some of our customers doing, especially after a night of drinking. As I watched the video, I knew you would reject Beno, that you would figure out he wasn’t me, but Beno...he is skeptical, and he protects his little brother with almost crazy devotion. He saw how defeated I was when I returned from Hollywood, he vowed no other person would ever hurt me again. Patsy’s appearance in Rome coincided with your arrival, and in fact the two of you seemed to know each other. Beno wanted proof it was sheer coincidence. So when you passed the test, the natural progression was to invite you here. For you and I to spend time together.”

“Wow,” Freddie said. “Don’t I feel like the one who’s been manipulated?”

“I am sorry, Freddie,” he said. “The Mancusi family is very enclosed—seldom do we allow others inside our sanctuary. This weekend was intended to be family only, a way for us to remember Papa, so the fact you are here, that Patsy is here, well, consider yourselves more than welcome. I’m sorry for the way I overreacted at the club. Was I just a fun diversion, another notch in your Roman belt? Or did you have true feelings for me? That is what I needed to know. Even though I disapprove of the way Beno went about it, I suppose it got results.”

“I don’t get it, Santo. You rejected Patsy’s request regarding the play. Yet here she is at the family compound. The way your mother greeted her, it was like Patsy was some long-lost daughter. Can you explain—what’s the big secret? How does the Mancusi family know Patsy?”

Santo smiled, a tinge of sadness to it. “All in good time. For now, Freddie, we are alone. Patsy and Mama are busy catching up—it is many years since they have seen each other, Gina has not yet arrived, and Beno and his wife, Sophia, they have gone to town to fetch copious

amounts of wine. This weekend will be a true celebration of all our father did for this family. Until that time, we have the pool to ourselves, and from the looks of it...well, Freddie, I think you came for a swim. So, allow me..."

Freddie never saw it coming. Santo just reached out and pushed him, sending him over the edge of the shimmering pool. He hit the cool water with a giant splash, landing awkwardly, lacking any finesse. As he resurfaced, spitting water out of his mouth, he stared up at Santo.

"So," Santo said, "you are cooled off?"

"Actually, I'm on fire," Freddie said, grinning widely now. "Get in this pool with me and kiss me."

Apparently his request was not so impossible to act upon. Santo leaped into the air and splashed big in the pool, his body nearly landing on a surprised Freddie. As the waves rocked them, Santo bubbled to the surface right next to Freddie. Bodies practically touching, Santo leaned in and placed a wet, passionate kiss on Freddie's lips, a hint of wine on his lips combined with vinegary chlorine. Freddie accepted his kiss, returning it, enjoying the scrape of Santo's heavy beard against his cooled skin. Funny how quickly the heat returned, their bodies halfway out of the pool, warmed by the sun, their lower halves still immersed beneath the swirling water. Yet despite this juxtaposition of temperatures, Freddie's cock had grown exponentially. He was as turned on as he'd been since the moment he'd first laid eyes on Santo, and now here they were, nearly naked, bodies pressing against each other, cocks dueling beneath the water.

"Will you follow me?" Santo asked.

Freddie gulped.

Hell, yeah, he thought.

"Hell, yeah," he said.

Santo climbed up the metal ladder, Freddie following suit. Passing the deck chairs, Santo stole a look up at the house and apparently pleased by what he saw—or rather, didn't see—he invited Freddie inside the cabana. Closing the door behind him, Santo slipped off his Speedo and allowed his growing cock to taste the warm air. Freddie too removed his board shorts, revealing his hardened, thick cock. They kissed again, Freddie's hand snaking down the wet mat of Santo's chest, finally grabbing hold of his cock. He bent down, easily, quickly, hungrily taking it into his mouth, tongue encircling the tip, devouring the shaft in one thirty gulp. Freddie sucked and sucked, Santo's thicket of dampened pubes making his cock seem bigger, thicker. He attacked his lover as though they'd never tasted each other before, as though they would never again taste the fruit of their loins, intensity the emotion of the moment.

Suddenly Santo cried out, and his cock jerked fiercely. Freddie watched each spurt jut upwards, shooting onto his smiling face. The sizzle against warm skin excited him and before he knew it his breath was coming in short, excited bursts. He realized the excitement of blowing Santo had driven heat inside his bulging cock, now threatening to boil over. Santo, sensing his imminent climax, slid down, taking hold of his cock and rubbing against the thick, coarse hair of his chest.

“Ahh...oh. My. God.”

Santo lifted the cock to his mouth, again scraping his scruffy chin against the sensitive head, a tortured sensation ripping through Freddie. He cried out again, and his cock exploded with a flood of come. He spurted, once, then twice, more, more, the pressure in his chest threatening to strangle him. Freddie fell to the ground of the cabana, his chest heaving still in need of oxygen. At last his cock settled, and his breathing returned to normal.

“Wow, wow, wow,” he stated, staring up at the sexy, smiling Santo.

“So, my Freddie. You are glad you are here?”

“Yes,” Freddie said, “oh hell, yes.”

“Good, just wait until tonight, when the house goes quiet. We will make urgent love.”

“With your mother in the house? I don’t think so...”

“Freddie, there are ways, many ways....”

Freddie laughed, gazing about the room, at this situation, their naked and relaxed bodies. An enticing bottle of white wine was situated on a nearby table, a tease to the thirst he needed to quench. “Is there no end to your manipulation? Next thing you’ll tell me, Patsy Abbott is really your sister, and that you are really considering doing her play.”

Santo said nothing, his expression unreadable. “You are half correct.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“All in good time, Freddie.”

Damn if this weekend wasn’t awash with mystery. Still, Freddie thought, it was off to a great start, so he would just have to put his trust in Santo. Until later, that was, when he would put his cock inside him.

For now, Freddie looked longingly at that bottle of wine. Santo took note.

“So, some wine, Freddie?”

“Hell, yeah. I think I earned it.”

Chapter Eight

Freddie Markson would finally get to meet the rest of the Mancusi clan at their formal dinner, which he'd been informed was scheduled for a seven o'clock start. He was also told to dress for the occasion, though he had no idea what that meant. The nicest clothes he'd brought were a pair of blue slacks and a button-down shirt that fit tight against his broad chest, so they would have to do. As he stole a glance back at himself in the mirror he could see his nipples through the soft material. Hopefully a result of the air-conditioning keeping the villa cool, and not an indication of how excited he was to get through dinner and dessert so he and Santo could indulge their late-night desires in darkened comfort of the bedroom. He could almost hear their eager grunts of sweaty sex, almost feel Santo's hot body thrusting atop him.

"Easy, tiger," Freddie heard. He turned around to find a finely tailored Patsy standing in the door frame. Her dress was dark blue, sleek against her body, her honey-colored hair back in the bun he'd first seen her in. "Sorry, the door was slightly ajar and besides, you weren't exactly responding to my knocking. So, I take it all is well in the lap...uh, land of Santo?"

"Very funny. And yes, it's better than I could have expected."

"Good. Let's go, you can escort me to dinner."

"Why do I feel like I'm the first course?" Freddie asked.

"Maybe because you are," she said.

"Shit, thanks."

"Watch your language, Mama Mancusi does not take to swearing."

"Shit, fuck, goddammit, asshole, bitch."

“Freddie!”

It took a lot to shock a lady of Patsy Abbott’s moral complexity.

“Just getting it out of my system.”

Patsy hardly looked amused, but Freddie was all laughs as they made their way down the staircase. His foul explosion had relaxed his body to the point where he was ready as he was going to be to meet the rest of the Mancusi family, which was a good thing because they were all waiting out on the north patio for their weekend guests. Drinks would come first, followed by a rather lengthy, gut-busting meal, Santo had explained earlier, promising that he would have Freddie work off all those calories later. Freddie liked promises.

There were four people, all of them adorned in darker colors, a direct contrast to the lovely setting that surrounded them. He supposed that since tonight’s occasion was a memorial of sorts for their deceased patriarch, their choice of color was appropriate, but really, with the sky alive with orange and yellow streaks, shadows upon the endless hills as spectacular as any sight Freddie had seen. With Patsy on his arm, they stepped outside on the patio, where a drinks cart had been set up in one corner, the long table under a portico roof set with fine china, glasses.

The first person to turn to them was the near-twin, Beno, dressed in a simple dark suit and tie, and he smiled as he gave Patsy an extended, warm embrace. He followed that familial hug with a strong, welcoming handshake to Freddie before introducing his lovely wife, Sophia. Freddie recognized her as the woman from the car outside Club Metro—so, this was Sophia, not the sister Gina, and Freddie supposed that made sense. Beno managed the club, so of course he would have a photo of himself and his beautiful wife on his desk. Sophia was coolly friendly, both to Freddie and Patsy. She excused herself.

Freddie then finally met the enigmatic Gina, and while her look was similar to her sister-

in-law—dark hair in tight ringlets, body thin and sexy—the resemblance ended there. Sophia was pretty, but Gina was stunning. Freddie realized he didn't know which of the Mancusi children was the oldest, middle, youngest. They all looked around the same age.

“Well, finally we meet,” Gina said as she approached Freddie, “I saw you that night at Mama's, and the way Santo waited on you hand and foot—among other body parts, I'm sure—I was like, just who is this man, and why is my brother acting like a teenage girl? So, Freddie, better not hurt him. Beno is the brains, Santo is the sensitive one.”

“Let me guess,” Freddie said. “You're the muscle”

“Got that right,” she exclaimed, giving him a mock punch on the arm. “Hello, Pats.”

“Gina.”

Okay, not the friendliest greeting between the two women. Unlike Beno's hug, and even Mama's, Gina held back with noticeable reserve. But Patsy didn't seem to care as she slipped away from their little group to give Mama some help with a couple of the place settings. Freddie trailed after her, extending his greetings to the lovely-looking Mama and thanking her for making him a welcome part of this night. Mama's polite nod would have to do. She was in chef mode as she attended final details for their special dinner. Patsy followed the old woman to the kitchen, leaving Freddie with no one to talk with and no drink in his hand.

Where the hell was Santo?

Beno rescued him, handing him a glass of red wine, which Freddie happily accepted.

“So, Beno, your brother wasn't all that surprised to see me here,” he said.

“Indeed,” he said with a knowing grin.

“You kept me dangling all week, allowing me to think I was going to be an unpleasant surprise. Meanwhile, you were spilling all your secrets to Santo. I'm not sure whether to hit you

or thank you.”

“Oh, I think you already have reason to thank me.”

What, had he seen them coming out of the cabana earlier? Freddie’s face flushed.

“And Santo, he’s not as closeted as he or as the rest of you think he is,” Freddie said, taking a sip of the wine, then a second. “Your mother knew immediately that I was a quote-unquote friend of Santo’s.”

“Welcome to the Mancusi family,” he said. “We all know what’s going on. That doesn’t mean we always wish to discuss it. Mama, she runs hot and cold when it comes to Santo’s...uh, sexual proclivities. Ultimately she wants her son to be happy, and if it’s a man who helps him achieve that, so be it. Our father...he was a different story. That he would have a son who was gay...he just didn’t understand. Old world, old school. So the fact that you are here on this night of all nights, essentially as Santo’s date, well, consider it a major step forward. You won’t have any trouble from Mama. Gina, she’s another story.”

“Yes, she told me she’s the muscle of the family.”

Beno nodded. “Her legs are registered as deadly weapons.”

“So, where is Santo?”

“My brother, shall we say, likes to make an entrance. He may no longer be an actor, but he still enjoys the limelight. Even if it’s just his family awaiting him, he still likes to arrive fashionably late. Toss in two guests, any guests, and you’ve got a recipe for melodrama. You saw him earlier. How was he?”

“Fine. Happy to see me.”

“Good.”

“Why, what did you expect?”

“Nothing, you’re fine. It’s Patsy. Have they seen each other yet?”

“I don’t think so. Benoit, tell me what’s going on. Don’t make me sic Gina on you.”

“Ha ha, well played, Freddie. Let’s just say, what Patsy wants from my brother, she is not alone in her wishes. Even Mama thinks it’s a good idea. We all do. It’s time for Santo to reclaim his life, and if that includes stepping onto a stage to reclaim his career, too, then we’re all for it. He has moped around Italy long enough. But we cannot tell Santo such a thing, he needs to discover it himself. Well, with a subtle push from us.”

“The more I hear, the less I like. This weekend sounds less like a celebration and more like an ambush. What’s my job? Pick up the pieces when Santo realizes his family has set him up, betrayed him? I thought he detested being manipulated.”

Beno said nothing, preferring to drink from his glass. “Enjoy your evening, Freddie.”

Freddie was about to probe the situation further when suddenly Santo appeared, his bright smile lighting up the fading sunset, giving the day one last burst of sunshine. He had that effect on a room, his handsome, tanned face complemented by a dark suit and electric blue dress shirt, a sexy triangle of chest hair visible at his open neck. Freddie’s heart—okay, his cock, too, mustn’t forget that—skipped a beat and danced a jig as he realized this gorgeous, sexy creature was his date, and later tonight, would be his attentive, urgent lover. Gina, Benoit, Sophia, they all turned their attention to him the second he stepped onto the patio, Mama Mancusi suddenly appearing from the kitchen and embracing her beautiful son as though she had not seen him years. She spoke something in Italian to him, and he hugged her tight, tossing a sad, wistful smile across the patio. That smile was meant solely for Freddie. As mother and son parted, out of the shadows of the thick potted plants on the patio came a strangely hesitant Patsy.

“Hello, Santo.”

“Patsy, I had heard rumor you might be joining us this weekend. You have remained in Rome all these weeks, yes? You must truly be dedicated to your cause. Regardless, you arrived with Freddie, from what I hear. Thank you for bringing him. It’s good to have you both at our home.” He was polite, businesslike. “I hope you enjoy yourself.”

Okay, now Freddie was really confused. This whole scenario was growing more bizarre with each passing minute, each arriving person. The entire family seemed to welcome Patsy Abbott like some long-lost relative. All except Santo, that is. Yet it was Santo she was here to see, to coax him back to acting, back to the States. After what Beno had confessed to Freddie, all of a sudden this ensuing dinner party had disaster written all over it. Would it end with Santo storming out of the room, feeling betrayed by them all, and would “all” include Freddie? Could he pull Santo aside and let him that whatever was going to happen, he’d had no part of it? But since he didn’t know what Patsy & Co. had in store for Santo, best he keep mum.

As the family set about refilling glasses, Santo crossed the patio, greeting Freddie with a kiss upon one cheek, then the other, the second one lasting long enough for him to whisper, “You look so hot, I cannot wait until later.”

Freddie could swear his cock just burst through his pants at such a suggestion. But his growing erection would have to wait. Beno approached behind them with new glasses, crystal flutes filled with gleaming, golden Prosecco. Each man accepted one, then turned to see that the entire group was waiting, glasses raised, for a toast.

Mama Mancusi moved to the center of the patio, her family surrounding her in a protective circle. She looked at each person gathered: son, daughter, daughter-in-law, guests. Pride was written across her weathered face. Wiping tears from the corner of her eyes, she began to speak.

“For several reasons I will speak in English, despite our presence here in the lush countryside of our homeland. For our guests, it is important that they feel included in this night, to know the special man who was my Rudolpho Mancusi, a man whose heart knew no bounds, whose boundless energy was directed at one thing: happiness at all times for his family. It is because of my Rudolpho that we can speak English. It was his desire to make America our home at one point, and for many years it was. Freddie,” Mama Mancusi said, gazing directly at him, “perhaps you do not know this, but my husband was a well-acclaimed actor. He co-starred in several Italian movies before the place that is Hollywood called. For nearly ten years he made Hollywood his home. He moved us all there, and it is there that Santo too found his big break in the show business. Yes, we returned to Italy eventually, and we have enjoyed our lives here as well as there. It is Rudolpho’s legacy that the family always be provided for, and so on this night, we honor him. We raise a glass, to his memory and yes, to his legacy. What he taught us—all of us—we can’t ever repay. Rudolpho, you honor us still.”

Mama Mancusi’s lovely, heartfelt toast ended, and the family raised glasses, moving into a tight circle to ensure each and every glass clinked in the quiet air, the sound taking to the wind, a communal expression of love sent out to their father’s and husband’s spirit. For Freddie, it was a touching moment which had him remembering his beloved mother, and he allowed a tear to escape his own eyes in her memory. As he drank his Prosecco, he felt a warm touch as Santo’s hand grasped his. Freddie gave him a thankful look, receiving back a warm smile. Oh man, not only was this guy sexy, but sensitive and supportive, too. Freddie Markson couldn’t believe his good fortune in finding Santo. Christ, he’d been physically attracted to the man the moment he’d laid eyes on him, he’d wanted to enjoy crazy, wild sex with him—and he had—but what he was feeling now went far deeper, and that’s what shocked Freddie. What the hell was this he was

feeling? Such a thing, if he dared give it a name, just didn't happen to Freddie. Life was a big joke, a steamy scene from a porno, right? Live in the moment, have your fling, move on, right?

Do Me, Screw Me, Leave Me.

Nothing in that title said *Love Me*.

Dinner thankfully began, leaving Freddie swallowing his dilemma.

Good thing. Because he wasn't sure if the answer scared him or thrilled him.

* * * *

A marvelous feast came to an end nearly three hours later, one in which everyone had indulged with gluttonous passion. Gnocchi with fresh ricotta and garden-grown zucchini to start, followed by braised pork and potatoes, plates of cheeses and fruits, followed by pastries served inside in the well-appointed living room. Beno then announced they were all gathered for a special occasion, and as they sat on plush sofas and chairs, rich, stuffed cannoli and additional Prosecco adding to the party atmosphere, the lights were dimmed. Stored inside a tall wooden cabinet was a large, flat-screen television, exposed now with the able assistance of Gina. Seemed she was in on the surprise, too. With Mama Mancusi seated front and center, Santo and Freddie sharing a long cushioned bench built beneath the window, the remaining ladies seated nearby in chairs, Beno turned to them and said, "We honor Papa tonight, and yes, his spirit surrounds us in this villa he so loved, Gina and I, we thought it would be a special treat to have Papa's presence here as well. So, without further ado, we begin."

He flicked on the television, slipped a DVD disc in the machine, and pressed play. A blue screen disappeared, a black and white image flickering before them. Words scrolled across the

screen in both Italian and English. *Rudolpho Mancusi. A Life in Pictures*. As the lettering faded into the blank screen, they were replaced with the image of a short, stocky gentleman, a slight twinkle in his eye transforming him from ordinary man to screen presence. For some reason Freddie had assumed Rudolpho was a strapping, hearty man—how else to explain his fine, handsome children?—but of course he was more of a character actor, indulging his talent in various roles, none of which gained him any fame, all of which gained him further employment and a comfortable life.

The early footage was black and white, a very young Rudolpho riding horseback beside an older, good-looking man. A smiling, yet wistful Mama Mancusi clapped excitedly at the sight of her husband's early screen role, causing Freddie to wonder how Santo was reacting. A quick look saw studied concentration on Santo's face, half in shadow, half highlight by the flickering light of the screen. What was he thinking? What was he feeling? Pride, excitement, remorse? Santo did not notice him looking, so intent upon the screen was he.

Freddie turned back in time to see several more images of the quirky Italian actor as he played in shootouts and bar fights, a bad guy robbing a bank, a best friend helping a woman escape a dangerous situation, and while the movies themselves seemed sort of cheesy, Rudolpho had an undeniable charm. The next set of excerpts was color, and it was clear the quality of film grew better. Beno explained that this was his father's American screen debut, a spy thriller in which Rudolpho was threatening a young American family, his English so accented it was almost difficult to understand him. That was the point; it was a post-World War II story, and he was no doubt portraying a fascist still pushing Mussolini's message. Typecast in his early days, Rudolpho was finally able to shed his villainous side to play the comical sidekick, the knowing bartender, the drunken guest at a wedding. Another clip had Rudolpho's character take a bullet,

the scene highlighted by a frantic rush to a hospital operating room, doctors ripping open a bloodied shirt in an effort to save his life. Freddie wasn't surprised to see thick hair covering Rudolpho's chest and rotund belly, Santo had to have gotten his sexy thatch from someone. Rudolpho's character didn't survive, and the camera panned upwards as the still figure lay outstretched on the table, a chilling image given the man's real death. But it was all pretend; Rudolpho was back seconds later in a new clip, and another, and another, his countless appearances in film and television playing out before them. He'd been a true character actor who immersed himself in even the tiniest role, the audience no doubt recognizing his face but mostly likely not his name. "Oh, that guy..." likely a common sentiment upon seeing Rudolpho Mancusi on the big screen. And his family was obviously thrilled to see their beloved patriarch come back to life, if only for a night.

Yet something else was up, Freddie surmised as he sat quietly, feeling like an interloper to his private event. His previous conversation with Beno came back to him, and he realized that this moment, this time, this...screening, it had to be the ambush he had mentioned. Could it be this subtle—a retrospective on their father's career with dual purposes—to make a teary Mama Mancusi relive her life with her husband while also encourage Santo back into the limelight of show business? Look what you're missing; your father did it on his terms; so too can you. Freddie stopped watching the television, his eyes darting about the room from Beno to Patsy, Gina to Sophia, and from their furtive looks Freddie had to assume everyone was in on it. Except Mama, who continued to stare lovingly at the flickering ghosts of her beloved husband, and Santo, who sat with his arms crossed and a stern expression on his face. Freddie wondered: did he know what was coming?

Just then a young boy appeared on screen, not more than nine or ten. His dark hair was

long, thick, and the smile upon his face practically drew the camera to him and him alone, despite the fact several other people appeared in the frame. The Mancusi family erupted into applause. Santo hung his head—embarrassed, shamed, or annoyed, Freddie couldn't tell. It was obviously Santo's first screen appearance, and Freddie had to admit the kid was as good-looking as they came, as though produced by the Hollywood Cute Kid Factory. Rudolpho was also in the scene, a bit of nepotism but still a fateful moment for Santo Mancusi.

"Ah, my Santo...so adorable, so special," Mama Mancusi said, clutching her heart.

"Mama, please," Santo said.

"God, I had forgotten that one, Santo," Patsy said.

Freddie knew from an early age he was more attracted to boys than girls, and had he been of like age as Santo, he might have come out even earlier. *Mom, I'm gay, I've got a huge crush on this boy on television, and in twenty years I'm going to be in Rome and meet him, and we'll meet and fall in love and have sex each and every night.* A ludicrous fantasy for certain. Except it was playing out now, their own fantasy, their own private movie. Freddie was here with Santo at his side, a smirking exchange between them as Santo's early screen appearance continued on the screen.

The scene suddenly changed, music filling the room through the television's speakers. Freddie heard a silly song, really more of a jingle, and he realized he recognized the familiar tune, if not the words. The opening credits of *The Exchange Student* filled the wide screen, short clips of scenes from the show interspersed with smiling, mugging shots of the program's stars. The dad, the mom, a young son, a teenage daughter, an older daughter, and finally, listed last as *And Introducing Santo Mancusi as Rico*, Santo's camera-capturing smile lighting up the screen. Freddie might have been paying further attention to Santo's first screen credit except he was too

focused on a previous image. She was unmistakable, even with her hair curly and big, and without the assistance of the credit, Freddie would have recognized Patsy Abbott.

He turned to her, his mouth gaping open.

“You were on the show?”

“Sure, I thought you knew,” Patsy said.

“How would I? You never said...”

“No big deal, Freddie. I was only one for one season. The producers wrote me out when they realized the money-making prize they had scored with Santo. Santo, Santo, Santo, even the actors who played the parents—who were supposed to be the real stars—ceded the show to him. He was the breakout star, the reason people tuned in. Isn’t that right, Santo?”

Santo didn’t answer.

Beno, Gina, Sophia, Patsy, and Mama all stared in Freddie’s direction, but he knew they weren’t looking at him. They were curious to hear Santo’s reaction to seeing his young self again, thrust upon the screen. Except the joke, the night’s biggest surprise, was on them. The only Santo who existed in the darkened room was the younger version, his beaming, innocent, million-dollar face captured for all eternity. Someone had pressed the pause button, locking him in time.

Someone else must have pressed another button, one that made the real Santo disappear.

Santo was gone.

Chapter Nine

The party was definitely over.

Freddie excused himself from the group, pretending to retire upstairs to his room. Once he returned to the top level of the house, he slipped out the side door that led to an outer deck, then down the stairs toward the tennis courts he'd noticed earlier. Santo had to be somewhere on the grounds, and Freddie was determined to find him. To help him.

He felt truly awful for Santo, for the trick his family had pulled on him. Ambush indeed, a tribute to their father suddenly becoming an audition of sorts for Santo. Like he needed any reminders of his past life, who he had been and all he had eventually lost. How did a young boy recover from such an early betrayal of trust, and how did a grown man deal with a family who wouldn't let him forget it?

The night had grown quiet, cool air swirling over the Tuscan hills, moonlight and stars his guide as he ventured away from the house. Freddie had no idea where he might find Santo. At the shimmering waters of the pool, staring at his cursed reflection? Too close to the house, too easy for anyone to find him. The cabana? It had a lock and he could keep out anyone he wanted. Again, too obvious a choice. He tried to think like Santo, wondering just how well he knew this new man in his life. He was not inside the house, Freddie was certain of that. But would he take one of the cars and drive off? They'd heard no roar of an engine, no sound of the gate being opened. No, Santo was still somewhere on the grounds. Perhaps he'd gone to the side of the house, where Freddie had earlier noticed a hot tub. Was he letting off steam by immersing his body in additional heat? The idea was not without appeal. Freddie would happily join him, hold

him, comfort him while bubbling heat swirled around sweaty bodies. But no, he doubted Santo had such desire, he was not about revealing himself, body or soul. He'd run for the purpose of hiding, knowing none of his family would come searching for him. They were used to his sensitive nature, and they would leave him alone to his thoughts. Not so Freddie: he was Santo's guest and his friend and his—his what? Just how did Freddie define their relationship? Should he even try?

As he walked up the hill beyond the tennis courts, Freddie thought he detected a figure in the distance, sitting upon a large exposed rock jutting out of the mountain's peak. Watching his step, not wanting to trip, Freddie was aided by the stars to find his way up the hill. At last he reached the stone, sitting down beside a contemplative Santo. He was staring up at the dark sky, twinkling lights his only companions. The stars said nothing, they expected nothing, they shared their light and cast shadows upon the grassy knoll. Freddie sat down upon the rock, sitting just behind Santo.

"You okay?"

"I am fine, Freddie."

"Do you want me to leave? You need some time alone?"

"Your being here...it is very sweet of you. How you knew where to find me..."

"I followed the stars, the led me to you."

Santo leaned back against Freddie, a sign of intimacy. Of a connection that went beyond the physical. Freddie said nothing, enjoying this peaceful alone time, a moment as unreal as any he had experienced. A man he cared for was in need, and who would have guessed it, but Freddie was actually there for him. Feeling his pain, wishing he could make it go away.

"Santo, what are you going to do?"

“Do? I’m not sure that’s for me to decide. Perhaps ask Beno or Gina...or Patsy.”

“Forget them,” Freddie said. “Life only has to be what you want it to be. Whatever you do, remember it’s your decision.”

Santo turned to him, planting a sudden kiss upon Freddie’s lips, hard, urgent, like Santo wanted to be swallowed up, taken from this world. Forget this night, his family, all that had happened. Time was theirs, this moment. All that existed was now, Santo, Freddie, their touch, their hunger. Freddie knew the man was hurting, but he also knew that to press him on it would make him seem like a co-conspirator, ruining the moment. So he allowed him to work through his pain sexually, his body pushing aside thought, emotion. Freddie returned the kiss, his tongue slipping inside his warm mouth, the fruit of the vine ever-present, consuming.

Santo licked, kissed his ear, his neck, the scratch of his shadowy beard, heightening the senses within Freddie. As tired as he’d been feeling inside the house, Freddie’s body came alive from his touch, from the heat building between them. Under the stars, upon this rock, the two men kissed, kissed, a great, hungry make-out session that had them nearly consuming each other, so strong was what they felt. Bodies pressed against the other, hands felt skin, hair, muscle; tongues lapped up their scents, their taste, their erupting desires.

“My God, Santo, I want you so bad.”

“I need you, Freddie. So much, I cannot stand it.”

“Let’s go back to my room.”

“No, no, Freddie. I cannot go back inside that house, not now . Where we are, under the stars, a summer night grown warmer from our desire...it is perfect. Take me here. Do not worry, I have come prepared...”

Freddie’s eyes widened and Santo allowed himself a grin. “You...you had this planned?”

“A fantasy only, so I thought. To walk with you among the dark hills, to feel your kiss here in the land I love so much, to touch you, to make love to you here, my dreams threatened to overwhelm me. My father may have bought Villa Mancusi, but I’ve always thought of it as my true home. Not the house in Rome, certainly not the faux villa in Los Angeles. To have you here with me, yes, this is nearly perfect. How we have come to be together up on this hill, it was my idea. But how it came about, that was all my family’s doing. But I do not wish to talk about them...they are not here, they share no part of me, no part of us. Freddie, if you were not here this weekend, I’m not sure I could handle them all...”

Freddie wasn’t sure what to say, afraid whatever words his tongue conjured might kill the moment. So his tongue found more purpose, licking Santo’s earlobe, and his rough, stubbled chin. He kissed Santo again, gently sucking his lower lip. Santo pressed harder against him, the bulge in his pants obvious, heightening Freddie’s rampant desire. They rose from the large stone, Santo leading him partly down the far edge of the hill and onto a thick swatch of grass. Standing before each other, they stared with pure intent. Santo reached over and pulled the shirttails from Freddie’s pants, fingers unbuttoning one button, two, and before long his shirt was open, Freddie’s muscled chest naked against the cool air. Santo’s fingers teased his hard nipples, bending over, licking them and tasting them. Freddie closed his eyes. Santo’s touch still made him see stars.

As they momentarily parted, eyes connecting, shining in the moonlight, Freddie’s fists grabbed at his shirt, tearing it off Santo’s body. Buttons flew past them, the shirt tossed to the soft ground. Freddie instantly ran fingers through the thick mat of hair, nails digging deep into his taut skin. Hungry mouths collided, fierce passion erupting. Licking, sucking, kissing, their bodies fell to the dew-scented grass. Lying atop him, Freddie’s tongue dug through thick fur for

Santo's nipples, encircling one, then the other, his tongue unable to choose. As he lapped at the left nipple, his finger found the other, squeezing, Santo's breath coming in short, pained bursts.

"Freddie, yes, how you make me feel...alive, so alive..."

"Hmm," he said, his mouth lost in the thick chest hair, following the trail down his belly, tongue slipping below his pants, on a mission, unstoppable. The hard bulge in his pants excited Freddie, and he gazed upwards at Santo, smiling at him, his look plain, obvious, knowing. *I'm going to fuck you, it said, hard, now, fast.*

Santo quickly removed his belt and slid his pants down, the movement giving Freddie a chance to shed his clothes, too. At last both men were naked, lying on the cool, soft lawn, their mouths again erupting into a fierce explosion of kisses. Cocks dueling like snakes in the grass, touching, dancing, rock hard. Freddie dug into the pockets of Santo's pants, coming up with a condom wrapper and small tube of lube. He tossed the condom Santo's way, and he ripped it open and sheathed Freddie's cock in it. Freddie then lifted Santo's ass, working the lube until he was good and ready, soft, pliable. Grabbing his ankles, Freddie positioned himself directly at Santo's ass, the tip of his cock pressing against that waiting hairy hole. A quick glance at Santo told him everything he needed to know: *now, now, do me now.*

Freddie slid in with ease, Santo relaxed, ready, accepting. Pushing further, Freddie's entire cock buried itself far up Santo's ass, his pubes mixing and mingling, with Santo's furry cheeks and hair-rimmed hole. He thrust and he thrust, his hands grabbing hold of Santo's hips, his ass, while his ankles rested high atop Freddie's shoulders. Running his hands all over Santo's hard, hairy legs, brushing them, digging his nails in deep, his cock pounded him, hard, harder, harder, his grunts taking to the night sky, his fierce energy giving the stars a brighter sheen.

"Oh yes, yes...Freddie, more, I need your cock more...yes, give me every inch...."

Freddie loved sex, and what he loved during sex was dirty talk, when passion took hold of rational thought, and all you did was beg, all you wanted was more, all you said was *fuck, fuck, fuck, more, more, more*. He thrust his cock deeper, Santo crying out loudly. He panted, he begged, he wanted more, don't stop.

“Yeah, Santo, you fucking sexy beast, take my thick cock, yes, I wanted you all night...to rip your shirt off, grab that fucking hairy chest of yours, fuck your hairy ass, it was all I could do not to bend you over the moment I saw you, plow your ass for hours, hours...yeah, Santo, my love, my sexy, hairy lover, yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Santo received each *yeah, yeah, yeah* with a throbbing thrust, thrust, thrust. Wrapping his legs around Freddie's ass, he held him tight, held him close, kept him inside him deep, deeper. Pounding harder, flesh slapping against flesh, Freddie watched as Santo's hard cock bounced, jumped, jerked with each hungry fuck, until finally Santo cried out with a howl that could wake sleeping animals, his voice an echo off the hills as his cock suddenly exploded. White ropes of sticky come shot out, drenching Santo's chest, matting his hair, until its last drops dribbled down his shaft, mixing into the thick bush at his crotch.

Freddie hadn't stopped, lost was he in sweaty exertion. Perhaps it was the earlier blow job, perhaps all the wine he'd consumed at dinner, but his cock wouldn't release, he couldn't find climax. He thrust more, more, grunting, moaning, Santo urging him on. *Yeah, more, yeah more, more* he seemed to be saying, his eyes locking onto Freddie's. Suddenly Freddie pulled out, directing Santo onto his feet. Positioning him against the rock, his ass practically in the air, Freddie once again shoved his cock deep inside him, pushing, pushing, his thrusts again taking on an urgent, uncontrollable, animal-like beating.

Wrapping his arms around Santo's chest, his hands running all through the sweaty mat of

hair, Freddie fucked him and fucked him. Beads of sweat poured down his face, stinging his eyes, like his body was leaking fuel. He was losing energy, but damned if he would run out before climax. Grabbing at Santo's chest, fingers buried beneath the rough, scratchy blanket, he thrust again. Passion began to build inside him, his toes to his loins, boiling inside his cock, shooting through his shaft, erupting from the tip of his cock, still buried deep inside Santo. He bucked, once, twice, his body wracked by a fierce eruption he couldn't control even if he wanted to. Nature took over, and orgasm continued to rip through him, stealing his breath, taking from him every ounce of energy he had left, and finally, finally, Freddie exhaled, pulling off, dropping to the ground from sheer exhaustion.

"Holy shit," he said, oblivious to the wet grass beneath his sweaty, naked self.

Santo slid in beside him, his chest brushing against Freddie's back. "I will second that," he said. "The way you fucked me, I fear we may have kept my family awake. You are very bad, Freddie Markson, such dirty talk, so loud you are when you come."

"Is that a complaint?"

"Hardly," Santo said, kissing his shoulder, gently nibbling on it.

"So, now what?"

"Now, we return to the quiet of the villa," Santo said, "and we forget the bad parts of tonight. We shall remember only the good, especially as our eyes close and we sleep. Sleep beside each other, would you like that, Freddie? For me to fall asleep in your arms?"

Freddie, the man who had come to Rome for flings, for the fun of wham-bam-thank-you-sir sex, don't let the door hit you on the way out, sorry no breakfast for you, surprised himself when he quickly said, "Yes, Santo, I would like that very much. Just so long as you're still there in the morning. I think I would enjoy waking up with you in my bed."

Every day.

Okay, that last part, he only thought. Still, the words scared the hell out of him.

* * * *

A beautiful, sun-dappled day covered all of Tuscany, a hovering blue sky nearly devoid of clouds, allowing the Mancusi family to go their separate ways for whatever adventures the day brought. Gina, Beno, and Sophia had taken one of the cars and driven up to Florence to visit some friends, and Patsy had accompanied Mama Mancusi into Arezzo for her daily shopping, leaving Freddie and Santo to themselves. When they woke just after nine o'clock, their bodies already entwined, they engaged in a healthy round of sex, Santo penetrating Freddie with surprising gentleness, as though their bond had deepened as they slept, their fierce fucking turning to tender lovemaking. The two of them came quickly, discovering afterwards that they were ravenously hungry—for food.

After a breakfast that had been left by Mama, the two of them headed down to the pool where they swam, Santo performing his daily laps as Freddie watched from the diving board, marveling at his quick, fluid motions. With the sun beating down on them, they rubbed suntan lotion all over their naked bodies, enjoying the solitude, the freedom of being themselves. Hardened by the erotic massaging of their bodies, they snuck into the cabana and serviced each other, sucking their cocks, on their knees and on the cot, their bodies spread out in a sexy, experimental sixty-nine. Santo shot his load first, finishing off Freddie with an intensity that had Freddie crying out when he came.

As they lay in each other's arms, Freddie absently stroking Santo's lush chest, the sound

of a car motoring up the driveway broke them from their hot reverie. Slipping on their swim trunks—Santo, his barely-there Speedo, Freddie his knee-length board shorts—the two men returned poolside, taking up on their chaise longues as though they had been like this all morning, a smirk between them the only hint that their bodies might have seen other an array of other positions earlier.

Just then they saw two figures crossing along the upper patio. Patsy was one of them, carrying several large sacks of food. She went into the house while Mama Mancusi stopped to stare down at the two men.

“*Buongiorno*, Mama,” Santo called out, waving his arm in the air.

“Did you eat?” she asked, standing on the edge of the patio hands on her hips.

“*Si*, Mama. Of course we ate,” he announced, gazing over at Freddie as he quietly added, “yes, sausage, all morning long.”

“Now who’s the one talking dirty?” Freddie asked, his cock happily dancing inside his baggy swim trunks. “You’d better stop such talk. The last thing I need is your mother to see with me a bulge in my shorts.” Then he too waved at Mama Mancusi. “*Buongiorno*, Mama Mancusi. It’s a lovely day, yes?”

She waved back at them, said something in Italian, then disappeared from view.

“What did she say?”

“She said you’ll never get tan wearing such long trunks”

“She did not,” Freddie said with a laugh. “God, Santo, I can’t believe you parade around in that tiny Speedo in front of your mother. I mean, my mother embraced my gayness with all her heart, constantly asking me who I was dating, whether he was a good kisser, good in bed, et cetera, but as open as we were...I don’t know, to walk around in her presence in such revealing

clothes, that might have crossed some bounds. Not that she would have said anything if I wore tiny shorts while staying at her place—instead, I might have found a new robe on my bed the next day. The subtle approach always worked for my mother.”

“Americans, you are very...how shall I say, uptight?”

“Hey, Freddie Markson has never been called uptight in his life.”

“Fine. There is a spare bathing suit in the cabana.”

Freddie wondered, was Santo challenging his very American idea of propriety? When he realized Santo was serious, he got up hastily, padding his way to the cabana. He found the black Speedo hanging on a hook, and he slipped off his long board shorts, sliding the Speedo on over his growing cock. No, no, no erections, not now. It was just a bathing suit, one that cupped his cock and balls in a tight sack. Little was left to the imagination, but hey, Freddie was not one to shy away from a challenge. So he returned poolside, walking almost proudly along the outer edge. Santo whistled his pleasure. Freddie tossed him the finger, which had Santo laughing aloud.

Freddie realized he was completely turned on. Whether from the freeing feeling of the short suit or the sight of Santo in his Speedo, he had to do something to douse his fire. Climbing onto the diving board, Freddie edged his way out. He looked up, noticing they had company making its way down the stairs to the pool area. It was Patsy, carrying something in her hands. He felt his erection already begin to deflate, so mad at her was he. She’d played him, and he hadn’t had a chance to confront her about it. What could he say, though? *Yeah, cool off, jump in the pool, and douse not only your erection but your anger, too.*

“Hello, Freddie,” Patsy said, “looking good.”

Freddie said nothing, just dove straight ahead, his body taking to the air before slicing

through the cool, bracing water. His body nearly touched the bottom of the pool, and just his hand grazed the tiles before he pushed back up toward the surface. He broke free, swam over to the edge. The water felt great, so much so he decided to stay in. Patsy, meanwhile, had taken a chair beside Santo, still hugging what appeared to be a thick file.

“I brought you something,” she said to Santo.

“I’m not interested,” he told her.

“Oh, Santo. You don’t even know what I have.”

“I know it’s been many years since I’ve been in show business, but I can still recognize a script, Patsy. Let me guess, you just happened to have brought a copy of that new play with you. Why am I not surprised?”

She unfolded the file from her chest. “Santo, you need to read it. Trust me.”

“Hey, Patsy, he said no. Can’t you take a hint?”

Patsy spun around to Freddie, still floating in the pool. “As much as I appreciate the way you’re trying to look out for Santo, I think he can make his own decisions.”

“Then why don’t you let him? He’s already told you—several times.”

“Freddie, please stay out of this.”

“You know, Patsy,” Freddie said, climbing out of the pool, coming to their side where he grabbed a towel, wiping himself down. “I don’t appreciate the way you’ve been playing me—at the airport, on the Via Veneto when I accidentally met Santo, in the limo on our way to the villa. Everything you’ve done, it’s been well calculated, hasn’t it? Why didn’t you tell me before of your connection to Santo...to the entire Mancusi family? You starred on that television show with Santo. Why was that such a secret?”

“I never held it back. It just wasn’t important...not yet, anyway.”

“What does that mean?”

Patsy turned back to a noticeably quiet Santo. His arms were crossed over his chest, his defenses up. She touched his hairy leg in a gesture of friendship. “Santo and I, we’ve had this arrangement going back...what, almost twenty years? I did him a favor, and in return, one day I would call in the favor. I’m doing that now. Santo, here’s the script. It’s important that you read it, but it’s even more important that you embrace it. It’s your ticket back to the big time.” She extended her arms, the script nearly thrust into his face.

Freddie was getting mad over this situation. Okay, madder. Clearly the wealthy, influential Patsy Abbott was not accustomed to people saying no to her, but she was going to hear it now, good and loud. He made his move, attempting to grab hold of the damned script and toss it into the pool. He was stopped, but not by Patsy.

“Freddie, it’s okay,” Santo said, taking hold of the script. “Patsy is right. If she is calling in her favor, then I have but no choice. I will read the play, and no doubt when I am done I will also agree to star in it.”

“Santo, I don’t understand. Why would you agree when it’s clear you don’t want to?” said Freddie, annoyed and confused. “Is Patsy blackmailing you? What’s going on?”

Santo rose from his chaise, the script still in his hands. “Perhaps I will leave you two to a discussion. I need to check on Mama.” Santo stood before Freddie, his hand caressing his scruffy chin. “Freddie, it’s okay. There’s nothing to worry about. Everything will work out as it’s supposed to. Talk to Patsy.”

With that, Santo made his way toward the stairs, climbing them carefully, one at a time. Freddie watched after him, admiring his tight ass within those tiny Speedos, and when at last Santo was gone from view he turned back to see Patsy staring right at him.

“Yes?”

“Wow, you’ve got it bad.”

“Excuse me?”

“Still polite I see, that’s good,” she said. “Freddie, you can’t keep your eyes off Santo. Yes, he’s beautiful to look at, front, back, sideways...hell, all ways, which is why he’ll be so perfect on the Broadway stage. There’s one especially hot, powerful scene where Santo’s character ends up shirtless. Think of the ticket sales. Not since Baldwin did ‘Streetcar’ has Broadway seen a chest like that.”

“He’s more than a slab of meat, Patsy,” Freddie said.

“Ha. Said the man fucking him.”

“God, you’re so crude.”

“And you need to lighten up. Where’s the fun-loving Freddie from the airport, making a proper lady like me do shots? You’re the one who told me your summer in Rome was all about fun, one fling after another. When I introduced you to Santo, I thought, well, those two boys could have a bit of fun. Seriously, I could tell right away you wanted him, and look at that—you got him. But aren’t you going a bit far? Here you are in Tuscany, a one-man man. Who’s the one with unrealistic expectations: me, wanting Santo to star in my play, or you, wanting him to move to New York for your own benefit?”

Freddie gazed at her, confusion written across her face. Wait, what did she just say?
“Wait, why did you just say?”

“About what?”

“Your play. You said it’s your play.”

Patsy hesitated, as though she wasn’t even sure she had said what Freddie had heard. But

then a wide grin spread across her face, as though she'd been caught. No more secrets, the cat was out of bag—pick your cliché, Patsy and Freddie finally had the truth hovering between them. “You know, Freddie, everyone has a story to tell. Just not everyone gets the chance to tell it.”

“What does that mean?”

“My play—by the way, it's called ‘Yesterday's Lover’—will be a huge hit. Think about it. A steamy love triangle between three gorgeous leads, a couple of simple sets. Pretty cheap to produce, by today's Broadway standards. Investors, producers, they'll make a mint on it. And when Hollywood comes calling for the film rights, well, that's where I truly get my revenge.”

“Revenge? On who? On what?”

“On the entertainment business.”

“Can to explain that one?”

“Oh, Freddie. You think Santo was the only one who was treated badly by that piece-of-crap town? When *The Exchange Student* was picked up by the network, I was promised to become the breakout star of the show, the sassy sister who showed the exchange student what life was like in America. I was young, attractive, and Hollywood was bowing at my feet. But then Santo came along, and America fell in love with his charm, his innocence. Yes, he was young, just ten, the son of an Italian-born character actor who was well respected in the industry. Santo was given a chance to shine, and shine he did. He took the world by storm, sent the show into the Top Ten, ensuring the creators of the show millions of dollars in revenue, syndication, all the good stuff. After one season, I was fired, my career essentially over.”

Freddie was listening, but couldn't believe this tale.

“Look, Freddie, I could go on and on, give you all the gory details. But you don't need to

know any of them. All you need to know is this: I think it's all working out perfectly. A month ago Santo would not even look at the script, and he wouldn't even consider the idea of going to New York. But look at us now. We're practically booking our return trip, and Santo will be with us. What we discussed that day you met Santo, it's all worked out perfectly, hasn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Getting Santo to fall in love with you, to give him more of a reason to come to New York. Not for money, but for love. And look at you. Santo is completely head over heels in love with you. What do you think of that, Freddie? You've done even better than I thought you would. All you wanted was to fuck his beautiful self, and you sure got your wish. I should give you a bonus—more than a ticket to opening night. You should get a percentage of the grosses. Because if you hadn't manipulated Santo like you did, there's no way he'd be agreeing to read the script. He's the next Broadway star, and it's all because of you, Freddie Markson."

"Is that so?"

Freddie spun around, where he saw Santo standing directly behind him. God, but he was sexy, beautiful. That handsome, striking face, his strong body, hairy chest, the impressive bulge in his Speedos. Freddie wanted to embrace him, assure him what he'd heard was not true. But he held back. Santo's expression had betrayal written all over it. Damn, why hadn't Freddie heard him approach? Why hadn't he felt his presence hovering behind him? Patsy too seemed unaware that he'd returned to them. Because there was no way she would risk her golden ticket by admitting to Santo that she had been manipulating this situation, manipulating Freddie, Santo, bending them to her whim, getting them to inadvertently do her bidding.

"Santo, what she said...it's not true...Patsy, tell him."

"Really, Santo, it may have started out that way...both of us only want the best for you,

surely you realize that...”

“I will not be coming to New York. I will not be anyone’s sexual toy,” Santo said, his voice thick with emotion. He gazed down at the script he still held in his hand, and then he laughed bitterly. *Yesterday’s Lover*’. It is an even more appropriate title than even you, Patsy, could have envisioned.” Then he simply tossed the script into the air, where it eventually splashed into the pool, sinking to the bottom with the weight of the water enveloping its cruel, prophetic words. “And I certainly will be no star of the stage, or anywhere else for that matter.”

Santo turned around and quickly ran up to the stairs, disappearing from sight.

Effectively disappearing from Freddie’s life.

Chapter Ten

So, this trip to Rome, it was all about having fun, right?

For Freddie, fun was what life was all about.

For Freddie, life was all about having sex.

For Freddie, sex was all about anyone but Santo Mancusi.

Case in point: the man he was waiting for this very moment.

Freddie Markson checked himself out in the mirror, and liked what he saw. He'd just had his hair cut into a short, tousled 'do, the front spiky with gel. He'd bought new clothes at Coin, including a pair of tight shorts that cupped his ass, and a V-neck shirt. He'd tanned nicely since his arrival in Rome two months ago, the color deepening during his two days in Tuscany, so he was looking hot, ready, and way horny. As much as he liked the new outfit he was wearing, he couldn't wait to get it off.

Two, short quick buzzes followed by a longer third buzz came at his intercom. As Freddie raced over to the let his guest in—he knew it was him, he'd used their secret code--Freddie snuck a peek at the time on the clock hung above the television. One fifteen in the afternoon, perfect timing. But of course, his visitor always arrived on time because he always had to leave with plenty of time to get back to work, and damned if they were going to waste precious sex time with the business of commuting. Today was Tuesday, their sixth hook-up in a row, and as regular was his arrival time, what they did to each other—hell, that varied each day. Freddie's hard-on was already pushing against his tight shorts just thinking about what position they might try today.

Opening the door, in walked a gay porn fantasy, a costumed hunk that wouldn't remain in said costume for very long. Title of this porno? *Do Your Duty, Then Do Me*.

"God it's hot out there today. That blast of air conditioning feels great."

Freddie didn't know how Johnny survived all day in the summer heat, his body clad in the heavy armor of a Roman gladiator. Granted, there was plenty of skin exposed, legs, chest, all of it burnished gold by the sun, but the other pieces that filled out the costume were all leather and chains, belts, swords, not to mention the big round shield he carried with those thick, muscular arms. All meant to attract the tourist, all intended to fill his coffers. And maybe once in a while, attract a horny guy interested in his sword.

"You need something to drink?"

"Just water."

Always the same, just water. He was a working man on his lunch break. Healways turned down Freddie's offer of beer, wine, booze. He was grateful to get indoors for even just an hour or so, but alcohol would not only dull his senses, it would sweat out of his pores, and the tourists would smell it on him. Not good for business. As Freddie fetched the cold glass of water, he watched out of the corner of his eye as Johnny went about removing his costume. The shield and sword always came off first, then he unpinned the leather vest, the short pants, and placed them neatly on the wooden chair near the door. In seconds, the air conditioning attacked his sweaty body, and he made his way toward the bathroom to towel dry.

Freddie could not believe his fucking luck, literally stumbling onto the sandal-clad feet of the gladiator while walking outside the Colosseum's perimeter. He'd been back in Rome for four days, the disaster that was the weekend at Villa Mancusi fading into his memory banks. Wandering down around the tourist area, he'd gone with the express purpose of scoping out the

gladiator, hoping their eyes would reconnect, that he would remember Freddie and the way they had smiled, waved, said hello. Freddie hadn't been watching where he was going, and tripped over the wheels of a baby carriage, landing flat on his face, spumes of dirt choking him. No harm to the baby, and the tourists had continued on, leaving Freddie to his own embarrassment. Except coming to his rescue was none other than Russell Crowe himself—okay, not really, but with a heavy growth of stubble on his face, his thatched brown hair lightened by the sun, and his golden, gleaming body, it could have been the handsome movie star still in costume. He helped Freddie to his feet, and before long they got to talking. Johnny was actually a native of Prague, and came to Rome to seek his fortune. He spoke several languages, as would befit a man dealing with tourists all day long. It hadn't taken much for Freddie and Johnny to realize a sexual spark had been lit between them.

“Sorry, clumsy of me,” Freddie had said.

“You are covered in the dust of the city,” Johnny had said. “Do you need to find a place to wash up?”

“Oh, no, I live just up the hill,” Freddie said, pointing at his apartment building.

“Perhaps I can assist you. It is nearly time for my break.”

“Oh, no, that's not...”

Then Freddie shut the hell up.

Johnny smiled knowingly at him, and Freddie, he just smiled right back.

The pick-up had been that easy, two men attracted to each other, feeling sexual energy between them, indulging in the rare moment. That afternoon Johnny came home with Freddie, and not thirty minutes later he was coming deep inside Freddie. Now, six days later, he was here again, a casual fling with no strings, just pure physical pleasure playing out as it should, a hot,

steamy sexual interlude in the middle of the afternoon. Just what he'd been looking for in Rome, no complications—something he couldn't exactly make a claim to.

Freddie returned to the living room, handed Johnny the water and watched as he downed the large glass in one impressive, sexy gulp. The water slid down his throat, some water escaping and cascading down his Adam's apple and onto his massive chest, Freddie's eyes on him like a cameraman. This was going to be a good movie today. Johnny was easily six feet three, and with his broad shoulders and thick arms, his towering body overshadowed Freddie. As he set down the glass, his arms pulled Freddie in tight against him, kissing his lips, his neck, with sudden desire. Freddie felt the man's cock poke at him, its intent clear.

Taking the lead, Johnny brought him into the bedroom, tossing him down on the bed roughly but playfully. Freddie peeled off his shirt while Johnny made quick action of his tight shorts, unsnapping them, unzipping them. Freddie's cock burst from its hold, bouncing with an excitement that continued as the naked gladiator took his sword inside his mouth. He sucked hard, taking the entire shaft into his throat. Rising up, down, up, down, Freddie felt his balls harder, tighten, an orgasm threatening to erupt already.

"Not yet, not yet," he said, panting.

Johnny pulled out, his slippery tongue licking Freddie's balls, traveling further to his ass. Encircling the rim of his ass, tasting, probing, Johnny opened him, readying him for entry. Freddie had been all bottom when it came to this gladiator, loving the image of being impaled by his thin but very long cock.

"Oh yeah, Johnny, lick my ass...get me all primed, I need to be fucked hard..."

"Mmm," Johnny said, "the way you talk, so dirty, gets me so hard."

Freddie could tell. Johnny's shaft was like a rock.

“How do you want me today?” Johnny asked.

“Let me ride you, I want to bounce up and down on that piece. Feel you thrust into me.”

Johnny slurped once more at Freddie’s ass, his cock, before sliding on his back. He gazed upwards at a grinning, horny Freddie. He straddled Johnny’s thick body, positioning his ass just over the waiting cock. A quick necessary move including condom, lube, and suddenly Freddie’s ass was greeting the red tip of his long cock. Sliding down, down, further down, he felt the tip pierce him, then the rest of the shaft followed. Breathing slowly, at last Freddie could relax, knowing he’d claimed every inch of the gladiator’s sword, the slight scruff of his shaved pubes against Freddie’s smooth bottom.

“Yeah, that feels great, so great....come on, take me now.”

Johnny thrust up, his back arching, and Freddie cried out with sudden surprise. He nearly lifted off the cock out of him before settling back down on it. Wow, the sensation that ripped through him—he feared he’d come too soon. But then Johnny settled back against the mattress, waiting as Freddie’s knees sank into the softness of the bed. He rose, went down, rose, pumping his ass against the hot shaft. God, this was perfect, just what he needed—and received—nearly each day since coming back from Villa Mancusi. *No, don’t think about it, his mind said, just fuck, just bounce high and deep on this man’s nice cock, feel it plow him, ride him with abandoned pleasure, Santo doesn’t exist, only this man is part of your world,* and only for the amount of time it took for them to suck, to fuck, to climax and to part ways happy, pleased, satisfied. Freddie continued his ride, hands placed upon the strong, muscled, smooth chest of his daytime lover. He was naturally smooth everywhere, and Freddie was enjoying the feel of skin against skin, sweat mingling with sweat.

“Yeah, harder, harder, Johnny, give it all to me. Now, now, now.”

Those strong arms lifted Freddie off him, throwing him down on the bed. With Freddie's cock buried into the tangled blankets, Johnny came at him from behind, thrusting his hungry cock deep inside Freddie's ass. Freddie moaned loudly when the cock came to a rest inside him, cried out with pleasure as it slapped against him again, again, again. His face snuffed into the blankets, he screamed out with hot pain, just taking each of Johnny's hard thrusts. The headboard bounced against the wall, matching each motion.

"Yeah, fuck me, fuck me...make me come..."

Johnny listened well; he fucked and fucked as hard as he could, hands grabbing onto Freddie's shoulders to keep him locked in place. Just then Freddie felt pressure inside his balls, shit—he was going to come with his cock hard against his own body. He was going to shoot his load onto his bed. He didn't want that, he wanted to watch his cock spurt—

Johnny lifted him off the bed, holding his body against his sweaty chest as he continued to thrust, fuck, screw, pound, Freddie taking each one, crying out from each one. But now his cock was free, sticking straight into the cool air, and that's when he allowed his body its release. Pressure, a boil, his cock holding back one second before erupting. His cock twitched, his tip reddened, and the hot sticky come shot forth into the air. Johnny pounded his ass still, grunting once, twice, then one more powerful thrust of cock to ass and he was crying out too, his cock coming, coming, his strong body finally coming to a rest atop Freddie.

"Oh, Christ, that was great, Johnny, the best yet."

"Yes, we are finding our rhythm, are we not?"

Yes, Freddie wanted to say, but didn't. Because he was struck by a sudden unfortunate truth. With this sixth sweaty go-round, he and Johnny had officially fucked more than Freddie and Santo had. He was getting used to the feel of this long cock, the smooth body, and while he

wasn't wishing to be back with Santo, the fact that he and Johnny were developing a routine of their own meant it was time to end this. *Thanks, it's been fun, time for me to leave behind the gladiator life, move onto some more contemporary porn archetype, a cowboy, a cop, a bottom-loving twink.*

"So, Freddie," Johnny was saying as he got up from the bed. "I will see you tomorrow?"

"Uh, actually, Johnny, I'm going to be away for a few days..."

"So, you are ending this?"

Freddie realized he was no actor, his fuck buddy had seen right through the façade. "Do you mind...I mean, are you upset?"

"I like you. I am enjoying our fun times together. But I always knew this was temporary. You will return to New York, like you told me just after we met."

"Now you're making me feel bad, like I just dumped you."

Johnny, still naked, his cock still semi-hard, leaned in and planted a kiss upon Freddie's lips. "Do not be worried about me. I have had many men myself. But perhaps meeting a nice one like you made me think that my days of fucking just for fun, maybe they are nearing an end. We would all like to meet someone, yes? Even you, Freddie, man of fun?"

Freddie didn't have words for that. He just watched from the bed as Johnny dressed back into his gladiator outfit, intent to return to his job, his duties for kin and country, his life beyond the sex he and Freddie had enjoyed this past week. Before he left the apartment, he raised his sword to the ceiling, and Freddie offered up a smile at the memory.

"Take care, Freddie."

"You too, Johnny. I hope you find what you're looking for."

"I hope you do too," he said, "and when you do, I hope you recognize it."

* * * *

Nighttime, and Freddie was bored out of his skull. Two nights had passed since Freddie ended his fling with Johnny the Gladiator, and he was sort of regretting his impulsive decision. Thinking about Santo while he was enjoying sex with Johnny had just confused him. But now, at nine o'clock on a quiet Thursday night, Freddie realized he could not just hang out in his apartment watching porn and working his horniness into a jerk-off frenzy. Why not go out, at least have a couple of drinks? It wasn't like he was thinking about getting laid.

Yeah, right.

Freddie Markson was living the life he'd wanted: one fling, another fling, two flings, more flings. Like a dirty Dr. Seuss story, and as the thought crossed his mind he let out a hearty laugh, his voice echoing in the courtyard of his building. He headed outside in the warm August air, the moon high in the sky, beautiful against a blue-lit canvas. The Colosseum was bathed in a soft, beautiful glow, giving Freddie pause. Rome was loveliest at night, and Freddie found himself glad he was here, thankful for the experience, happy to be living in the Eternal City on his terms. No more Mancusi family, and no more Patsy Abbott. He'd heard from none of them since his return, least among them Santo. In fact, Santo had left the villa long before Freddie had, getting into one of the family cars soon after overhearing his discussion with Patsy. Not even allowing the truth to come out, to trust Freddie, Santo had bailed. Freddie had stayed the remainder of that Saturday, feeling awkward at dinner as the family reverted to Italian to discuss whatever matters they needed to discuss. When Santo had not returned by Sunday morning, Freddie made his polite excuses, took a taxi to the train station in Arezzo, and nearly three hours

later was hailing another cab outside Termini.

Freddie recalled the Irish pub up the street where he'd met up with Len, the hot flight attendant with the big dick. It would be nice if Len was on another layover, maybe venturing to the pub to see if he'd run into Freddie. He was doubtful that would happen, and besides, Freddie was looking for someone new. He'd slept with three men on this trip, lots of sex but not lots of variety. If variety was the spice of life, then Freddie wanted to try as many flavors as he could. Like eating pizza every day, he wanted to put different toppings on each order.

So Freddie walked in to the odorous pub and sat at the near end of the bar. He ordered a Guinness, drinking down the first foamy sip as he gazed about the room. Not very crowded tonight: a couple of guys at the bar's far edge, a large group in the back room. Freddie happily sat alone, listening to the British bands playing on the jukebox. Coldplay, Snow Patrol, Keane, a few other similarly sounding bands he didn't recognize, but for a moment he felt transported to the British Isles. The beer, the music, the thick brogue of the bartender, the raucous laughter coming from the big group, made him think of his friend Jake, summering in London, just as Freddie was in Rome, Matt in Paris. He hadn't heard from either of his friends, so he had to assume things were going well enough for them both. And as much as he was enjoying the past week in Rome, part of him couldn't wait to get home to New York and see his friends. To hear about their trips, whom they met, whom they screwed, whether they had found someone to share their life or just someone to share their bed. Matt he envisioned easily falling in love, Jake wrestling with his dual desires, wanting love, needing sex, settling for the latter when he missed out on the former. Yup, the two did not always come together, but if the guy was hot enough, maybe you could come together with him.

“Something funny?”

Freddie lifted his beer. Drank.

“You, with the Guinness. What’s so funny?”

Freddie realized he was being spoken to. “Excuse me?” he asked, turning to the two guys at the edge of the bar.

“You were laughing at us?”

“Sorry, no. I...was thinking about something...someone, actually,” he said. “A friend of mine who happens to be in London. This place made me think of him.”

“Bosh. London. Sucks,” said the thicker of the two guys, a scruffy-faced guy with thick hairy arms who spoke with his own heavy brogue. His friend was slighter, skinnier, smoother, cuter. The way they interacted, Freddie began to wonder: were these guys a couple? Did they think Freddie had been laughing at them because they were gay? He’d barely noticed them.

“Where you from?” Freddie asked.

“Dublin.”

Of course London sucked. Dublin ruled. “Never been. Never been to London either, so I’m not partial.”

The guys moved closer, sliding their beers down the bar. “You?”

“America. New York.”

The skinny one laughed. “No, man, that we could tell when you ordered your Guinness. We knew you were from the States. What we mean is, what are you partial to? Girls, guys? Both? At the same time? Threesomes? Kind of hard to tell with you, not a lot of gays drink Guinness from our experience.”

Freddie looked at their drinks. Lager. Was that supposed to be a hint?

“Look, guys, I’m not looking for trouble.”

“Neither are we. We’re lovers, not fighters,” said the thick guy. He extended his meaty hand. “I’m Liam, he’s Mikey.”

“Freddie,” he responded, shaking one hand, then the other.

“Get you a refill?”

Freddie smirked. “Uh, you guys offering to buy me a drink?”

“For starters,” said Mikey.

He might be slight, but he was aggressive.

“How about we take a booth, get to know each other?” Mikey asked.

Why the hell not? Freddie mused. He’d enjoy the company. He took his Guinness refill, joined the two Irish gay guys at a side booth. The music changed to some Britney Spears piece of shit, which amused Freddie. Like a signal that the pub had gone gay tonight, and a pick-up was in the process. He had to wonder, how long had it been since he’d had a threesome? Years. God, another porno scenario for Freddie, what was this one called? *You and You, How You Do...Me*.

So the three men talked. The couple was visiting Rome for a long weekend, and yeah, it was cliché of these Dubliners to arrive in Italy and on their first night find their way to a traditional pub, but hey, habits were hard to break, and besides, this was their anniversary weekend, celebrating three years together. The first trip they ever took was to Italy, and that was when they realized how committed they were to each other.

“So, you’re committed. Nice. What am I doing here?”

“Doesn’t mean we don’t like to spice things up. So, what do you say, Freddie?”

By now he’d consumed his third Guinness, this on top of some wine he’d had back at the apartment. He was feeling no pain. Looking at Liam and his hot thick body, at Mikey and his skinny frame that was no doubt adaptable and flexible, Freddie imagined sex with the two lovers

might prove interesting. A fresh fling, two varieties, was presented to him, and Freddie found himself agreeing . The only question: where?

“My apartment is nearby,” he said.

‘ “So is our hotel. Huge bed.”

Freddie thought of his place, the cramped bedroom. A change of scenery might be nice.

They drank one last beer to toast their upcoming night, and soon after Freddie was walking along the Via Cavour with his new friends, taking a side street to a dingy-looking hotel. Freddie barely got its name. There was a tacky look to the rundown place that perhaps played well with the coming scenario. How huge could this bed be? Freddie got his answer as they entered the room: barely large enough for one, much less three.

“Uh guys, you think this bed is huge?”

“No, we lied,” Mikey said. “Who needs a big bed? Just big cocks.”

“Yeah,” Liam said. “How about a game? You show us yours, we’ll show you ours.”

They wasted little time, stripping down to nothing. Freddie followed suit. Soon, all three men were naked, hard cocks at the ready. Liam was nicely hung, his cock like his body, thick. Mikey’s cock had decent length to it, and given his slight size Freddie was impressed. He found himself drawn more to the cute Mikey, dropping to his knees, taking the long cock into his Guinness fueled mouth. He sucked so hard, Mikey fell back against the bed. His reaction only spurred Freddie on, and he slurped hard and fast. As he serviced him, he felt a rough scratch against his ass, realized the scruffy-faced Liam had gone exploring. Liam’s hand snaked around to the front, started jerking off Freddie’s cock. Christ, he grabbed it hard, pounded it against calloused skin.

Freddie heard Mikey’s sudden gasps, and pulled out just in time to see the skinny guy

lose his load. Come shot out, dripping into his sparse pubes. He fell back against the bed, leaving Liam and Freddie to indulge the moment. Liam came at him, his thick, hairy body crashing into Freddie, pushing him against the wall.

“Uh, whoa, man...”

“You want to get fucked, that what you want? I’ll do you while Mikey sucks you.”

Freddie actually wasn’t so sure anymore. This room was tacky, Mikey had come so fast, it had almost taken the hotness out of the situation. Liam appeared to be pretty drunk, a bit sloppy. Not very hot, this situation. Liam was nice-looking enough, his chest with a nice mat of brown hair, and thick cock, all things Freddie would have enjoyed. But could he go through with this encounter? A simultaneous suck and a fuck, given by two guys who claimed to be a couple, but who also needed to spice things up by inviting someone else into their bed.

“You know, Liam...I’m thinking, uh, sorry. I don’t think it going to work out.”

“Christ,” Liam said, releasing Freddie from his strong hold against the wall. “You suck off Mikey, least you can do is give me one too. Come on, Freddie, thought you were here for some fun. Come on, let me do you. I’ll plow you right against the wall. Yeah, you’ll love it, my cock is thick enough. You’ll get off real fast. Shoot your load against the wall, eh?”

An image came to Freddie, a memory. Santo and Freddie in the office downstairs at Club Metro, Santo claiming if all he wanted was fun, then he could give it to him. If that was all that mattered—not the man, just the sex, just the climax. Then Santo thrusting him against the wall, penetrating him, fucking him, the rough feel of his thickly furred chest rubbing hard against Freddie’s back. Freddie had taken it, it had been hot, and yes, yes, he’d lost it, he’d come all over the wall uncontrollably. It was the only time Santo had screwed him just with his cock, not his heart.

Shit, what did this mean? Was this fling with Liam and Mikey as cheap as it felt?

Could he make a graceful exit?

And what would he do after that?

“Sorry, guys. Really, this isn’t what I wanted. I had a fight with my lover. I thought it was over. But it’s not. I can’t allow it to be finished. To be with you both, it would be wrong.”

Liam looked pissed, but he stood by his earlier comment. He wasn’t a fighter, he was a lover. He let Freddie go without another word of protest, and as Freddie got dressed, Liam mounted his boyfriend and began to fuck him right there and then, Freddie an unwitting witness to his urgent, messy, drunken screw. God, he’d made the right decision. He closed the door, their groans barely silenced by the thin walls of the hotel.

Freddie finally made it outside, breathing in warm, comforting air. He shuddered at the thought of what he’d almost gone through with. A hot, horny fling was one thing; a dirty sex romp in a sleazy hotel, quite another.

He returned to the wide boulevard of the Via Cavour, intent on walking home. Seconds after he turned the corner, a car pulled up beside him, its tinted window rolling down.

A woman’s voice, so familiar sounding, said to him, “So, Freddie, you’ve been quite the busy bad boy, haven’t you? I suggest you hop in, if you know what’s good for you.”

Freddie did. After all, he’d been warned. Wasn’t she the family muscle?

Chapter Eleven

The restaurant was closed at this late hour. Mama Mancusi had gone home to sleep after a long day in the kitchen, and there was no sign of the maître d with the pencil-thin mustache. Still, that did not mean there was no service available to the lone customer, Freddie Markson. Just a couple of sconces upon the wall blazed inside the main dining room, and before him waited a small carafe of white wine and a plate of pasta. An intimate setting and meal ideally suited for an intimate chat. His first visit had called for a table for one; tonight, a restaurant for one.

Not counting the two people who stood before him.

“The glass before you is out of courtesy. You probably don’t need any more booze,” said the woman hovering over him.

“I recommend you eat. Perhaps you need some food in your system,” added the man who stood beside her. Neither looked particularly pleased with Freddie.

“And the body language? If I don’t, you gonna beat the crap out of me?”

“More like beat some sense into you? Hello, Freddie, those two guys were skeevy.”

“Skeevy, that’s quite an American word. We call it slang.”

“You forget, the Mancusi family lived in Los Angeles for many years.”

Freddie looked up at his two captors, Beno Mancusi and his sister, Gina. Beno was adorned in his traditional dark suit and tie, his accessory a disapproving expression. Gina was in a tight, leather dress that looked so painted on her body it might have made a dominatrix jealous. Her expression was hard to read, but given the hands-on-hips pose, those powerful legs of hers

open and ready to crush at a moment's command, the intent was quite clear.

The pair had had Freddie watched since his return to Rome, and from the looks of it, his trappy excursion with Liam and Mikey had not gone over well. They had driven up to him in their dark sedan, encouraged him to get in the back seat. Said they would take him home. They had not. They were here as the clock struck midnight, and they were grilling him about his personal life. His sex life.

A hint of a smile crossed Gina's face. "The gladiator, him I can understand."

"Okay, I get it," Freddie said. "You've had me shadowed, how very intriguing. But why?"

"Easy. We wanted to see how you were after Santo dumped your ass."

"And? Did I pass the test again?"

"Actually, yes," Gina said. "You've been having a lot of fun, Freddie, hasn't he, Beno? Fun-loving Freddie, getting daily visits from a hunk in a gladiator uniform. And in the middle of the afternoon, what decadence. What you do, Freddie, and who you do, that's your business. Or at least we thought it was. If that's your way of getting over our brother, indulging in lots of meaningless sex, knock your socks off." She laughed at her own pun. "We were willing to leave well enough alone with your gladiator. Then when he didn't show yesterday, and again failed to show today, we knew you were moving on, and from what we saw, not upgrading."

"Are you for real?" Freddie asked. Was he drunk, were they? Was this a dream? Being brought to the restaurant after hours, essentially held hostage to explain who he fucked, why, and when? "Look, I left Villa Mancusi, and when I did I effectively ended my relationship with all of you. Santo broke up with me, not even bothering to listen to my side of a very convoluted story. So if I don't get the benefit of having Santo, I certainly do not need the burden of the two of

you.”

When Gina glared at him, he added, “No offense.”

“Eat your pasta. Mama made the spaghetti-and-olive oil dish you like.”

Freddie admitted the food smelled good, and the first bite tasted even better. Now he lapped up the remaining pasta, downing it with water from the goblet in front of him. He passed on the wine for now. Maybe it was a good idea to clear his head, make some sense of this situation. *I mean, really*, Freddie was thinking, *what do they want from me?*

“What do you want from me?” Freddie asked.

“We want you to be happy,” Beno said. “We want our brother to be happy.”

“And you think us being together will ensure our mutual happiness?”

“Yes,” Gina said, crossing her arms.

“Yes,” Beno said, his hands hidden inside his pockets.

Okay, there was that body language again, defying the meaning behind their words.

“Why don’t I believe you?” Freddie asked. “I’m sure you want Santo to be happy—hell, I want Santo to find happiness too. But I’m not the answer. He thinks I’m just another person in a long line of people trying to manipulate him and drag him back into a life he wants no part of. I unknowingly became a pawn in Patsy Abbott’s plot, and somehow she got your family to play along. You want Santo to be happy? Then end this all. Send Patsy back to the States alone, let me go on my merry way for the remainder of my stay, let your brother make up his own mind.”

“Easier said than done,” Gina said.

“Especially when it comes to Patsy,” Beno added.

“Okay, you’ve got my attention now,” Freddie said, his mind working overtime trying to understand the situation. He reached for the wine. He’d decided the drink was needed for what

was sure to be a doozy of a story. “Let me guess. Patsy Abbott is here not of her own choosing—she was coaxed into coming to Rome. Your idea, right?”

Beno looked at Gina, who looked back at her brother. Finally, they both sat down at the table, making Freddie feel less intimidated. Each of them grabbed an empty glass, Beno reaching up to grab a bottle of red and a handy opener from the wall display. He uncorked the wine, and soon brother, sister, and hostage were all comfy with their drinks, a casual gathering that reeked of conspiracy.

Christ, Matt goes to Paris to fall in love, Jake goes to London to meet the man of his dreams. Freddie in Rome, what happens to him? Kidnapping.

“You are right, Freddie. Patsy is in Rome at our insistence,” Beno said. “She is a woman with many powerful friends and connections. A simple phone call from her gets things done. Not bad for a woman scorned.”

“Oh, this again? Her revenge play?”

“Call it convenience that Patsy had written the play. We had no idea when we contacted her what she’d been up to. But it was perfect,” Gina said. “A way for us to get Santo back into the business. He could star in her play. She’d practically written it for him. She and Santo go way back to their sitcom days. Santo felt so badly when he became the focal point of the show to the point where the producers let Patsy go. She had a hard time dealing with the disappointment, and in her couple of screen appearances afterwards...well, she’d lost the drive. The passion. She left the business, went to London to study abroad...”

“And eventually met and married money,” Gina added.

“Ah yes, our Lady Voignier,” Freddie said with a drip of sarcasm. “Her rich aristocrat husband died and left her his considerable fortune. So, she has more money than she needs. Why

then does she have to write this play, and why does she need Santo to star in it? Couldn't she cast just anyone in the role?"

"No, because the whole play...it's a metaphor. A memory play about former lovers, but they are mere stand-ins for the industry itself. Filled with betrayal and lust, desire, a hint of sex, and the ultimate triumph of friendship over evil, it's Patsy's way of dealing, finally, with her disappointment. She's lived most of her adult life in Europe. The States turned their back on her. So she's going home on her terms, and on top. To have Santo—who supposedly stole her career from her—as her leading man, to her it's justice."

"This is crazy," Freddie said. "She's using Santo to play out some little girl's fantasy."

"Actually, she's not using Santo. He made a promise to her," Gina said.

Freddie interrupted. "Yeah, yeah, Patsy mentioned something about that. But never said what it was."

"Santo's always been a sensitive person," Gina said. "As a kid, he was grateful for Patsy's friendship, she helped him through so much—he knew his success was driven partly by her failure. The writers didn't know what to do with her character, and if not for Santo's breakout role, the show might have been canceled after one year. So, they changed the focus of the show, and it made tons of money for everyone..."

"Except Patsy," Freddie said. "Okay, I get it. So Santo promised her—a promise I remind you, made by a teenage boy who didn't know any better—that he would help her one day regain her career. So, him starring in her play sends a signal to people. It's a great human interest story: two onetime child stars who were tossed out of the industry when they grew up, now reunited and exposing the monsters. Still doesn't make sense. Why would Santo have made such a promise all those years ago?"

“For that, you’ll have to ask Santo.”

“Santo doesn’t want to see me.”

“Yes, he does,” Gina said. “Freddie, it’s why we came for you. We’re going to take you to him. He’s as much as admitted he’s going to do the play. He’s going to New York. It’s an obligation, more than he knows, and we want to make sure he has more than one reason to return to the States. The play is business, but you...you are his heart. Don’t you get it, Freddie? Don’t you get why Santo was so hurt by what he thought was your betrayal? He’s madly in love with you.”

“More so than I’ve ever seen him,” Beno said.

Freddie drank down his wine, finishing the contents of the glass. His mind was swirling. Two hours ago he was in some fleabag hotel with two drunks from Ireland, about to screw them both. Two days ago he’d been having sweaty sex with a man who wore a gladiator costume to work. Two months ago he’d had a quickie fling with a hot flight attendant with a large cock. After each of these horny encounters, had he felt any better? Did his orgasms bury the sense of personal loss he’d been feeling at the loneliness he’d felt in the Italian capital, over mourning the loss of his mother from earlier in the year? Of all he’d been doing since arriving in Rome, what had calmed him the most, what had stirred his heart, gotten his cock to dance with such excitement? Easy. One word.

Santo.

“Fine, maybe Santo and I do need to talk. But not just yet. You two—you still have one question to answer.”

“Which is?” Gina asked.

“Why did you bring Patsy to Rome? What does the Mancusi family need from her?”

Beno answered simply, "Money."

"Money? For what?"

"Papa's money will not last forever, and Santo's earnings from years ago...they have all but dried up. He knows we are in dire financial straits, and he knows what has to be done. Yes, we all work, and we make a comfortable living. But for the restaurant to survive, for Mama's life to continue as she is accustomed...for the continuing survival of Club Metro, we either need a large infusion of investment money, something Patsy can help us with, or..."

Freddie nodded, the light bulb going off. "You have to sell Villa Mancusi."

Brother and sister nodded. "Something we cannot allow to happen," Gina said.

"It would kill Mama," Beno said. "It would disappoint Santo."

"I agree. You cannot lose the home your papa bought for you," Freddie said, knowing the villa was truly the only place on earth that Santo felt at home. He'd told Freddie that night when they had made passionate love in the grass high above the house. To deny him his home, his sanctuary, to realize he could lose it forever, well, Freddie didn't want any part of that. A solution, as crazy as it was, was possible. But it had to be on his terms. And by "his," Freddie did not mean himself.

"I'll see Santo. On one condition."

"Which is?"

"Santo comes to me. The two of you step aside."

Gina rose from her chair, looking not at all pleased. She flexed her arms. "You're being suddenly disagreeable, Freddie."

"Too bad. Those are my terms. Since meeting Santo, all I've witnessed is other people taking advantage of his sweet nature. Everyone telling him what to do. He's been manipulated

long enough. By Patsy, by his family. Look, I mean no disrespect. You are doing what you think is best for the entire family's future. But someone has to look out for Santo—let him make up his own mind. He's no longer that child star. He's a grown man with a mind of his own. Tell him I'm waiting. If he wants to see me and talk, it has to come from him."

The room had darkened, or maybe that was just the mood. Beno and Gina exchanged silent glances, nodding once.

"Well done, Freddie," Beno finally said.

"Excuse me?"

"You passed. Again."

"Another test, Beno?"

"Gina's idea this time."

She spoke up. "I wanted to know how much you cared about Santo. Now I know."

Freddie just shook his head, marveling at the audacity of this family. Manipulating the situation once again, like spiders drawing Freddie into their web. But rather than capture him and move in for the kill, these two had an ulterior motive. Their web might be one of deceit, but it was spun from something called love.

* * * *

The taxi ride had taken longer than expected. Traffic was crazy on this Friday night in Rome, and Freddie kept checking the time on his cell phone, fearful suddenly that he would be late for his mysterious appointment. Time was closing in on seven and the taxi had still only reached the western edge of Via Nazionale, one of Rome's main thoroughfares. They crawled

alongside a teeming number of cars, enduring the pointless blasts of horns. Finally, they turned onto Via Augusto DePretis, and traffic opened up a bit. Ten minutes later the taxi pulled in front of their destination, the classic elegance of the Hotel Majestic situated on the Via Vittorio Veneto, the famed, winding street where Freddie had met Santo that day in June.

Trouble was, Freddie wasn't sure who he was scheduled to meet.

Could be Santo.

Could be Patsy.

After all, wasn't she staying at this hotel? Wasn't it more likely she had sent for him, perhaps one last-ditch effort to enlist his services in securing Santo's star wattage for her revenge play? He wouldn't put it past her. Patsy Abbott had proven to be nothing if not persistent. But on the heels of his frank discussion with Beno and Gina the night before, it could be they'd passed along his message and this was Santo's way of making an overture, an entrance. Asking Freddie to come to him—but on his own terms. What had made Freddie agree to the invitation? Call it natural curiosity. It wasn't every day you found yourself invited to a suite at a five-star hotel.

The enigmatic invitation had come via messenger, a young kid buzzing his intercom at noon. Freddie accepted the thick cream-colored envelope, noticing the good stock, the gold leaf, monogrammed "M" stamped on the back flap. He'd opened it quickly, the person behind the handwriting not easily discernible. It could be from a man, could be a woman. Hell, could have been dictated by aliens for all Freddie knew. The message was short, mysterious, but to the point: "You are cordially invited for drinks at the Hotel Majestic. 7 p.m. Via Veneto Suite, 2nd Floor. Casual, classy attire." When he actually decided to accept the invitation, Freddie couldn't say. But by five thirty he'd tossed on a nice pair of slacks and button-down blue shirt, the colors highlighting his tan skin, his sparkling eyes, the clothes tight against his strong body. He was

ready to go.

Now, ninety minutes later, here he was.

He paid the cab driver, slipping him a couple of extra euros as a tip for getting him here on time.

“Grazie,” the cabbie said, speeding away.

Via Vittorio Veneto gleamed on this sun-streaked, golden evening. Sharp reflections hit brass plaques on marble columns, shiny windows, the glare even piercing the sunglasses Freddie wore. The two nearby street side restaurants were bustling with activity, smartly dressed waiters scurrying about, taking orders, delivering wine, cocktails, Peroni beer to their thirsty guests. August in Rome tended to be quiet, its residents hidden away in small towns and at seaside resorts, but for the hotel industry this was peak season, and Via Veneto’s top lodgings, the Hotel Majestic and Hotel Imperial, did not lack for business.

Tonight Freddie would not be dining outside. The invitation had clearly stated what room, at what time. So he took the three steps up with a spring in his stride, passing two marble columns that adorned the front façade of the fancy hotel. He entered the glorious, white-marble lobby, again dashing up another staircase, red carpet beneath his feet. Easily finding the elevators, Freddie pressed the button for floor two, and rode up by himself. Suddenly he was faced with the front door to the suite: the Via Veneto suite. He was about to be swept into a world of luxury, and if all went well, if the right person answered the door, a world of untold desires. Could Santo Mancusi be right behind that door?

One way to find out.

Freddie knocked once, politely. He realized his palms were sweaty.

Why? It was just a guy...right? Sure, a totally hot guy whom you were crazy about, who

made your heart sing and your cock twitch, and here you were about to meet him at a fancy hotel, indulge in...what? A night of incredible sex? That would be nice. He'd had sex in a lot of places this summer: his apartment bed and futon, an office inside a throbbing dance club, a cabana in the Tuscan hills—hell, on the Tuscan hills themselves. But he'd not had the pleasure at a hotel, and he wasn't even counting that aborted threesome with Mikey and Liam. That was no hotel, but the Hotel Majestic surely was.

Just then the door swung open. Freddie's eyes widened at the vibrant, coral colors adorning the suite, heightening his senses. He stepped over the threshold like Dorothy when she arrived at Oz. Everything was in bright Technicolor, and that included the resident of the suite. He was dressed in a bright electric purple shirt, black slacks, and perfectly polished black shoes. He'd grown his hair out some, no longer gelled in spiky points, instead smooth against his head, brushing his collar. The colors were beautiful against his tan skin, his handsome, freshlyshaven face. His smile was wide, bright, and, thankfully, inviting. Shit, was this guy sex on a stick or what? Hotness redefined.

“Hello, Freddie.”

Freddie tried to find his voice, words getting caught in his throat.

Santo took hold of his hand, leading his guest further into the suite and closing the door behind him. At their first touch in nearly ten days, Freddie snapped out of his fugue state. “Wow, Santo...this room...it's so...and you...you're so...” Words were gradually coming back to him—a couple more minutes and he might even be able to form complete sentences.

“Let me get you something to drink? Champagne?”

Like he was supposed to drink tap water amidst all this luxury. “Yeah, sure, sounds good.”

“Make yourself comfortable. Why not go outside? The deck offers lovely views of the Veneto, and it’s a perfect night. Not too warm. You won’t feel the heat.”

Looking over at Santo as he opened the champagne bottle, his ass tight in those sleek black pants, Freddie thought, *don’t be too sure*. The sound of a cork popping filled the room, and soon glasses of the liquid gold were served. Freddie happily accepted one, following Santo out onto the second-story deck. The private deck with nicely appointed furniture lived up to Santo’s promise, offering perfect views of the city as well as privacy for its tenants. On the corner of the deck, Freddie couldn’t help but notice an idle Jacuzzi. Geez, this room dripped of money. How could Santo afford this?“So, Freddie, you like?”

“I love. It’s beautiful.”

“It’s Patsy’s,” Santo offered.

“So I figured,” he said.

“She is away right now, visiting her brother in the South of France. Did you know she had a brother? Actually, I think she has two, not that I’ve ever met either. The older one, he’s some kind of hotshot lawyer, works all over the world. Carlton...Colton, something pretentious like that. The other brother...oh yeah, Hunter is his name. I think he’s the family fuck-up. Anyway, when I spoke with her a few days ago, she told me she would be away, that I was welcome to use her suite...for whatever purpose I saw fit.”

“Purpose. Interesting word choice.”

“Beno, Gina, they told me of your conversation.”

So, the pleasantries were over and they were going to get into it already? They had not even toasted this reunion. Freddie had yet to take a drink of his champagne. As though noticing the downturn in his smile, Santo said, “Forgive me, of course. Yes, Freddie, let us raise our

glasses. We have much to celebrate—at least, so I hope.”

“We do?”

“Shall we toast first, talk later?”

Freddie’s eyes fell on Santo’s handsome face, felt the heat permeating between them.

“It’s your invitation, so it’s your toast.”

“Yes, well, let’s make this simple. To New York City.”

Stunned, Freddie found his body momentarily paralyzed to the point where he could barely lift his glass. A smiling, surprisingly calm Santo—nearly laughing, actually—leaned over and clinked his glass with Freddie’s. He didn’t wait for them both to drink; he took the first sip, and damned if that didn’t seem the most refreshing taste imaginable. Freddie regained his composure, took his first sip and went weak in the knees as the dry, crisp bubbles attacked his taste buds, tickled his nose, warmed his insides.

“Delicious,” Freddie said, taking a second, larger sip.

“Yes, Patsy said to order the best. This night is all on her account.”

“Why?”

“With Patsy, you can never know. She’s a hard woman to read, doesn’t let many people get to know her well. Hasn’t loved since her husband died. Maybe she’s trying to find her way back to romance through us. But if I had to take a guess, I’d say it’s a big case of guilt. Guilt deep enough to offer up this ridiculously priced suite. Do you know it goes for over eight thousand euros a night? Do you realize how much guilt she must feel?”

“Or how much money she must really have. God, Santo, this play of hers, it’s really the ultimate vanity project, isn’t it? She certainly isn’t doing it to get rich.”

Santo shrugged. “Who knows what’s truly going on inside her devious, pretty mind? But

remember, even a woman of Patsy's financial independence is still just a woman, a person with feelings, regrets, emotion. We would be wise to remember that." He paused, taking another drink. "So, Freddie, would you like to sit?"

"Actually, I'd like to know what's going on."

"Fair enough," Santo said. "Simply, I owe you an apology."

"Me?"

"Yes, the way I roped you in with everyone else, assuming you were part of my family's lame conspiracy. Inviting Patsy to Rome, her pitch to make me Broadway's hottest sensation, the weekend at the villa. To have all of those machinations going on was one thing, but to have met you, to have...yes, Freddie, to have fallen in love with you, it all seemed too good to be true. So I got suspicious—or perhaps paranoid is the right word. Regardless, I let Patsy, Gina, Beno's scam affect the way I treated you. Hearing you and Patsy talking down by the pool...well, let's just say since I had already convinced my heart of your motives, once my brain processed your words...well, my entire body shut down. And I left you—God, I'm so sorry, I left you to fend for yourself with my family."

"I survived."

"Yes, by leaving. You returned to Rome. And finally had the trip you wanted, yes?"

Freddie wasn't sure what Beno or Gina had told him. Did Santo know about Johnny the Gladiator, about Liam and Mikey and the fleabag hotel? A telling look on Santo's face indicated he knew everything, but he suddenly waved it away. "Freddie, I am not interested in what you did, who you did, but I would like to know why. Sex with strangers, with other men...so soon after what we had experienced? I'm not sure I understand your motives."

Freddie opted to take a seat finally. "Wow, you go right to the solar plexus, don't you?"

Santo, this entire summer, it's almost like Rome has controlled me—maybe the heat and humidity made me a little crazy. Yes, when I arrived I was convinced I was just going to hang out, not get involved, have fun, drink, go clubbing, meet some guys, the whole no-responsibility thing. Except Rome threw me a curve—right here, on the curving Via Veneto.”

“Meeting me,” Santo said, his words not a question.

“Yeah, you. I couldn't get you out of my mind, and sure, my first instinct was desire. I wanted to sleep with you. Hello, you're sexy as hell, why wouldn't I want a piece? Once I sought you out at Mama Mancusi's, something began to change. Not initially when you joined me at my table for dessert, because I was still just thinking about ripping off your clothes and...well, you know. Afterwards, when I left the restaurant, you came after me, and you were so sweet, almost childlike in the way you asked if I was interested in you. Back home, good-looking guys like you don't lack for confidence. They'll either be aggressive in their pursuit of you, or remain aloof, giving off a vibe that you should be so lucky. Santo, you were up front. And then you kissed me. You sent me off with a feeling I don't think I'd ever experienced.”

“Which is what?”

“I think you know,” Freddie said.

“Freddie, cards on the table. If I'm going to make this commitment to New York, I want to know I'm not just following a paycheck. Yes, my family is in need of a bailout. I understand I am the one who can do that. But I want more.” Santo leaned forward, his hands taking hold of Freddie's, his eyes searching for the words which were surely hidden behind his eyes. Freddie nearly looked away, so intense was the gaze, but he couldn't, not with such a beautiful man sitting before him, holding him, letting him know it was okay to admit his feelings. “Freddie, I am in love with you, and I hope, I wish...”

“I love you too,” Freddie said, the words spilling out of his mouth, hanging there in the open. “God, I cannot believe I said it, but yes, I said it, and I mean it, wow, do I ever. I am totally, madly, wildly in love with you, Santo Mancusi. Oh my God, I’m not used to hearing those words, and I’m definitely not accustomed to saying them. This isn’t what happens in the pornos. Usually you just hear sounds, bad music...”

“No more pornos, Freddie. No more of your clever titles,” Santo said with a laugh. “Just love between two people and...and all the wonderful things that come with expressing it. We can make our own music, a soundtrack to our lives.”

Santo stood, his hands, his eyes, his entire body, gesturing for Freddie to join him. Santo pressed tight against Freddie, pulling him in tight. He leaned forward, kissing him deeply, passionately. His cock pressed hard against him, and Freddie responded with a gentle cry of desire. He felt heat sizzle between them, crackling in the night air as Santo kissed his neck, ran his tongue along his ear.

“Santo, make love to me,” Freddie breathed. “Make love to me all night long.”

Santo, smiling, kissing him again, said, “Yes, tonight, and beyond.”

Chapter Twelve

“Oh yes, yes, more...Santo, give it to me...more, more...oohhh, aaahhh...”

His words reverberated against darkened walls, their shadows alive and dancing in the room. Lit by an illuminated Rome that peeked through billowy curtains, silhouettes of bodies thrust and pushed, grabbed and pulled, fucked, cried, begged, bellowed. On the huge king-sized bed, Santo lay atop Freddie, his thick, hard cock buried deep inside, and not just for the first time on this magical, sex-fueled night. Kissing his lips, his tongue swirling inside his mouth, Freddie was holding Santo so close they were nearly one. With each powerful thrust of his hips, slapping hard against Freddie’s ass, their bodies were indistinguishable in the shadowy light.

“Freddie, my Freddie, how you make me feel.”

Freddie grabbed at his lover’s muscled back, digging nails deep into the taut skin. He could feel the thick hair of Santo’s chest brushing hard against him, scratching, rubbing, red streaks upon his body as a result of his urgent, desperate fucking. Freddie demanded more, more, begging for that cock, to feel his thick pubes tickling, touching, scraping at his smooth ass, to know their lovemaking was as deeply, earnestly felt as the words they had expressed at the night’s genesis. The evening had begun hours ago, and after finishing off the champagne they had retired to the bed, undressed each other, touched their bodies, sucked their cocks, before finally falling to the massive bed and, alternating positions, pleased each other as they never had before. Freddie had fucked him, and Santo had fucked him, each man marveling at their versatility, their obvious heated desire for each other, at the number of orgasms each had

achieved. A short rest with their bodies entwined, spooned, and suddenly Santo's cock was hardening again. Freddie smiled as it poked at him.

Now, as the clock reached two in the morning, they delved into each other yet again.

Santo pulled out briefly, tossing Freddie onto his back and lifting his legs toward the high ceiling. Hovering over him, he panted with desire as he positioned himself before Freddie's pulsing, hungry ass. Their eyes connected, Santo's chocolate-drop irises melting into Freddie's waiting, wanting expression. Freddie's long fingers found the thick hair of Santo's chest, teasing his tiny nipples, pulling at the dark tufts. Santo cried out with pleasure, desires heightened by the sensations ping-ponging inside him. He entered Freddie then, his cock pushing gently at first, then he unleashed himself as he found firm ground. Thrusting, pounding, his body on fire, Santo brought his lover to new heights, new passions, with Freddie crying, digging, calling out his name. Dirty talk ensued, Freddie crying, "fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, give me that hard cock, don't stop, oh my hairy Santo, don't ever stop, stop...yes...more, more."

Sweat poured down Santo's his body, matted the hair of his body, his chest and his legs, and he shivered as drops slipped between the crack of his ass. He gave Freddie everything he desired, even more, his cock pounding, pounding. He felt a powerful rush in his body, orgasm forming deep inside him, building, coursing, boiling, constricting until...until...until...not yet, not yet, he thrust once again, and that powerful motion caused Freddie to pull harder on Santo's chest, as though tearing the thick hair off his body, tufts caught in his fists. Just then Santo cried out, and his cock exploded with an amazing shudder. Shot after shot of hot come jerked out of his cock, burying itself inside the tip of the condom, Freddie still able to feel every spurt, every burst.

"Oh my God, Santo, so good...so good...oh, my ass, my cock..."

“What about your cock?” he asked, laughing. “I think it needs to come again. What you just did for me...to me, it’s the least I can do.”

“Yeah? How are you going to do that this time? You want me how?”

Santo smiled. “I have an amazing idea, come follow me.”

“Which should I do—come, or follow?”

“Oh, Freddie,” Santo said, “your humor, it will take getting used to.”

Santo lifted his sexy, sweaty body off the bed, making his way to the small refrigerator. He took out another bottle of the expensive bubbly that Patsy had insisted they indulge in, their third. Santo popped the cork, freeing the cork to fly into the air. He laughed, and Freddie whooped it up joyously. This night of love and sex, bubbly and decadence, it was perhaps the best night he’d ever spent in his life. And the best part of it? It wasn’t over, not nearly.

Freddie got out of bed, Santo grabbing his hand. They both ventured outdoors onto the deck, the night’s cooling air turning their tan skin into a series of prickly goosebumps. It was the first hint of a change in season, even for a place as warm as Rome. Santo made his way toward the Jacuzzi, flicking the switch for the water to churn, swirl. Its lush bubbles called to them. Lifting his naked self over the deck, Santo sank into the warm water, currents of enticing electricity spreading throughout his heated body. Freddie joined him, settling beneath the warm white caps with a sigh of explicit pleasure. That was when he noticed that even though Santo had brought the bottle of bubbly with him, they had no glasses, and he said so.

“Who needs glasses?” Santo said, drinking straight from the bottle.

A few drops of the bubbly slid out of the corners of Santo’s mouth, dripping down his neck, lost in the coils of his chest hair. Freddie leaned over, licking him, his tongue trying to lap up the wayward champagne and failing, but enjoying the fuzzy taste nonetheless. Santo passed

the bottle to Freddie, who paused his foraging through the forest on Santo's chest, happily drinking from the bottle, too. As he did, Santo went beneath the water, and suddenly Freddie cried out, champagne nearly erupting out of his mouth like an unexpected climax. Santo had wrapped Freddie's cock around his lips, sucked him deep into his mouth. He stayed underwater, still sucking, driving Freddie wild, the heat of the water matching the heat in his body. At last Santo surfaced, sucking air down his starved lungs, smiling at Freddie.

"That was amazing," Freddie admitted.

"Yeah, it was," Santo said, diving back down into the water, resuming the blow job he'd been giving Freddie. He sucked and he sucked, harder, harder, Freddie's arms spread out against the Jacuzzi's deck and he gazed at the stars, imagining the twinkling, twitching explosion gathering in his loins. Santo resurfaced, but this time his hand remained below the surface, stroking, stroking, pulling at Freddie's hard cock. One more dive down, more sucking, Freddie finally began to feel his balls constrict, his cock about to blow its load.

Santo shot out of the water, his body rising halfway in the air before coming down to rest against the edge of the Jacuzzi. Freddie climbed atop him, his hot cock rubbing against the damp hair of his belly. Freddie thrust, thrust, his cock pushing farther up Santo's torso until it buried itself in the thick hair between Santo's pecs. Santo slid his hand over the cock, pressing it hard against his chest, the mix of warm skin and damp hair sending waves of passion throughout Freddie's spine. He cried out, once, twice, then Santo pulled his hand away and Freddie thrust again, and his cock exploded, hot ropey come shooting out, dropping onto the mat of Santo's chest. Freddie grabbed his shaft, pulled, pushed, wanting to take full advantage of his orgasm.

"Yes, Freddie, come again, right on my chest, my hairy chest you can't get enough of..."

Freddie felt his cock explode again, a continuation of his previous orgasm or a new one, he didn't know and he didn't care. He just shot more, more, more, white droplets splattered against the black, matted hair. A heaving, smiling Freddie at last slid off Santo, immersing his entire body into the water before resurfacing, refreshed and energized despite the fierce climax which had left his body shattered.

"More bubbly?" Santo said, holding out the bottle.

"Hell, yeah," Freddie said, drinking again from the neck, realizing little remained inside.

"Wow, this stuff doesn't last long with us, does it?"

"There will be plenty more this weekend."

"Oh? You have a plan, Santo?"

"Only that we will not leave all weekend, Patsy is not expected back until Sunday night, the suite is all ours until then. Imagine, Freddie, how much we can do, how many times we can come, indulge, learn every part of our bodies."

"Sounds great, sounds amazing...but why am I sensing a 'but' in this conversation...and by butt I don't mean yours or mine."

Santo smiled, cupping his hand against Freddie's chin. "Because after this weekend, I will need the time to take care of some details in my life. There is much for me to take care of before I can leave for New York, and I'm sorry to say...Freddie, as much as I adore you and your company, you will be too much of a distraction. Among things, I must begin to learn my lines. It is a short play but intense, many monologues. Understand, please. Give me these two weeks to prepare myself for New York. Can you do that for me?"

"Sure. I mean, I guess so," Freddie said, as hesitant now as he'd been when he first arrived outside the suite. "When will I see you again?"

“My idea is a romantic one, perfect,” he said. “Meet me at Fiumicino, at our gate. I will have myself booked on the same flight. Imagine the anticipation: which of us will arrive at the gate first, which of us will spot the other first. An airport gate represents a portal that will transport us from our old life to something new, wild, and unpredictable. Yes, Freddie, you will meet me then?”

God, it was like something out of a movie, something dreamed up by Hollywood.

Which is exactly why the idea did not sit well within Freddie Markson.

Hollywood had not been kind to Santo Mancusi, and he had no hope that it would get any better now, even if Broadway was not exactly Hollywood. Still, he swallowed his fear, drank the last of the champagne along with it, and then settled his body against Santo’s, snuggling in the swirling, churning waters of the Jacuzzi. Did they have to go to New York? Did they have to meet at the airport? Did this night have to end?

“Yes, I’ll meet you,” Freddie finally said, “but let’s not think about tomorrow just yet. Let me take you to the bed. Let me show you how much I love you.”

“A better idea than mine,” Santo said agreeably. “Yes, Freddie, please take me to our bed, kiss me and fuck me, love my body like you’ll never love me again.”

* * * *

Italian first, English second. No matter the language, the intent was clear.

“Final call for Alitalia Flight 610 to New York’s JFK International Airport. This is a final boarding call.”

Few people remained at the gate, and most of those people were already on line. Freddie Markson, his head was still swiveling around the terminal, left, right, turning so fast he might end up with whiplash. He could care less about such a minor ailment when what he was facing was a broken heart. Because with just minutes to spare before the crew would close the main cabin door, essentially sealing the plane and its passengers off from the rest of the world, he was still waiting for Santo. Soon they would taxi out to the runway, then shoot into the sky. Next stop, New York City.

It was early September, the Thursday before Labor Day. Summer was waning, and as though the sun knew such an end was imminent, it decided to hide. Dark clouds had enveloped the city for the last two days, intermittent rain falling on the Eternal City, on Freddie's not-so-eternal sojourn. The weather had spoiled Freddie's last couple of days, but that was okay. He'd seen so many sights already—the ruins, the numerous piazzas, finally a visit to Vatican City, including a visit to Saint Peter's Basilica and the Vatican museum—so Freddie was content to spend his remaining hours inside the apartment he'd come to know as home, and stare at the frail but still thriving Colosseum. And while he wished he'd had Santo at his side, in his bed, in his arms, he knew their two weeks apart would be over soon and they would be reunited.

Except they weren't.

Freddie gathered his carry-on luggage, and made his way toward the beckoning gate. Only ten people were ahead of him, though he assumed there was a back-up of people boarding further down the jetway. So he held back again, thinking Santo was going to come running through the terminal any second.

“Sir, are you boarding? We need to get ready for take-off.”

Freddie knew they were talking to him, but he didn't respond, still looking around.

“Sir?”

“Yes, sorry, I’m boarding. I...I was just expecting someone...I thought. Can you tell me whether someone had boarded?”

“No, sir, regulations prevent us from disclosing such information.”

“I suppose the same applies to whether someone has a reservation for the flight?”

The gate attendant nodded, essentially forcing silent Freddie’s concerns. He had no choice. He handed over his boarding pass, with the woman running the card through the machine, effectively checking him in. There was no turning back now. Traversing down the jetway, he came to the opening of the huge transatlantic jet, stepped over its threshold, saying goodbye to Rome as he did. Was he also saying goodbye to Santo? Had their sultry, sexy weekend at the Majestic been a ruse, one last manipulation from the Mancusi family, perfectly executed by its youngest member? Freddie refused to believe it, but the truth of the matter was that Freddie had not heard one word from Santo in two weeks.

“Good afternoon, sir. Which seat number?”

“44A,” Freddie said.

“Down this first aisle, toward the rear of the aircraft.”

Freddie nodded. Steerage.

Christ, this ought to be fun. For the next nine hours he’d endure nothing but the noisy drone of airplane engines, even with his earbuds stuffed in his ears. Freddie made his way back, hoping against hope that he had the two-seat row to himself. The last thing he needed was company: large woman, cute guy, crying baby. God, the possibilities were more awful than not, and none of them was he in the mood for. Especially a cute guy.

It was going to be a long flight. Or was it? Because there was a light at the end of the plane in the form of Len, the hot flight attendant. Well, wasn't that bringing the trip full circle?

As Freddie settled into his seat, Len came up to him, gave him a quick hug.

"Hey, Beer Guy. I figured I'd see you eventually," Len said, "What are the odds? Let me sneak you a beer before take-off, get you settled."

"Thanks, Len. Good to see you."

Len showed no indication that once they had taken off, he would really help get Freddie settled. Not that Freddie needed any additional complications, but damn if he wasn't mad enough to go through with a mile-high adventure. Were the hell was Santo? Freddie sat, buckled his seatbelt, accepted the proffered Peroni from a quickly passing Len, who was busy with pre-flight preparations. Freddie slid the beer into the seat pocket, staring out the window to watch the ground crew finish their duties. Fueled, bags packed, the whirl of the plane's engines being given a test run. All systems were go, and an announcement was made that they had closed the main cabin door, asking that flight attendants prepare for takeoff. No one had taken the seat next to Freddie. Was the plane mocking him?

He was exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Dealing with airports, the security, the baggage handlers, all the waiting at the gate, finally took its toll on him as his eyes closed. Good, let him fall asleep, stay that way until he heard the pilot speak over the intercom announcing their descent into the New York area. The safety features demonstration over, the plane taxied from the jetway, beginning its trek out toward the runway. The pilot welcomed them all aboard, reminding them they were on board flight 610 to JFK. Could someone really be on the wrong plane at this point? Hope rose inside Freddie's heart, thinking maybe Santo had gotten

on the wrong flight, or maybe he'd taken an earlier one? He could be waiting for Freddie in New York, sheepish over his stupid error.

But no, that was pure fantasy. Fantasy had no place in real life.

This wasn't real life, not right now. Flying was like living life inside a vacuum, reality on hold while they rode the clouds toward their destination. The giant aircraft thundered down the runway, picking up speed until finally its nose lifted, the powerful engines and wings giving them flight. They soared high, higher, climbing into the dark, rumbling clouds. The wheels slid inside their compartment, and the flight attendant announced they had cleared ten thousand feet and passengers were free to use approved electronic devices. Freddie wasn't in the mood for his iPod, so he grabbed the beer and popped the top. The first sip felt good, cold against his dry throat. If he couldn't sleep, then let this beer be the first of many.

About thirty minutes into the flight, Freddie was lightly dozing when he felt a touch on his shoulder. He opened one eye, found Len staring back at him.

"Come with me," he said.

He just wasn't into it. "Len, thanks, but I'm not so sure..."

Christ, was he really turning down an offer for sex? Just because the trip was over, did that mean the fun had to come to an end? Santo was not here, he wasn't coming to New York, his sexy body, the wild nights they had spent screwing each other—in the club, in Tuscany, surrounding by the luxury of the Hotel Majestic—they were all just a series of memories of an amazing summer in Rome.

"Just follow me, okay?"

Freddie unbuckled his seatbelt, heading down the aisle toward the front of the plane. Len drew back a green curtain, allowing Freddie admittance into the first-class cabin. A small bar

was situated in the middle of the cabin and two people were sitting at it, happily drinking champagne. The woman turned, smiling at him. So did the man, but his smile was even broader, so happy was he to see Freddie.

“What the hell...?”

Patsy Abbott came over to Freddie, hugging him.

Santo Mancusi came next, and in addition to his tight embrace, he planted a hot, steamy kiss upon Freddie’s trembling lips. As they parted, Freddie’s mouth remained open, surprise eating away at his expression.

“But...how...what...”

“There was a mix-up,” Patsy said. “I phoned the airline, asked to upgrade you to First Class. But I’d also booked Santo’s flight at the same time, and they must have thought I meant to upgrade Santo....which makes no sense, since he’d already been booked that way. Anyway, it’s all been cleared up. I asked Len to find you, but he said he had to wait until they had taken off. So, here we are in the air, all of us at last reunited. Freddie, there’s an empty seat in the row behind us, which of course I’ll take. You and Santo can sit together. But that’s for landing. Right now I think we hang at the bar. I think you need a glass of champagne. Barkeep? Can you set my friend up? Oh, and given the shock he’s feeling, can you pour him a shot?”

Patsy laughed at her order, but it was Freddie who got the last laugh.

“Give us all a shot,” Freddie announced.

So, whiskey shots for three, and Patsy, Santo, and Freddie raised their glasses, toasted the air, the sky, the moon, the stars, sex, romance, success, revenge, loyalty.

“I think we’re missing something,” Freddie said.

“Ah, yes, we have left out fun. Freddie cannot forget his fun,” Santo said.

“No, not that...though, perhaps a little fun later would be a good way to wait out our flight, but...no, Santo, what we forgot, it’s something far more important.” He raised his glass and then said, “To love.”

They drank, they kissed.

Patsy applauded, the first sign of the accolades to come Santo Mancusi’s way.

The plane continued to thrust forward, as though it had picked up speed, knowing the three friends, the two lovers—well, they couldn’t wait to return to the pulsing city that was New York. A new adventure awaited them.

THE END