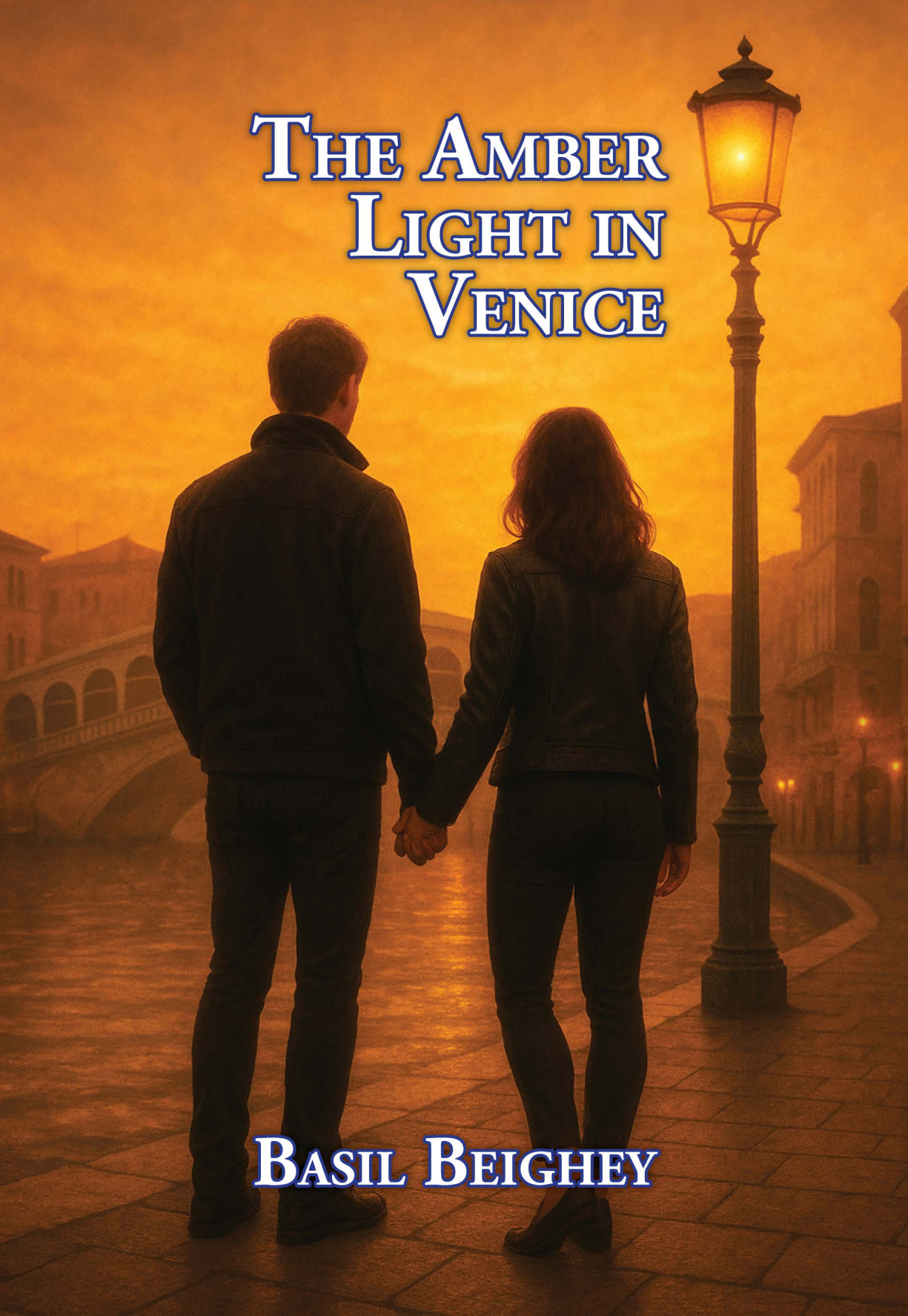


A romantic couple stands with their backs to the camera, holding hands on a cobblestone path in Venice. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise. In the background, the Rialto Bridge spans a canal, and a tall, ornate street lamp stands to the right. The overall mood is intimate and nostalgic.

THE AMBER LIGHT IN VENICE

BASIL BEIGHEY

The Amber Light In Venice

by
Basil Beighey

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The following is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Learn more about the author at:
www.BasilBeighey.com

1005 River Mill Circle
Roswell, GA 30075

404-451-3929
BasilBeighey@iCloud.com

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I'd love to hear from you. Thanks!

This book is dedicated to my grandfather,
Paul Rossi Lanzoni, who lived in Felonica Po, Italy.

PROLOGUE

Tuesday, October 1, 2002
Four Weeks Before the Trip

CHAPTER 1 - A TICKET TO SOMEWHERE

The bed oscillated as the young man slid out and stood. Moisture from heavy breathing and sweat dampened the sheets. They clung to her bare skin as she turned. Her head throbbed from the four vodkas and fogged from the pot she'd ingested the night before. She peeked out from under the covers to look at her alarm clock. Almost ten.

Her eyes scanned the tiny bedroom that held her worldly possessions. She fixated on a small, worn stuffed bear sitting forlorn on a shelf in the corner, a birthday gift from her mother long ago. She imagined her mother's eyes watching her — quietly bearing witness to the mess she'd made.

He was already pulling on his jeans, dressing quickly as if he had somewhere to be. Maybe he did. Carrie didn't ask.

She sat up, arms draped loosely around her knees. "You don't have to sneak out."

"I'm not sneaking," he said, slinging his shirt over one shoulder. "I just ... I think we need to cool off. That's all. It's starting to feel like a thing."

Her laugh came out bitter and reflexive. "A thing? You mean talking over drinks at the bar a couple of nights a week? ... coming back here to get high and fuck?"

He didn't answer. He just grabbed his keys from the table and

gave her a vague, apologetic nod. The door clicked behind him, and she was alone again, wrapped in silence and the echo of his departure.

She snapped her lighter and drew deeply. Cigarette smoke filled her lungs. How many times had this scene played out? How many men? She couldn't even remember their names. What she remembered vividly, however, was the feeling of emptiness and worthlessness she felt on the mornings they left, ... or said it was over.

She stood under the shower for a long time, watching the water swirl down the drain. The sting of the hot water on her shoulders and back felt like penance. It felt like control. She scrubbed her skin hard to erase every hint of his cologne, his breath, and his essence.

When she stepped onto the sidewalk, her hair was still damp, but it was free of any trace of the night before. The morning light over Atlanta's Candler Park was soft and forgiving. The warm September sun reflected off puddles in the street and warmed the walls of stately clapboard houses and brick buildings. She tucked her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket and walked west on McLendon, looking down, watching her black Converse sneakers heel-toe on the sidewalk.

She didn't mind walking. It cleared her head and gave her time to think. She was stuck and longed for something different. Something had to change. The bar job was a dead end, and everyone knew it. But what else was available for a punky rebel with blue hair, a tattoo, a nose ring, and no higher education?

Her shift didn't start for another hour. Her path detoured, as it had so many times before, into the small park with the crooked iron fence and cracked pavement, where mothers and nannies

opened juice boxes for children playing tag around playground equipment, picnic tables, and a tired old oak.

It reminded her of better days, days when she felt loved, safe, and wanted. She recalled her mother watching her play, letting her take chances on monkey bars and swings, then nursing her scrapes and scratches when things went too far. Her eyes glazed over as she thought of it. She missed her and felt lost.

She leaned on the low chain-link fence surrounding the soccer field, watching a group of young boys kick a soccer ball. One of them — a boy, maybe eight, with a mop of curly hair and a gap in his teeth, spotted her.

“Hey, Carrie! ... Carrie!” he called, jogging over. “Do that thing! The thing you did before. The thing with the ball?”

Carrie blinked, then smiled.

“You remember that?”

“Yeah!” he bounced in place, eyes wide. “With the ball, and your foot, and your head. Do it again!”

One of the other boys rolled the ball toward her. She tapped the ball with the rubber toe of her sneaker, popping it up in the air, then catching it on the top of her foot. With a flick, it rose upward. She bounced it off her knee once, twice, then harder to her forehead. She balanced it for a second, then tilted her head forward to let it drop, catching it cleanly on the bridge of her foot, then flicked it to the boy.

The kids cheered; several tried to mimic the move. The curly-haired boy clapped as if he’d just seen a magician.

Carrie, hands above her head, twirled in a graceful circle, exaggerated and theatrical, then held the finish. “Thank you,” she said. “I’ll be here all week.”

The boy grinned and ran off. She lingered for a few seconds, watching them chase each other, laughing and kicking the ball. It reminded her of playing kickball and soccer with her friends as a child in the yard next door.

The club was dark when she arrived. Her keys jingled as she unlocked the door. She flipped on the lights, slipped behind the bar, and hung her jacket and daypack on a peg in the corner. Glasses clinked as she stacked them, lined them up, and polished each with a clean towel. As she straightened and cleaned the whiskey bottles on the back bar, she noticed her reflection in the mirror staring back. She studied her face, her black glasses, the blue streaks in her hair, the ivy tattoos on her arms, and the small silver ring hanging from her septum. She grabbed a clean bar towel and wiped the mirror clean.

By the time the first regular wandered in, she'd buried the morning deep beneath the clink of bottles, buzzing neons, and humming coolers. Her melancholy had diminished, but hadn't disappeared.

As she finished stocking the reach-in, the bell above the front door jangled. She turned to investigate.

"Are you open yet?" a young man in a sport coat asked.

"Yes," she said. "The kitchen won't be open for twenty minutes, though."

"That's okay. I'm actually looking for Carrie McCall. Is that you?"

"Yes, I'm Carrie."

"I'm John Noble. I'm the La Marca Prosecco representative. You probably don't remember, but you met me six months ago, ... when we launched the Prosecco sales contest?"

She nodded. "I remember you."

"Well, I'm happy to inform you that you've won! You won the contest! You sold the most Prosecco nationwide in the last six months. You sold over four cases — the most of any restaurant worker in the US."

Carrie stood in silence. "I did? ... What did I win?"

"A first-class, round-trip ticket to Venice, Italy. It's worth about \$3,000, and you can use it whenever you want. Just call this number at Delta, give them this prize number, and make your reservation. Here's the information and ticket," he said, handing her a large orange envelope. "There's also a train pass from the Marco Polo Airport to and from the island. Don't lose that."

She reached for the packet, then looked at the salesman. "Venice Italy? Where's that?"

"It's a beautiful city in northern Italy, on the Adriatic Sea. It's a very popular tourist destination. Lots of history, beautiful old buildings, gondola rides? ... You'll love it."

"Thank you," she murmured, slipping the envelope into her daypack.

"Well, congratulations. If you have questions or issues, call me at this number," he said, handing her his business card.

She studied the card. "Why Venice, Italy?"

"That's where La Marca Prosecco comes from. The winery is just on the mainland. I could probably arrange a tour if you want. They're very grateful. Do you want me to make a call?"

"No. ... No, that's okay. But thank you."

The man stood silent for a moment, as if waiting for Carrie to speak. ... "Well, ... okay. Congratulations. Have fun, and call me if you have any questions."

With that, he left, leaving Carrie in stunned silence.

“Hey, congratulations!” a regular at the bar slurred. “That’s a big deal, right? ... Good for you. Wow, Italy. Right?”

She continued wiping down the bar and mumbled, “Where’s Venice?”

“Beats me. But it sounded nice. Let’s celebrate! ... Give me another beer.”

The day dragged. She occupied herself making drinks, drawing beers, serving food, and cleaning her station. The thought of the trip lingered. Do I really want to go? I don’t care about going to Venice. Can I even afford it? Maybe I can sell the ticket.

Late afternoon, just before shift change, the bar was empty except for two couples watching the Braves on the TV across the room. The doorbell jingled. A distinguished-looking older man in a blue sport coat, with gray hair and a trimmed beard, took a stool at the far end of the bar.

“Hey,” she called out. “The usual?”

“Yeah. Dewars. ... I need to talk to you.”

She poured his scotch, walked to the end of the bar, and placed it carefully in the middle of a coaster.

“What’s up?”

He pushed a small box toward her. “I want you to have this.”

Carrie smiled. “What? ... What’s this?”

“I want you to have it,” he said.

She opened it. Inside was a heavy gold chain bracelet.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “But I can’t accept that.”

“Listen. ... My wife is out of town for a week. Let me take you to dinner tomorrow night? We’ll go someplace nice this time.”

“Listen, ... we’ve been over this. You’re married. We had a few laughs. We had a few drinks. But there’s no future in it. ... Please. I don’t want to keep going over this.”

“My marriage is over. We’re done. It’s only a matter of time. I told you that. ... I want you.”

“What about your kids? Are you going to leave them too?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

She laughed. “You’re crazy. It was a Cobb salad and a couple of drinks, and now you’re giving me jewelry? Come on. This is ridiculous. Besides, you’re too old for me. What are you like, sixty?”

“Fifty Seven,” he said indignantly, stirring his drink.

“Seriously ... It was one silly date.” She said, sliding the box back across the bar. “Besides, I don’t trust you. I thought you were a solid guy. But you conveniently omitted the fact that you were married. Had I known, I would never have gone out with you.”

He slid the box back across the bar. “Think about it. ... Please.”

“I have. And no.” She shoved the box back toward him. “You’re being pathetic. Go home to your family.”

He threw down the scotch, slapped a ten-dollar bill on the bar. “Please think about it.” He said, turning toward the door.

“Take this!” she said as he walked away. “I don’t want it!”

“It’s yours. I bought it for you. If you won’t go out with me, think of it as payment for a good time,” he muttered, loud enough to be heard. “It’s worth over three hundred dollars.”

The bell above the door jingled as he left.

Carrie shook her head in disgust and watched through the window as he walked down the street. She looked down at the tiny box. After clearing his glass and wiping away all evidence, she threw the box into her daypack.

At six, the second shift arrived and manned their stations. Carrie cashed out her tips, slipped onto a bar stool beside the server station, and lit a cigarette.

“What will you have?” her replacement asked.

“Double Absolute on the rocks with a lime,” she mumbled, exhaling into the air.

As she sat quietly, reflecting on the day. Several of her workmates gathered around her, preparing to start their shift.

“Does anyone want to go to Venice?” she asked. “I won that Prosecco contest, and I’ll sell my first-class, round-trip ticket for \$500.”

The three servers stood in stunned silence. “You won the Prosecco contest? That’s great! You deserve it, Carrie! Why don’t you go?” one of her workmates asked. “I’ve heard Venice is beautiful, ... very romantic.”

“I don’t have the money. Even with a free ticket, it’s gotta cost at least another \$1000 for a passport, food, and hotel lodging. Right? I don’t even know where Venice is. I’d really rather have the money. Does anyone want to buy it? It’s a \$3000 ticket; I’ll sell it for \$500.”

“Carrie, ... use it. Go! Just fly over and sit on a bench for a week. Try the food; watch the people.”

“It won’t cost that much,” another friend offered. “It will give

you a fresh perspective.”

As the girls offered advice, a tall, good-looking young man in a leather jacket slid onto the stool beside her.

“What are you up to?” he mumbled.

“You’re off early, aren’t you?” Carrie asked, exhaling Marlboro smoke into the air. “Things dragging at Marlow’s?”

“A little. ... Slow lunch. ... What are you doing later? Wanna hang out at your place? I’ve got some good weed.”

“You’ve got some good weed? What an offer! How could any girl turn that down?”

“It’s very good weed, Carrie.”

“Is it beyond you to ask me on a proper date? All you ever want to do is come over to my apartment, get stoned, and have sex.”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s fun. You always seemed fine with it before. It’s not like it’s the first time,” he laughed, slapping a pack of cigarettes and a Zippo lighter on the bar.

“It’s just getting old. I’m tired of it. I’m off Saturday. Why don’t we go to a movie or dinner?”

“Can’t Saturday. My sister is getting married. I’ll be busy all day,” he said, striking his lighter and drawing deep.

“Then take me to the wedding?”

“Carrie, ... come on. What do you think my mother would say if I brought a tattooed chick with blue hair and a nose ring to my sister’s wedding? She’d have a fucking nervous breakdown.”

“Fuck you,” Carrie snapped, almost shoving him off the stool. She tipped her drink high in the air to let the last few drops of vodka and an ice cube fall into her mouth. As she slid off her stool, she punched him hard in the arm.

“Goddamn it, Carrie. That hurt.”

“Fuck you. Don’t call me anymore,” she said, bolting toward the door.

Outside, she walked to the common area in the center of Five Points. Several people sat on benches in the square. A homeless man snored, a street musician noodled on a guitar, and a couple of old men threw peanuts to squirrels. She walked to a vacant bench on the opposite side and sat watching a small bird peck at crumbs.

Her thoughts drifted back to the life she had when her mother was alive — dance lessons, gymnastics, clean clothes, home-cooked meals, love, and safety. She wrapped her arms tightly around chest and bent over. She shuttered. Tears ran down her cheeks and dripped onto the bricks beside her feet. How did I become such an unworthy, unwanted mess?

She pulled a napkin from her pocket to wipe her tears, then dug her checkbook from her daypack and did the math. The \$547 in her checking account, plus the \$63 she had just earned in tips, was all she was worth.

She wiped her eyes and sniffed as she watched the little bird, all alone under the opposite bench.

Fuck it. I’m going. ... How could it be any worse than this?

She gathered herself and walked slowly home. She closed her apartment door and leaned against it.

“Carol, ... can I borrow the blue suitcase in the front closet?”

“Sure,” she said. “Where are you going?”

“Venice. ... It’s in Italy.”

“I know Venice,” Carol laughed. “That’s great! How did you

swing that?”

“I won this contest at work.”

“When are you going?”

“I’m not sure yet — a couple of weeks. I have to call and finalize the reservation, ... and get a passport.”

“Are you going alone?”

“Yep. ... Can I use your computer to look up Venice?”

“I’m looking at it now,” she replied. “Come here. ... Look, ... on MapQuest. Here’s Venice.”

Carrie walked into Carol’s room and studied the map. Carole zoomed out and said, “That’s going to be a long flight.”

“Will it be cold there?”

“I think it’s like here. It’s warmer than you’d think because of the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas. It will be cool, but not cold,” Carol said. “This time of year, ... says the highs are around 65°, the lows around 51°. I think your leather jacket will be fine.”

Carrie walked into her bedroom and flopped onto the bed. She wrapped her arms around her pillow, pulled it close, and looked at the little bear on the shelf in the corner. A tear rolled down her cheek. “I’m trying, Mom,” she whispered. ... “I’m really trying.”

Three weeks later, the afternoon before leaving, Carrie wheeled the blue suitcase into the bedroom and placed it on the bed. She stood over the empty vessel. What the fuck do you bring to Venice, Italy?

She packed as much as the case would hold, sat on the contents

and strained to zip it shut, then wrestled it to the door, ready for the following day's departure.

"Carol, can you drive me to the train station tomorrow?"

"Sure, what time?"

"Like, four?"

"Sure. ... But you don't have to take the train. I'll drive you to the airport."

She had drawn the night shift at the bar and needed to get ready for work. As she undressed to shower, she looked at her reflection in the mirror. The blue dye in her hair had washed out; it was once again thick and dark brown. She carefully removed the silver nose ring from her septum and placed it by the sink.

"Sorry," she said. "You're not going."

THE FIRST DAY

Friday, October 25, 2002

CHAPTER 2 - A SIMPLE PLAN

“That will be \$12.49 with tax,” the cashier said, slipping a bottle of Advil into a small plastic bag.

Ahead of me, a Delta flight attendant rummaged through her purse. The line behind us lengthened with anxious travelers pulling carry-ons, queuing to pay for water and snacks before long international flights.

“Oh, ... no.” She bit her lip. “I left my wallet in my carry-on. All I have is \$9.50 in cash.”

She shielded her mouth so others wouldn’t hear.

“Will you accept that? ... I’ll make it up when I get back,” she whispered. ... “You know me. ... Right? I come here all the time. ... I just work over there,” she said, pointing to a gate across the concourse.

The young cashier stepped away from the counter and stood as tall as possible to look for a manager. Three more people joined the line. By now, the restlessness of those rushing to make their flights was becoming palpable.

“Here, I got it,” I said, tossing three dollars on the counter.

The attendant whirled to look at me.

I smiled. “Delta’s been good to me. ... It’s no big deal.”

“You are so kind. ... Thank you.” She handed the cashier the

money and stuffed the Advil into her purse.

As I paid for my water, she lingered. “God bless you. My back is killing me.” She said, touching my arm. “I’m sorry, I’m working, and I’ve got to run, but thank you so much. That was very kind.” She turned and rushed away.

I looked at my watch. Thirty minutes until boarding. I spotted an open seat by the window near my gate and headed in that direction.

I’d racked up plenty of time off and frequent flyer miles, but since my divorce two years ago, I hadn’t used them. I had no desire to travel and had been avoiding vacations. Friends at work were constantly trying to cheer me up and urge me to take some time off.

“Why don’t you take a trip to Italy to see your grandfather’s hometown?” A colleague suggested. “You’re always talking about him. That might be fun, right?”

The idea resonated with me. My father’s family immigrated to the US from Italy. My grandmother was an Esposito from Naples — loud, animated, and expressive. Her maiden name, “Esposito”, came from a term for orphaned children left in Italian convents, so her roots were uncertain.

My grandfather, however, was Northern Italian, from a region north of Venice, near the Austrian border. His family eventually settled in a small town along the Po River called Felonica Po. He immigrated to the United States in 1898 at the age of nine and later found work in the underground coal mines of western Pennsylvania. As a child, I listened intently to his many stories about his childhood, journey, and heritage. He was quiet, intelligent, artistic, and serious, with a dry sense of humor and a gift for storytelling. I longed to see the places he

spoke of.

I'd been to Europe many times for business, but never for leisure. On those trips, I always prepared a rigid itinerary and usually hauled loads of business clothes and photography gear. I left nothing to chance. I prepared months in advance, always booking aisle seats for extra elbow room and easy bathroom access. On this flight, however, my short-notice and use of frequent flyer miles limited my options. I looked at my boarding pass: economy cabin, middle section, middle seat, one of the worsts seats on the plane.

I sipped my water and pondered my situation. One of my biggest fears is being a sucker — getting taken because I don't know the rules or understand the proper procedures. Travel is no different. There are ways and principles. Someone has done it before and documented the best procedures. If done correctly, traveling can be enlightening and enjoyable. If done incorrectly, a miserable mess.

I contemplated the advice I'd seen while binge-watching leisure travel shows: lighten the load, move freely, one carry-on, no rigid itinerary, and no hotel reservations. It seemed reasonable, but so contrary to my experience. I winced and sipped my water. After much consternation, I decided on a simple plan: travel through Italy, immerse myself in the local culture, try to decompress, ... and forget. My only firm objective was to visit Felonica Po to see where my grandfather lived.

I glanced at my watch; ten minutes till boarding. I turned to look out the window. The body of the shiny Boeing 777 seemed solid, clean, and well-maintained — no visible cracks in the wings or fuselage. Check that off the list.

Although I'd skipped booking hotels in advance, I'd kept detailed notes on the best lodging areas within each city. I un-

zipped the front pocket of my suitcase and pulled out the highly rated guidebook I'd purchased. I opened it and removed the pocket-sized reference card I'd made and slipped the card and a pen into my jacket's breast pocket.

"Oh, ... can I borrow your pen for a second?" a lady next to me asked.

"Sure," I handed her the pen.

She scribbled a note on the back of her boarding pass and handed the pen back. "Thank you. ... That's a nice carry-on. Are those straps on the back?"

"Yeah. I just got this. It has wheels and straps; it doubles as a backpack. See." I said, unzipping the back of the case to fully expose the padded straps. "They say it's hard to pull suitcases on wheels over cobblestone streets."

"Interesting. I never thought about that. ... Is that all you're taking?"

"Yeah, I'm going to be walking a lot, so I decided to travel light."

"You have more courage than I do," she said, laughing.

I sighed. "Well, ... I'm trying something new." I propped my feet on my suitcase and sipped my water. Her comment made me a little nervous.

The seating area in front of the gate was full. Across the aisle from me, two parents stuffed crackers into the mouths of a pair of toddlers. The crumbs dribbled onto the carpet beneath them, creating an unsightly mess. I wondered in which culture this was acceptable.

I studied the other travelers waiting to board. Like me, some

seemed organized and efficient. Others burdened themselves like pack mules, hauling not only carry-ons, but also purses, packages, strollers, food, children, and toys. As I watched them, I tried to imagine the stories behind their journeys.

One girl looked to be in her mid-to late 20s and fiddled with an Apple iPod. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she leaned against her blue carry-on as if it were a beanbag chair. Her suitcase seemed stuffed to the bursting point. All the exterior pockets bulged. Next to her suitcase was a large bag-purse, also packed to capacity. Protruding from her purse was a Chick-fil-A bag. A leather jacket, a large orange envelope, and a soda bottle lay strewn on the floor beside her.

She was about 5'5" tall, with full-bodied dark brown hair that extended just past her shoulders. Torn blue jeans, black Converse sneakers, and a loose T-shirt with an image of the performer 'P!nk," and a caption reading "Get the party started!" completed her look. She was petite, but curvy and sturdy. Tattoos that looked like ivy peeked out from under her T-shirt sleeves on both her arms. Her most distinguishing feature, however, was her librarian-style black glasses. The dark glass frames contrasted with her clear, light skin and obscured what appeared to be better than average good looks. I fixated on her. She appeared relaxed and oblivious to the surrounding chaos.

"Good afternoon, passengers. This is the pre-boarding announcement for Delta Flight 5011 to Venice, Italy. We now invite passengers with small children and those needing special assistance to board.

The crowd stirred. Loose items disappeared into bags. A queue stretched from the gate to the concourse. I checked my boarding pass again — zone eight — and waited as the early zones

filed in. I noticed the parents with the two toddlers — the two dribbling cracker crumbs on the floor, were at the front of the line. My first reaction was, figures. Then I stopped myself. Why was I so quick to judge strangers? I hadn't always been this bitter and judgmental. When had cynicism become my default? What good had all my judgments ever brought me — except isolation and regret? What was I even doing here? I looked away and reflected.

“Now boarding all first-class passengers; please have your boarding pass and identification ready.”

As the first-class passengers queued in front of the gate, I noticed the girl with the ivy tattoos and black glasses gather her things and prepare to board. She slung her heavy purse over her shoulder and towed her overstuffed case toward the gate. Sure enough, she showed the attendant her boarding pass and moved onto the jetway. I watched her wrestle with her two heavy bags until she disappeared from view.

A few minutes later, my zone was called. I lined up, presented my boarding pass, and entered the jetway. The line moved slowly. The flight appeared to be full. I entered the aircraft and turned right. The Boeing 777 economy cabin has a 3-3-3 layout — three seats on each side and three in the middle. I checked my boarding pass again and sighed. It still read: middle seat, center section. Nothing had changed.

As I approached my seat, I noticed the woman sitting to my right was wearing a Middle Eastern Muslim burqa and comforting a crying baby. The baby's head was under the woman's garment, attempting to attach itself to her breast. Great. I get to endure a crying baby for the next nine hours. That'll be fun. She's probably a great conversationalist, though. I shook my head. Stop it! I stowed my carry-on in the overhead compartment and attempted to get comfortable next to the woman

and baby.

Moments later, an elderly woman took the seat to my left. She stashed her purse, then hoisted a medium-sized “service dog” onto her lap. The dog looked like a schnauzer-beagle mix, and its odor suggested it hadn’t been bathed recently. The woman situated the dog so that its head faced the aisle and its tail faced me. The high-strung animal began to whimper and wag its tail vigorously. With each wag, the tail batted my left arm. Worse, the woman appeared unaware of the animal’s encroachment. She stared blankly into space and softly petted the animal to pacify it. As I watched, I wondered which was actually the service animal.

The scene was like a comedy sketch, and might have been funny if it weren’t so annoying. To my right, a crying baby under a burqa. To my left, a senile old woman with a hyperactive service dog. After contemplating my situation and options, I resolved to make the best of it. I distracted myself by scanning the movie selections on the tiny screen embedded in the seat back ahead of me while questioning the impromptu decisions that had delivered me to this bizarre situation.

The jet backed away from the gate, and the captain’s voice buzzed over the speaker: “Flight attendants, prepare for take-off.”

As the flight attendants demonstrated seat belts, oxygen masks, and evacuation procedures, I noticed the attendant checking seat belts was the same attendant who had purchased the Advil just ahead of me in the concourse convenience store. As she approached my row, she smiled and rolled her eyes as if to say, “Yikes!”, then continued on until she disappeared into the front of the plane.

The plane taxied onto the tarmac and took its place in line for

takeoff. As I fumbled with my earbuds, preparing to start a movie, the familiar attendant walked briskly down the left aisle toward my row. As she approached, we locked eyes, and she motioned with her finger to “come”.

In disbelief, I pointed at my chest and mouthed the words, “Me?”

She smiled, nodded, and again gestured for me to follow.

I squeezed past the elderly woman and her dog, reached for my carry-on, and again looked at the attendant. “This, too?” I mouthed.

She laughed and nodded. I slung my bag over my shoulder and followed her toward the front of the plane.

CHAPTER 3 - A CHANGE OF FATE

We passed through a blue curtain, and the attendant paused in front of the restroom. As I approached, she pointed to an aisle seat about halfway through the first-class cabin and said, “We were saving that seat for one of our senior pilots who was relocating to Italy, but he canceled last minute. You’re welcome to take it.”

I was shocked by this sudden change of fate. Wow, first-class? “Are you sure it’s okay?” I asked, stunned.

The attendant laughed. “I’m the lead flight attendant. When the plane leaves the gate, I can do anything I want. What did you say at the counter? ... It’s no big deal?”

I smiled. “Well, thank you so much. That’s the cheapest upgrade I’ve ever gotten. What’s your name?”

She smirked, lifted her lapel, and pointed to her name tag. “Jenny, ... Jenny Rice.

“Oh. ... Yeah, I guess it’s right there,” I mumbled.

“Now go get strapped in. We’re going to take off in a few minutes.”

Compared with economy class, first class on a Boeing 777 is luxurious. The 2-4-2 layout meant wider seats, more legroom, and actual comfort. As I reached my aisle seat, I did a double take — the woman I noticed earlier, with ivy tattoos and black

glasses, was sitting in the window seat next to mine. She was leaning against the window and appeared to be sleeping. Her Chick-fil-A bag was on my empty seat.

I put my carry-on in the overhead compartment and attempted to sit. When she didn't clear it, I grabbed the Chick-fil-A bag and said, "Excuse me, miss, is this yours?"

She squirmed in her seat, rubbed her eyes, then slowly opened them. "Yeah, ... sorry." She took the bag and set it on top of her big purse, next to the wall of the aircraft.

"Not a fan of airplane food?"

She glanced at me suspiciously and said, "Well, ... you never know what you're going to get."

Her low alto voice surprised me. I guess I expected a higher, 'childlike' voice from such a petite woman. "First-class food is pretty good, though ... right?"

"I wouldn't know. It's my first time flying. I didn't even know if they would feed us."

"Oh yeah. They usually have pretty good food in Delta first class," I said, showing her the menu card from the seatback pocket. "Wow, they even have steak on this flight."

She took the menu and examined it. "I'm not paying for high-priced airplane food."

I leaned into her and whispered, "It's included."

She looked at me silently for a second, then said, "You can order anything on this card ... free?"

"Well ... you have to wait until the plane reaches cruising altitude, but yes, the fare includes food ... and drinks too."

"Drinks too?" she said suspiciously.

“Yes,” I said, looking at her, ... “even alcoholic drinks.”

At first, I thought she might have been playing with me. But I soon realized she was sincere.

“So this is your very first flight — and it’s in first class?”

“That’s right,” she said. “I’ve never had the opportunity to fly. I’ve wanted to go places, but it’s so expensive.”

“So, now you’ve decided to go to Venice?”

“Well ... it probably wouldn’t have been my first choice, but I won a contest, and the prize was a free ticket.”

“Wow, seriously? That’s great. You won a first-class ticket? How did you do that?”

“I’m a bartender, and I sold the most La Marca Prosecco in the last six months. I think I was the top seller in the entire country. The prize was a first-class ticket to Venice. That’s the area where they make La Marca Prosecco. ... I guess.”

“You must be good at what you do.”

“I’m good, but that’s not why I won.”

“Okay, so how did you win?”

“I just gave La Marca Prosecco to anyone who asked for champagne. Most people don’t know the difference,” she said with a smirk.

I smiled, shook my head, and laughed. “Where do you live?”

“Originally, Walnut Grove. But I work in town now, at a bar in Little Five Points called the Euclid Avenue Yacht Club. Have you heard of it?”

“Yes. I’ve been there. That’s a great bar, all that junk on the walls and ceiling. I love Five Points. Very bohemian. ... I’m

a little scared to park my car down there, though. ... all that graffiti?”

Carrie raised her eyebrows and winced.

The jet made a sharp left turn, and the engines roared. The aircraft accelerated, and the lines on the tarmac began flashing by. Soon the nose of the large aircraft rose. The engines whined as the wheels left the runway.

As many times as I had flown, the power of the jet engines always amazed me. I think of the weight of my person and suitcase, then multiply it by the hundreds of people on board, then try to imagine how much thrust it would take to just lift that load, let alone accelerate.

As the large jet angled upward at about 45 degrees, I looked at the young woman next to me. Her fingers clasped the seat divider so tightly that her knuckles were turning white.

She saw me watching her and whispered, “This is fucking scary.”

I smiled. “You’ll get used to it. Think of it as a ‘technology trap’ like an elevator or a rollercoaster. You make the decision to trust your life to a machine when you cross the threshold. There’s nothing you can do about it now, so you may as well relax.”

Suddenly, the jumbo jet began to shake violently as it entered a pocket of heavy turbulence. Her face turned white. She closed her eyes and moved her lips as if praying, or maybe cursing.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered. “These big jets usually get where they’re going. Nothing usually happens. Everyone usually makes it. ... Usually. I don’t think they’ve had an accident, ... recently.”

“Will you stop it!” she shouted in a whisper.

“I’m sorry,” I laughed. “You’re fine. The pilot looked a little young, but we’ll probably be okay. ... They usually know what to do. The training program at Delta is pretty good, ... as far as it goes. There have been cutbacks, though ...”

“Stop it!” she whispered sternly, making a fist and punching my thigh.

The giant aircraft rose above the clouds and leveled off. The shaking stopped, and a collective sigh of relief ensued from the assemblage. After a couple of minutes, the aircraft was so calm and stable that the seatbelt sign went out with a bing.

I motioned to Jenny for service. “Jenny, can we get drinks yet? ... I think we need one here.”

“Sure, what can I get you?”

“What does a bartender drink?” I asked the young woman.

“Anything?” she asked.

“Anything on the menu card.” I said, flipping the card to the back side and handing it to her.

“Hmm, ... okay ... I’ll have a double Absolute on the rocks, with a lime if you have it.”

“Maker’s on the rocks, with a little soda water, please, Jenny,” I said.

When the drinks arrived, I lifted mine to take a sip and stopped. “What’s your name?” I asked, looking at the young woman.

“Carrie. ... Carrie McCall. ... You?”

“Francis, ... Francis Marino. It’s nice to meet you, Carrie McCall. ... Here’s to a great Venetian visit,” I said, extending my glass toward hers. We clinked and sipped.

The nonstop flight to Venice left the gate at about 8:45 PM. With the time zone changes, the flight lands at Marco Polo Airport at about 12:00 noon the following day. Night passes quickly when you fly east, usually only 4-5 hours. It's odd.

Shortly after takeoff, the aircraft cabin assumes a "nighttime" atmosphere, with all cabin lights off except for the aisle markers, seatback TV screens, and individual seat reading lamps. Many travelers try to get a jump on the time change by sleeping. But I never could. The anticipation of any European destination always made transatlantic flights incredibly exciting.

Carrie and I finished our drinks and ordered another. She mentioned that she hadn't slept much after ending her shift.

"So what's involved in closing a bar?" I asked.

"Give the last call. Sweep. Throw all the lingering customers out. Wipe everything down. Wash the glassware. Restock — pretty basic. We usually sit around after cleanup and have a drink, smoke, and talk about the shift. My friends knew I was leaving today and threw a kind of after-hours going-away party last night. It was nice. We had fun, ... got high. It was after four when we locked up, then we went to breakfast. I tried to sleep for a few hours when I got home, but the trip anxiety kept me awake," she mumbled. "I honestly don't remember sleeping at all."

Carrie was drifting off. The anxiety of the airport and takeoff had taken its toll. Shortly after her second drink, she curled up against the window and fell fast asleep.

I, however, could not sleep, even after two drinks. I watched a movie, then sat silently, looking over the dark cabin. I loved flying at night. The stillness and indirect lighting contrasted sharply with the harsh activity of day flights. It was relaxing, almost like traveling by candlelight. I observed the TV screens

on the myriad of seat backs to see what others were watching. Some movies I recognized; others I did not.

I rose to go to the restroom. Airplane restrooms are a weird experience. You lock yourself in this tiny room with a mirror, a small sink, and a toilet, isolated from the rest of the plane. You're all alone. It's still and private. Then you remind yourself you're forty thousand feet above a vast ocean, flying at over 400 miles per hour. Without turbulence, the altitude and motion are imperceptible. Curiously, the first-class restroom had an outward-looking window above the toilet. I opened the shade and looked at the ocean below. Never seen that before, I thought. I closed the shade and flushed the toilet. Its contents evacuated the bowl with a loud rush, and I wondered where it all went. The loud rush sounded as if it went outside the plane. But that couldn't be? Someone has to empty those tanks at the airport. Right?

The restroom was at the rear of the first-class cabin. I exited the tiny restroom, passed through the blue curtain, and stood looking over the sea of economy class passengers. I walked down the right aisle to stretch my legs. As I passed my old seat, I noticed the older lady sleeping with her mouth open. A black sleeping mask covered her eyes, and she was snoring slightly. Her dog lay limp and asleep. His tail hung over into my old seat. On the other side, the baby was sleeping, nestled under the mother's burqa.

I continued on to the flight attendant station at the rear of the aircraft. Three attendants were resting on jump seats and talking.

"Hi," I said as I entered their small galley. "Can I get a cup of coffee?"

"Sure," one replied, rising to pour. "It should be okay. We just

made it.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the paper cup.

I passed through the tiny galley to the aisle on the right side of the plane, then moved through the archway and stood facing the rear safety exit. I looked down at my toes. They were on the edge of the door’s threshold. I leaned forward to look out the window. It was a clear night, and all I could see was the ocean in all directions. I thought it curious that while I suffered vertigo at building-level heights, standing on the threshold of a forty thousand-foot drop, with only a door between me and certain death, didn’t bother me at all. It was all so surreal. The aircraft was still and peaceful. The whine of the engines was the only clue you were in motion.

As I stared blankly at the ocean below, my thoughts drifted back to that summer evening almost two years ago. I’d come home in a good mood. Work was going well. Our finances were good. I was optimistic. Then I walked down the hall, and there she was, standing in the kitchen with a big envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Divorce papers,” she said. “I want a divorce. You need to move out.”

Just like that.

I stood in silence, looking out on the vast but peaceful ocean below, reflecting on the emptiness and pain of the past two years. I shook off the memory. Not tonight. Not on this trip. I walked back to my seat and started another movie.

THE SECOND DAY

Saturday, October 26, 2002

CHAPTER 4 - BREAKFAST IN THE SKY

Five hours into the flight, the cabin lights came up. Dawn edged over the horizon. Somewhere on the ground, it was morning, and the attendants were syncing to local time. They handed out warm towels in lieu of showers, then began breakfast service.

Carrie opened her eyes and squirmed into an upright position. Smacking her lips, she whispered, “My head hurts. I think I need a Bloody Mary.”

She stared blankly ahead for a moment, then said, “Can you let me out? I have to use the restroom.”

I watched her walk down the aisle. She disappeared into the restroom and returned a few minutes later. She slid into her seat and buckled in.

“Did you look out the window before you flushed?” I asked.

She rubbed her eyes and blinked. “What?”

“Before you flushed the toilet, did you look out that little window to check for ships passing underneath us? ... Where do you think that stuff goes?”

Carrie stared blankly. “You’ve got to be kidding me?”

“On transoceanic flights, they usually just evacuate sewage to keep the weight down. We’re so high, it freezes solid before

hitting the ocean. If it hits someone on a boat below, it can cause serious injury. You're supposed to look out that window before you flush, just to make sure. Didn't you see the sign on the mirror?"

She stared at me in silent disbelief. Across the aisle, a man bit his lip, clearly trying not to laugh.

Carrie shook her head slowly. "You have to look out the window before you flush the airplane toilet?"

I slowly nodded.

Just then, Jenny walked up to take our breakfast order. She overheard my instructions and laughed. Looking at Carrie, she smiled, closed her eyes, and slowly shook her head in a silent no.

Carrie crossed her arms and glared at me. "You're an asshole," she whispered, shaking her head, pretending to be mad while holding back a smile.

"I had you for a second." I laughed. "I saw that window above the toilet last night, and thought of that. The flushing sound, ... that rush, sounds like it could be shooting the contents outside the plane, right?"

She just stared at me, feigning indignation.

We chose breakfast items from the menu and ordered drinks. A Bloody Mary sounded right, and I ordered one for each of us.

"So," I said, "what's with the tattoos?"

She stared at me for a second, then smirked. "Don't you like tattoos?"

"I don't know. I'm still thinking about it. Usually no, but I'm curious about yours. I've never seen ivy like that. It's pretty.

How far does it go?”

“It’s the same tattoo. It just extends over my shoulders and down the other arm,” she said, pulling up her sleeves to expose more ink.

“I’ve always wondered. Are tattoos ornamentation or deprecation?”

She smiled and shook her head. “That’s a good question. I think mine started out as ornamentation, but sometimes I wonder. Almost everyone in Five Points has one, and I was always curious; I thought they were kind of cool. Bad girls had them. I wanted one. ... I guess I wanted to be a bad girl. But honestly, ... when I think about it, I was in a bad place when I finally went for it.”

“Why was that?”

“I was having trouble at home with my father. We weren’t getting along at all. At the time, I thought it was normal, but looking back, he was verbally abusive. He basically kicked me out of the house. I guess I wanted to make a statement.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “It’s fine. He wanted me to go to college, but he didn’t want to pay for it. He hated that I smoked, drank, and hung out with my bar friends. He wanted me to live a ‘normal’ life.”

“What does he do?”

“I don’t know anymore. He was a salesman when I was young, but we don’t speak anymore. I haven’t talked to him in three years. We didn’t talk much when he was around. ... What do you do?”

“Mr. Corporate America,” I said. “A marketing manager.”

Our drinks and breakfast arrived. Carrie squeezed her lime into her drink, then pushed the olives and lime to the bottom of the glass with her straw and stirred. I did the same.

“So you like P!nk?” I asked, nodding at her T-shirt. “Get this party started!”

She laughed. “You talking about this?” she said, looking down at her T-shirt. “Yeah, I like her. I like her lyrics. She speaks to me. A lot of her songs are about young women’s issues. I got this shirt at a concert. It was great. Do you know her music?”

“Just that one song.”

“Who do you listen to?”

“These days? Mostly audiobooks, ‘how to’ books. I’m listening to ‘The Power of Now’ by Eckhart Tolle. Have you heard of it?”

“No, ... I mean, I’ve heard of him. I’ve seen him on TV, but I haven’t read the book. That’s pretty heavy stuff for a corporate guy — Zen Buddhism, right?”

“Yeah, ... mostly. He also draws from other religions too. He quotes Christianity, Islam, ... Hinduism. I’ve been trying to live more ‘in the moment’, ... but it doesn’t come easy for me.”

I looked down at her feet. “I used to wear sneakers like that when I played basketball in junior high school,” I said, nodding at her black Converse low-tops. “At the time, they were the best on hardwood. The traction was so good, the soles chirped when you stopped quickly. ... I guess they’re a fashion statement now?”

“I just like the old-school look,” she said, looking down at her feet and wiggling her toes.

After breakfast, I queued up a movie but drifted off a few minutes into it. I woke to a PA announcement: seat backs up, trays away, prepare for landing. I smacked my lips and rubbed my

eyes. Carrie was looking out the window at the lagoon below. I leaned her way, as if to look out the window, and whispered. "This is the scary part."

She turned toward me and scanned my face for clues. Pushing her black glasses higher up her nose, she said, "What are you talking about?"

"Well, ... when you take off, the aircraft is under full power. Pilots have control. But landings? That's when they cut the power. The plane is more at the mercy of the elements. Things can get pretty dicey. ... You know, ... wind shears?"

She stared blankly. "What's a wind shear?"

"A sudden downdraft. Statistically, that's when most of the bad accidents happen. They're not usually too bad, though. ... Not usually. ... at least not in the summer months."

As we descended, the aircraft's wings vacillated; the plane rocked slowly from side to side. Carrie looked at me, her face serious and pale.

"Don't worry. Experienced pilots usually handle them pretty well, ... usually. But this young guy?" I said, shaking my head. "... they've had cutbacks."

She shook her head and glared. "Will you stop it!" she whispered. "I'm onto you. You're taking advantage of me."

I laughed. "Yeah, we'll probably be okay. ... Statistically, crashes are pretty rare. ... The odds are in our favor. There hasn't been a bad wind shear accident since that time in Dallas, ... August 1985?"

"Will. ... You. ... Shut. ... Up!" she shouted in a whisper, clenching her fist and punching me in the thigh.

"Ouch! ... Okay, ... okay." I laughed.

When the chime sounded, I stood, retrieved my carry-on, and let Carrie into the aisle. She wrangled her purse onto her shoulder and reached for her carry-on in the overhead. It was wedged in tight. She tugged repeatedly, but the overstuffed case wouldn't budge.

"Let me help," I said.

She stepped back, and I tugged at the case repeatedly. It finally gave, nearly dropping.

"My God," I muttered, laughing. "What's in here — cement blocks?"

She smiled sheepishly, hunched her shoulders, and looked off to the side.

When her case was in the aisle, I watched as she struggled with the heavy purse and carry-on. It would have been comical watching her struggle to navigate the aisle and bump-tug her luggage onto the jetway, if I hadn't felt a sense of concern. After speaking with her on the plane, it was obvious she was a novice traveler, and transatlantic flights to countries that don't speak English are even more difficult. As I watched her struggle with her bags on the jetway, I felt compassion for her. We've all been there, I thought, ... not knowing what you don't know.

As we entered the busy concourse, I noticed her looking confused. Many of the signs were in Italian, with English, and sometimes Chinese subtitles. Even knowing a little Italian, I found the signage somewhat bewildering. You had to understand airport parlance and study the signs carefully. Worse, Americans many times call cities by different names than Europeans do. Venice, in English, for example, is Venezia in Italian.

"This way," I said, pointing to the sign that read 'trasporto via terra', or ground transportation.

Landing in Europe is a mixture of excitement and exhaustion. Short sleep on the plane and time zone changes are the culprits. Adrenaline keeps you going until you inevitably crash. The long walk down the concourse with your baggage always seems to remind you of this. As Carrie and I reached the ground transportation area, I asked her if she was going to take the vaporetto to the island.

“What’s a vaporetto?”

“It’s a water taxi. It takes you across the lagoon and stops at several locations in Venice. It’s supposed to be a great way to see the city for the first time. The guidebook recommends it.”

She fished an orange envelope out of her purse and flipped through the papers. “No. ... No. ... I have a free train pass that came with my ticket.”

“Okay, the train station looks like it’s that way,” I said, pointing to a sign reading ‘Stazione Ferroviaria.’

She turned toward me and stood silent for a few seconds, studying me, as if waiting for me to say something. “Thanks for your help,” she said, tilting her head to one side. “I hope you find your grandfather’s house.”

“You too, Carrie. Have fun. Be safe, ... and be careful. ... Hey, ... I’m sorry about teasing you on the plane. Think of it as your initiation, ... your rite of passage? You’re a seasoned flyer now. You’re one of us,” I smiled.

She nodded and smiled, then pivoted and dragged her suitcase toward the train station. As I watched to make sure she was heading in the right direction, I noticed she had a nice, strong walk, coordinated and confident. Then I remembered she was a bartender, accustomed to standing and walking for long hours. As she crossed the threshold, she turned back, smiled, and

waved. I was sad to see her go. She was cute, and her defensive sass seemed to hide a sweetness she didn't want others to see. I smiled and returned the wave. I should have gotten her contact information, I mused, shaking my head before turning to find the Vaporetto departure dock.

I purchased a ticket and stood in line to board. It was late October, and while the weather was mild, the wind on the dock made it chilly. I pulled my black jacket from my suitcase and put it on.

For efficiency and simplicity, I packed only black and white clothes. But now, as I stood on the dock, I realized many local Italians dressed in black. As my pants were black, and my jacket was black, I got the feeling that many in line thought me to be Italian. At one point, an English-speaking couple addressed me with the Italian phrase, "Buongiorno", or good morning, and asked me if I knew a good place for lunch. I laughed and told them I was from Atlanta, but it was nice to be thought of as a local.

The vaporetto was a sturdy, yellow-hulled boat, about forty feet long, with covered seating. Around seventy passengers boarded. I checked the map. It made several stops along the northern edge of Venice, then east and south to Piazza San Marco. I decided to get off there, then walk north to find a hotel.

Although you can see the Venice skyline clearly from the vaporetto departure dock, the trip took longer than expected. So many boats cruise the lagoon that authorities keep speed limits low to prevent waves. The big boat pattered along at only 5 to 7 knots. It was partly cloudy, but enough sun was peeking through to cast dramatic shadows over the buildings on Murano and Venice proper. We made three brief stops along the way. At each stop, tourists got on and off.

I was struck by how vibrant Venice appeared to be. I was so concerned with just getting there that I hadn't thought past the flight. But it was now almost one PM, and thousands of tourists from all over the world crowded the attractions, shops, and streets. The contrast between the formal Renaissance architecture and the crowds of casual, modern tourists was quite surreal. The island was brimming with excitement and felt festive.

When we docked at Piazza San Marco, I hoisted my carry-on onto my shoulders and stepped off the boat. The Pillars of San Marco and San Theodore guarded the entrance to the city. Atop one pillar stood the Winged Lion. On the other, San Theodore held a spear over a dragon. To the right loomed the Doge's Palace — a Gothic marvel, once home to Venice's highest official. To my left stood the Campanile di San Marco, the city's most iconic symbol. The 12th-century bell tower soared 323 feet into the sky.

I stood in awe. It's hard to explain, but seeing something in person that you've seen so many times in pictures, in movies, and on TV, is always a revelation. When you have the time to study the details and look at the things that matter to you, the impact is exponential. The intricate stonework, the ornate design, the size and grandeur far surpass anything an image can capture.

As I entered the piazza, tourists lined up patiently outside St. Mark's Basilica, eager to glimpse its treasures — frescoes, sculptures, paintings, and supposedly the remains of St. Mark himself.

Hundreds of tourists and thousands of pigeons swarmed the vast piazza in front of the Basilica. It was as big as a football field and framed by elegant buildings. In the center, a vendor

sold bags of pigeon feed. Tourists scattered it on the ground or even held it in their hands to feed the birds. The pigeons were so brazen that they would land on tourists to eat the feed. One man held seeds in both outstretched palms while his girlfriend sprinkled more on his arms. Within seconds, pigeons covered his limbs, shoulders, and head. She snapped photos of the ridiculous spectacle.

I remembered a trick I'd seen on TV: if you throw your jacket in the air; it spooks the birds. I talked a young boy into trying it. He tossed his jacket as high as he could. Thousands of pigeons, mistaking the jacket for a predator, exploded into flight. Gasps and laughter from unsuspecting tourists followed. It was beautiful chaos.

My adrenaline reserves were dwindling. I was exhausted. I had to find a hotel and crash. My guidebook indicated that most of the cheap hotels were located close to the train station on the northwestern side of the island. I headed that way. The guide also said that any hotel with fewer than three stars wouldn't have a private bathroom; anything higher than three stars was probably too extravagant for my needs. I wasn't planning on spending much time in my room, so I opted to make a three-star rating the target of my search.

One interesting aspect of Venice is that while there are no main roads, there are main "alleys" Small signs and arrows on the corners of the old buildings indicate the direction to major attractions. The directions to the train station were clearly marked.

As I followed the signs on the old Renaissance buildings, over tiny arched bridges, and around corners, I was struck by the amount of graffiti on some of the building walls. In a city so rich in history, who would do such a thing? I couldn't imagine.

At one point, I crossed a bridge over a canal and noticed gon-

doliers staged underneath, waiting for paying customers. I had a misconception that gondoliers would be grizzled old men poling old-fashioned, worn-out boats. I was wrong. The gondoliers were actually very cool, buffed-out guys, handsome and well-groomed. The gondolas they poled through the canals were beautiful, with shiny black finishes reminiscent of “high-end” Cadillacs.

After walking a few minutes, I arrived at yet another iconic Venetian landmark, the Rialto Bridge. According to my map, only three bridges crossed the Grand Canal. Of the three, the Rialto was the most famous. Again, I was awestruck. The ornate stone arch bridge appeared much more magnificent than any image I had ever seen. On either side of the center portico, rows of shops selling street food and souvenirs to tourists crowded the bridge. I crossed and began looking for hotels. The first few I encountered were luxury, 4 and 5 star. I continued on.

The walk from St. Mark’s to the train station took about thirty minutes. About halfway there, I encountered the first three-star hotel. I inquired about a room, but they were full. Three more stops resulted in the same response. I began to worry. What if every hotel is full? Would I sleep on the street?

Finally, with the train station in sight, I spotted an arrow-shaped sign for a three-star hotel pointing down a tight alley. At the end of the alley, a small office displayed a neon “Vacancy” sign in its window.

As I entered the office, the bell above the door jangled. Through an archway, I noticed an old Italian man watching TV. He rose and emerged to greet me.

“Hi, I’m Francis Marino. ... Your sign says you have a room?”

To my relief, he spoke broken English. “Yes, one just became available.”

“I’ll take it,” I said, handing him my credit card.

As he swiped my card, I noticed a business card holder beside the cash register and took one. “Your Geno?”

“Yes. Geno, ... Geno Clemenza. This is my place. Welcome,” he said, handing back my credit card and a key with a massive tassel — too big to pocket.

“Wow, that’s a big tassel.”

“Yes, you return it here when you go out, then pick it up when you return. The key stays here, in the office, when you leave.”

“How late are you open?”

“1:00 AM. ... Your room is just down the outside passage to the right,” he said, pointing in the correct direction.

The room was small and cramped. It included a tiny bathroom with a toilet, sink, and shower. The shower was so small that once the sliding doors were closed, it was impossible to bend over and pick up a dropped bar of soap. The bed was also small, roughly the size of a narrow full-size bed in the States. A small closet, a tiny desk, and a dresser completed the room. I stowed my suitcase in the closet, stripped, climbed into bed, and the room went dark.

CHAPTER 5 - CRYING IN THE RAIN

I rubbed my eyes and looked at my watch — 7:00 p.m. I had slept for five hours and felt somewhat refreshed. I was excited to be in Venice. It was Saturday evening, and I didn't want to waste it. But what now?

The tiny shower was challenging for an American. I had to open the doors twice to bend over and pick up the soap. In the end, I managed. After toweling off and dressing, I returned to the hotel office to drop off my room key — the one with the giant fob. I confirmed that the office would be open until 1:00 AM so I could retrieve the key again. Geno again assured me it would be.

I walked down the narrow alley to the larger street in front of the train station, then turned left toward the center of the island and the Rialto Bridge. After scanning my reference card and contemplating a few attractions, I decided on a simpler plan: wander toward Piazza San Marco, look at things, and stop anywhere interesting along the way.

I desperately needed caffeine. A few yards from the hotel, I spotted a coffee shop and ordered an espresso and two pastries to fight off the grogginess and hunger before continuing my walk. The streets were still busy, but the flow of foot traffic was moving northwest — back toward the train station and the cheaper mainland hotels. Venice was emptying for the night.

A few hundred yards later, I noticed what looked like a disco. An Italian disco in Venice? That's got to be weird. I opened the door to peek inside. The club had just opened, and the staff were setting up the bar and getting organized. There was no music yet, only the sound from two televisions mounted above the bar. It was Saturday evening, but still too early for dancing. There were no stools at the bar, which made me think the place became packed later at night and needed the space clear for service. I stood and ordered a glass of red wine.

"Un vino rosso, per favore," I said to the bartender.

"Va bene," the bartender countered.

"Lei parla inglese?"

"Only a little," he answered as he slid my wine across the bar.

"What time does it get busy?"

"Oh, tonight, ... about 10:00 PM, it starts to get very busy."

The club was empty except for the staff. Two young guys sat on the opposite side of the island bar, and three young, attractive girls stood a few feet from me. The girls seemed to be in their mid-twenties and wore swank disco attire — short skirts and heels. I sipped my drink and listened to their banter. They were chatting and laughing in what sounded like Cockney English, an accent similar to that of the Beatles. I assumed they were tourists, like me. All three seemed tipsy and ready to party. At one point, one woman laughed and said, "I wonder how you say, 'Do you want to fuck?' in Italian?" The three broke into wild laughter.

Their brazenness surprised me as they stood only a few feet away. Then I realized that my entire outfit was black: black pants, black shoes, and a black jacket. The white collar of my shirt was the only break in the dark color scheme. They must have assumed I was Italian and couldn't understand them.

The girls were cute, if a little shallow, but lonely as I was, I didn't want to spend my first night in Venice trying to split one of them away from the group in a cheesy Venetian disco. It just seemed like too much work. I finished my wine and left.

Back on the street, the sky was dark and overcast, and droplets spattered the cobblestones. I headed southeast toward the Rialto Bridge. The crowd was thinning; the alleys were quiet. The light rain intensified to a sprinkle. I hugged the building walls, walking beneath small eaves to stay dry.

It was an interesting walk. I noticed many things I had missed when anxiously searching for a hotel. Boxes filled with red geraniums adorned many of the windows. Until now, the only geraniums I had seen were Memorial Day grave decorations in our Catholic cemetery. In Venice, however, they seemed to be everywhere. The young, bright, beautiful red flowers struck a sharp contrast against the decaying buildings.

The alleys took interesting twists between ancient structures, stores, churches, apartments, and hotels. Tiny arched bridges over the many canals punctuated the walk. Despite the light rain, I stopped for a few seconds on each bridge to look down the canal and appreciate the architecture. As I paused, I struggled to stay in the moment and quiet my mind. But the stillness invited loneliness to creep in. The canals were beautiful. But as I stood in the light drizzle, staring at the decaying buildings haunted by the ghosts of ancient merchants and mariners, I couldn't help but wonder: what was I doing here? Why did I come? What did I hope to find? Loneliness and melancholy seeped in. I ignored it and pushed on.

When I finally arrived at the Rialto, the precipitation had intensified into a light rain. I zipped my jacket to the collar and

looked for cover. It was late October; the days were short. Amber street lamps and indirect lighting on the bridge struggled to cast a warm glow and long shadows on the masonry. The overcast sky, the wet cobblestones, and the minimal ambient light, however, made the evening seem dark and lonely — almost spooky. The tight, wet alleys appeared ghostly and haunted.

I descended the bridge and looked down a narrow alley for cover. About 100 yards away, a bright yellow-orange light glowed from a window. A small sign over the door read ‘Bacaro’ — a traditional Venetian bar. I quickened my pace and headed toward the light.

Inside, the bacaro was small, warm, crowded, and smelled of drying overcoats. I guessed that about thirty patrons were laughing, drinking, and talking loudly. Every seat was filled except for one lonely stool in the middle of the bar. I slid onto it and ordered a red wine.

As the barista slid my wine toward me, I heard someone shout. “Francis!”

I turned to see three women sitting at a tiny high-top table against the wall. The woman who called out to me was Jenny Rice, the flight attendant who upgraded me on the Delta flight.

“Jenny! ... What are you doing here?”

“Layover,” she said. “Delta put us up in a cheap hotel by the airport. ... Borrrring. So we took the vaporetto into Venice for the evening. What are you up to?”

“I found a hotel close to the train station, slept for about five hours, and now I’m out on the town. It’s Saturday night. Right? I didn’t want to waste it.”

“I hear that. Isn’t this a cool little place? We found it last year and stop whenever we lay over. It’s very local.”

“Can I buy you girls a drink?”

“No, we’ve had too many already. We’re leaving soon. We’ve been here since about five. We ate the cicchetti for dinner. I think they put it away now, but you should try it here sometime. It’s very good.”

“Maybe I’ll swing by tomorrow at happy hour. How long are you here?”

“We fly out tomorrow morning at ten.”

I hadn’t noticed how attractive Jenny was. On the plane, her uniform and tight hair bun made her seem formal. Now, in fitted jeans and a loose sweater, with her hair down past her shoulders, she looked relaxed. Her laugh was infectious. Late thirties, maybe — older than me — but very attractive.

“Are you here alone?” she asked.

“Until now. Why don’t you come home with me?” I teased.

“I’m married, silly boy. Besides, I’m too old for you.”

“I’m thirty-three.”

“Well, ... you don’t look it,” she said, laughing. “What about the little girl you were teasing on the plane? She was cute.”

“She was interesting ... but I’m not sure she’s my type. ... You thought she was cute?”

“Yes. She was adorable. I talked to her for a few minutes before I came to get you. She was sweet and very polite. I helped her get her suitcase into the overhead. Did you notice how heavy it was when you helped her?”

I nodded.

"She reminded me ... of me at that age. I was a rebel before I joined the establishment. Did you see those tattoos on her arms? She probably has daddy issues."

"Why do you say that?"

Jenny stood, turned around, and lifted her sweater just enough to reveal several Chinese symbols tattooed on her lower back. "I know what I'm talking about," she laughed. "When are you flying out?"

"Next Saturday."

"At ten in the morning?"

"Yes."

"We'll probably see you then on the flight back to Atlanta. We're all working on it."

The Delta attendants paid their tab and rose to leave. "Safe travels," I said. "Hey Jenny, thanks again for the upgrade. That was very sweet of you."

"I had a team tennis match the evening before the flight. My back was so stiff I couldn't stand up straight. ... I really needed that Advil."

She smiled and pulled her jacket over her head. The women stepped out into the drizzle and waved through the window as they passed.

I turned back toward the bar and ordered another red wine.

"You're American?" a well-dressed gentleman sitting to my right asked.

"Yes, Atlanta, Georgia. How did you know?"

"Your accent gives you away," he said. "It's unmistakable."

"You're ... German?" I asked.

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Your accent is unmistakable.”

We both laughed.

“What would your second guess have been?” he asked.

“Probably... Austrian.”

“That’s very good. I’m actually from Bavaria, very close to Austria.”

“What do you do?” I asked.

“I’m a congressman in the German government. Hinrich Schmidt,” he said, extending his hand.

“Francis Marino,” I said, shaking his hand. “Wow ... I’ve never met a congressman, not even in the United States. It’s an honor. What brings you to Venice?”

“I’m attending an economics conference at Ca’ Foscari University. ... You?”

“I’m a tourist. Just wanted to see Venice before visiting my grandfather’s hometown.”

“Where is that?” he asked.

“On the Po River, it’s called Felonica Po. I don’t know much about it, but I wanted to see where he ... I came from.”

“You must’ve loved your grandfather?”

“I did. What made you ask?”

“You are spending a lot of time and effort to find his hometown. You must have been close, right?”

I paused. “Yes, I guess so. I wish I’d have known him better. He died when I was still in high school. I never really got to ask

him deeper questions.”

The congressman smiled. “I think we all feel that way. By the time we are old enough to understand the questions, the people with the answers are all dead.”

By now, the bacaro was very loud and crowded. Patrons kept reaching between those sitting at the bar to get drinks. As a man extracted two draft beers on my left, the gentleman on the stool to my left said, “Be careful with that, Laddy. I don’t want to get wet.” Our eyes met.

“How you doin’ tonight, Francis?” the man said.

“I’m okay. ... How’d you know my name?”

“Oh, I heard you talkin’ to your German friend over there,” he said, leaning in to catch Hinrich’s attention.”

“Killian Conley,” he said, reaching for my hand and nodding at Hinrich.

As I shook his hand, I noticed it was rough and strong. His clothes were worn and dusty.

“What do you do?” I asked.

Killian seemed a little drunk and laughed loudly. “Why do so many Americans ask: ‘What do you do?’ Why don’t you just come out with it and ask, How much money do you make? It’s so American.”

Hinrich laughed so hard he had to wipe dribbled wine from his chin.

“I’m sorry. I meant no offense,” I said. “Your hands are strong and rough. I thought you might be a tradesman. That interests me. I come from a long line of tradesmen.”

“I’m an Irish stonemason, and yes, I make a lot of money.” He laughed. “There aren’t many of us around anymore.”

Hinrich leaned in. "Are you working on St. Mark's? I saw the scaffolding."

He nodded. "Yes, I'm working with the crew repairing the north wall."

"You must be very good. They don't let just anyone work on such a masterpiece." Hinrich said.

"Thank you," Killian said, raising his glass. "See, Francis. If Hinrich had introduced himself, he'd have asked: 'Where did you go to school?' That's what Germans do."

Hinrich laughed and mumbled, "I was actually going to ask if you made a lot of money."

"Okay," I laughed, "where did you go to school?"

"Cambridge."

"Come on. ... You're joking?"

"No, I'm not. Full scholarship. Don't you believe me, Francis?"

"I would never have guessed Cambridge."

"Are you implying I don't look smart? Do you think I'm stupid?"

I laughed. "No! ... Stop it! You said you were a stonemason. Stonemasons rarely have degrees from Cambridge. ... Right?"

"I was the goalie on the Falcons soccer team my junior and senior years — graduated too. Of course, that was about 80 pounds ago," he laughed.

"Then why are you a stonemason if you have a degree from Cambridge?"

"Philosophy majors aren't the most sot after graduates. Besides, it's a family business. My father was getting old — I started

helping out, and here I am.”

“Why philosophy?” Hinrich asked.

“I had to pick something when I got the scholarship. It sounded interesting. ... I actually enjoyed it.”

“Can I buy you both a drink?” Killian offered. “Come on, guys. It’s Saturday night. Let’s get pissed!”

We thanked him and ordered drinks. Over the next hour, we all got quite drunk. We bantered loudly about soccer versus American football, politics, food, and which countries had the prettiest women. Hinrich and I bought the next two rounds.

“I can’t believe how nice people are over here,” I mused.

“Do you make friends easily at home?” Killian asked.

“I guess so.”

“Well, there you go. You’re the same guy here — you make friends easily at home, you make friends easily here. ... I like you, ... and I just met you.”

I smiled and said, “Thank you.”

Hinrich leaned into the bar and said, “People say travel is ‘transformative’; I think it just clarifies who we actually are.”

As the hour approached midnight, I said, “Gentlemen, this has been an education, but I’ve got to get going. My hotel lobby closes at one.”

“Aw, come on, Francis. Don’t bug out on us now,” Killian said. “It’s Saturday night. Just beat on the door. The innkeeper will let you in.”

“Buddy, I was in Atlanta this morning. I’m drunk and beat. I’ve got to get some sleep,” I said, sliding off my stool and steadying myself.

“Ah ... you’re weak, Francis!” Killian said.

“Good luck with the basilica,” I said, man-hugging and slapping him on the back. “Thanks for the drink. I’ll check out your work next time I’m in town.”

“Ah ... you’re welcome, Francis. Safe travels,” he said. “Keep an open mind when you visit your grandfather’s home. A lot has changed in a hundred years.”

I smiled and nodded, then turned toward Hinrich. “Good luck at your conference. Learn something about economics. Enjoy your stay.”

“You as well, Francis,” he said. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

We shook hands. I paid my tab and left.

I was exhausted and drunk. I stood under the bacaro’s eave for a moment to steady myself, zip my jacket, and contemplate my walk home. The alley was silent and deserted. It was dark, cold, and drizzling. I pulled my jacket tight around my neck and set off. Small puddles punctuated the narrow passageway. It was very wet. I was glad I had followed the travel advice and worn waterproof shoes. I quickened my pace.

As I climbed the Rialto Bridge, I noticed one of the amber street lamps on the far side of the Grand Canal seemed to be brighter than the others. It flickered intensely, as if the bulb were on the verge of burning out. That’s odd, I thought, and fixated on it.

As I crested the bridge, I paused to gaze at the vacant canal and contemplate the deserted alleys and ancient, rain-soaked buildings. Leaning against the heavy stone railing, and stared

at the flickering lamp. It was hypnotic. The black sky and gloomy silence again stirred a hollow loneliness inside me. The old questions welled. What did I hope to find? What am I doing here? ... Who am I?

The tinkling of rain in the downspouts and the soft lapping of water in the canal were the only interruptions to the deathly stillness. My head was spinning. Raindrops streamed down my face and dripped from my nose, finally reminding me it was time to move on. As I descended the north side of the bridge, I cast one last glance at the strange, flickering amber beacon, then at the café beneath it.

I froze.

Under a canvas awning, about forty yards away, sat a lone figure. She had situated two chairs so that they faced each other. She sat on one and put her feet up on the other, as if trying to sleep. I recognized the shoes. They were black Converse basketball sneakers.

That's Carrie.

As I approached, she looked up. Her eyes appeared red under her fogged glasses, and tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Carrie? What are you doing here?"

She sniffed and cried. "Someone stole my suitcase."

"What?"

"The restroom on the train wasn't big enough for me and my suitcase, so I left it outside on the baggage rack. While I was in the restroom, the train made a stop on the mainland." She sniffed, then wiped her nose on her sleeve. "When I came out of the restroom, the train was moving again, and my suitcase was gone." Her head drooped, and she started crying again.

I dragged another chair close to her and sat. "I'm sorry. Did

you get a room?”

“No,” she said, wiping her nose. “My clothes, my money, and my debit card were in my suitcase. Except for the thirty dollars I had in my pocket, my passport, and my ticket home, I lost everything.” She broke down again.

I sat silently for a moment, trying to steady myself and think. My head was spinning from the wine and fatigue. I liked Carrie; she was cute, but I didn’t really know her. She seemed cool, but what if she was just a flaky bartender? I was looking forward to simplicity, decompression, and relaxation. I didn’t need a boatload of drama to crush the first vacation I had taken in two years.

I looked up at the raindrops falling in front of the amber lamp, then back at Carrie. As I watched her shiver and sniffle, I felt myself melting. It was after midnight; all the hotels were full or closed. Lending her money would not help. I handed her a napkin I’d taken from the bar, then spoke, “Well, ... you can’t stay out here. Come on. You can crash in my room tonight, and we’ll figure things out in the morning. You’ll be safe. It will be okay.”

She wiped the fog from her glasses, slid them back on, and looked up at me with tears in her eyes.

“Really? ... You’d do that for me?”

“Yeah, ... sure. My room isn’t much. I didn’t plan to spend much time in it, so it’s cheap and small, but I think there are extra blankets in the closet. I held out my hand. Come on. We can make it work. You’ll be warm and safe there. I promise.”

She grabbed her big purse and took my hand. We walked briskly along the sides of the buildings to avoid the rain.

“Did you get anything to eat?”

“Yes, I ate that Chick-fil-A sandwich I brought.”

“Was that enough? I think there’s a convenience store close to the train station if you’re still hungry. They may have things there.”

“That’s kind, Francis, but I’m okay. Thank you.”

When we reached the hotel lobby, I rang the bell. Through the archway, I saw a TV tuned to a soccer game. Geno rose from an easy chair and rounded the corner. He paused and studied us. “Numero 12?” he asked as our rain soaked clothing dripped on his tile floor.

“Sí, numero 12.”

He turned and looked through a series of ‘pigeonholes’ on the back wall, finally handing over the key with the enormous fob.

Carrie laughed sadly. “How are you supposed to put that in your pocket?”

“You’re not,” I mumbled. “That’s the point.”

We trotted down the narrow alley to my room. I unlocked the door and let her in, then turned on the lamp. She was drenched. Her hair was dripping, and her jeans and shoes were soaked. I remembered that the room was tight. With two people in it now, it suddenly felt much smaller.

“Do you have another change of clothes?” I asked.

“No. I do have extra underwear somewhere at the bottom of my purse. You can never have enough underwear. You know?”

I laughed. “Okay, do this.” I opened my suitcase and pulled out an elastic clothesline. Stretching the line across the warm radiator by the window, I secured it with the suction cups on either end.

“You brought a clothesline?” Carrie mumbled.

“Yeah, ... camp soap too, ... you know, ... just in case? ... to wash your clothes? The guidebook recommended it.”

I reached into my suitcase and pulled out a large white T-shirt. “I’ll leave for thirty minutes. Hang your clothes on this clothes-line to dry. Take a shower if you want. Dry off and put on your clean underwear and this T-shirt. You can sleep on the floor with the extra blankets in the closet, or share the bed — your call. If you choose the bed, I promise I’ll be a gentleman. Trust me. You’re safe here.”

“It’s raining outside. Where will you go?” she sniffed.

“I’ll walk to the train station. It’s only a block away and probably open all night.”

“Francis, ... I feel terrible putting you out of your room.”

“It’s okay, Carrie. You’ve had a rough day. Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you in thirty.”

I trotted to the train station to loiter for thirty minutes. There wasn’t much happening at 1:30 AM. A handful of travelers waited for an early-morning train to Milan. I walked to one of the open service counters and asked to speak with the station manager.

When I returned to my room, I opened the door quietly.

Carrie was asleep on the floor, wrapped in a blanket. She’d taken one pillow from the bed and curled up between the desk and the wall. The day’s stress had clearly taken its toll; she was sound asleep.

I brushed my teeth in the tiny bathroom, then crawled into the narrow bed.

THE THIRD DAY

Sunday, October 27, 2002

CHAPTER 6 - A NEW DAY

I woke around 8:00 AM to the sound of a running shower. Carrie had folded the blanket she had used neatly on the desk chair, and the clothesline over the radiator was empty. Sunlight filtered through the glass. The shower stopped, the toilet flushed, and water ran in the sink. A moment later, Carrie emerged, wearing the same outfit as the day before. She walked over to the desk in bare feet, then sat in the desk chair.

“Good morning,” I said.

“I really want to thank you. I was in real trouble last night. I didn’t know what to do.” She took her sneakers off the radiator and dropped them on the floor, then slipped her feet into her socks and inserted them into her sneakers.

“Are your clothes dry?”

“Mostly, ... a little damp,” she said while tying her shoes. “It’s nice out this morning. I’ll sit in the sun for a while. My body heat will dry them.”

“Give me a few minutes in the bathroom and I’ll buy you breakfast,” I said, rubbing my eyes.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to. It will be fun to have company. Join me?”

She studied me for a second, then nodded. “Okay. I’ll go for

a walk in the sun to give you some privacy. See you in thirty?"

"Yeah, that's good."

After I showered and dressed, there was a knock at the door. It was Carrie.

"Hey, come in," I said. "What have you been doing?"

"Walking. Looking over the bridge by the train station. It's nice out. Sunny and warm. I'm already dry. I called Wells Fargo and canceled my debit card. The guy in the office let me use the phone. There's nothing in that account anyway ... but whatever."

"Let's go to breakfast. I didn't eat much yesterday, and I'm starving."

"That's nice of you, but I need to figure out what I'm going to do. I can't keep mooching off you. You're on vacation. You must have plans, right?"

"No, ... not really. I just wanted to see Venice and visit my grandfather's hometown, Felonica Po, maybe go to Florence or Rome before flying home."

"I have to figure out what to do about money and getting home," she said.

"When do you fly out?"

"My ticket says next Saturday, but I can't stay that long now. I should probably change it to this afternoon."

"Well, breakfast is on me. Let's eat and talk about it afterwards. Did you see any interesting breakfast places when you were walking around?"

"There's a busy place across from the bridge. They have coffee and pancakes, and outdoor seating."

“Let’s go.”

We returned the key to Geno, then walked to the restaurant, Ai Scalzi. It sat just before the steps to the train station, across from one of the three bridges spanning the Grand Canal. Normally, I avoided restaurants near tourist hubs — they were usually overpriced and inauthentic. But I was hungry, and I suspected Carrie was very hungry too. The location offered a great view of travelers pouring out of the station, and seemed like a good place to get a coffee, relax, and watch people.

The host ushered us to a small table in front of the restaurant, under a canvas awning beside the main walkway. We both ordered lattes and scanned the menu. The menus were in English and full of pictures of the food, never a good sign in Europe.

Looking over the top of her menu, Carrie said, “This is nice. Thank you. I need to get your number so I can repay you when we get back to the States.”

“Here,” I said, handing her a business card. “But don’t worry about breakfast. I just want to stay in touch. Can someone wire you money?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about that. The six-hundred in my suitcase was all I had. She looked down at her wrist. I could probably pawn off this bracelet for a few bucks,” she said, jangling what appeared to be a heavy gold chain amidst several bracelets on her wrist. “I just need enough to get home. My bartender and server friends are all broke. I hate to ask them. My ex would probably wire me a hundred. If I move my flight to this afternoon, I’ll just make it.”

“What about your parents?”

“My mother died of breast cancer when I was thirteen, and,

like I said, I haven't seen my father for three years. I'm not even sure how to get in touch with him. ... I don't want to talk to him anyway. We don't get along."

"I'm sorry. Any other family?"

"Nope."

Our coffee arrived. Carrie ordered pistachio pancakes, and I ordered crepes. The restaurant was clean, and the service was good. It probably wasn't the best choice, but it was close, and the view was spectacular. Hundreds of tourists were passing by. Many were lining up for service, and the café filled a few minutes after we sat.

"You said 'ex'; were you married?"

"No, ex-boyfriend. Really, just some guy who used to come into the bar a couple of times a week. I would wait on him, and we'd talk. He seemed nice. We hung out a few times.

"What happened?"

"He ended it a few weeks before I left. He said we needed to 'cool off'. We were becoming too much of a 'thing'. I think he's back with his ex-wife now. They had kids. You know?" She pushed her glasses higher up her nose. "It's all for the best. I'm sure he'll still wire me a hundred bucks if I ask him, though."

The food arrived. Carrie brushed her hair back over her ears and ate. She was hungry and didn't waste any time. She was cute. I enjoyed watching her eat, and it felt good to help her. She was out of her element in Italy, almost childlike. I felt an urge to protect her.

"What about you? What did you say you did?"

"I'm the Marketing Manager for Philips Electronics. Have you heard of it?"

“The lightbulb people?”

I laughed. “Yeah, that’s the biggest part of it, but there are a lot of other divisions. It’s a thirty billion dollar company. I’m in industrial automation. You know, robots that build things?”

“What’s that like working for a big company?”

“Okay. ... It was fun at first, ... but it’s getting a little boring. I get to travel a lot, all over the world, actually. I manage all our events, one hundred and forty last year.”

“That’s a lot. Is it hard?”

“There are a lot of details. Small mistakes can cost the company a lot of money, so you have to be very methodical and organized. Some of our events cost over a million dollars, and only last a few days.”

“Do you like it?”

“The money is good. I can’t complain. I’ve been doing it now for over ten years, and it’s getting a little old. Even with three people working for me, there’s never a break. The market is changing, though, and I’m afraid our products don’t quite fit in. I like the people, but I’m not sure our division is going to survive. I actually think Philips is trying to sell our division. ... How did you become a bartender?”

“Well, ... like most bartenders, I started as a server, running food and drinks to tables. After a year, I was senior and started subbing for the bartender when he was off or sick. Bartenders make more money, so when he left, I moved behind the bar permanently.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s okay. I’m good at it. The customers seem to like me. ... Hey, I won the contest, right? You meet lots of people and

never have trouble getting dates. Unfortunately, most of the guys who hang out there aren't that solid; lots of drunks and divorced guys."

We ate in silence for a few minutes. I watched her intently. Curiously, she handled her knife and fork with confident elegance. I had mistakenly assumed she came from a seedy background, but her table manners suggested otherwise. They were unmistakably the mark of good breeding.

"Listen, Carrie. Don't go back tomorrow. You're in one of the greatest cities in the world. Stay a few more days. You can crash in my room. You have your ticket home, so it won't cost much — just food and drinks. If you want, you can pay me back when we get home."

"You're sweet, but I can't ask you to do that. We just met. We don't even really know each other."

"Then stay one more night. Let's see Venice together. You'd be doing me a favor by keeping me company. Let's see how it goes? ... Who knows? I may want to tease you some more."

She crossed her fork and knife on her plate and looked up at me through her black-rimmed glasses. Her skin was soft, light, and clear. She brushed her dark hair back over her ear and smirked. "Okay, but I'm taking notes and I'll pay you back when we get back to Atlanta. It may take me a few weeks, but I'll pay you back."

I smiled. "Don't worry about the money. I trust you, and you don't look like you eat much."

"You may be surprised. I have expensive tastes. That's why I'm always broke," she whispered, looking off.

"What were your plans? What did you want to see in Venice?" I asked.

“No idea. I don’t know anything about this place, ... or Italy for that matter. I won the trip and was so busy right up until I left that I didn’t have time to research anything. ... Do you mind if I smoke?”

“No. ... I mean, I don’t mind. Go ahead.”

Carrie pulled a pack of Marlboro Lights from her purse and a Bic lighter from her jean pocket. She smacked the pack on the table a couple of times to tamp down the tobacco, then shook one out. She grabbed the filter end with her lips and pulled it out, then dropped the pack on the table. Shielding the end of the cigarette from the breeze, she confidently snapped the Bic lighter and drew deeply. The tobacco glowed as it burned. She looked off into the distance, then exhaled the smoke toward the street and tossed the lighter onto the table.

“I know. ... It’s a nasty habit. I started in high school. I wanted to fit in with older art reprobates. Now, ... well, ... almost all servers in restaurants and bars smoke. You know.”

I laughed. “I was just thinking you looked kind of sexy with that cigarette, like something from a film noir movie. It’s the first time I’ve seen you confident since we met.”

She smiled and looked away for a second, then back at me. “You don’t smoke, I take it?”

“No, ... not cigarettes. I worry about the health risks. I do smoke pot once in a while, though.”

Carrie smiled and stared at me. “You smoke pot?”

“Yeah, once in a while. Why? Is that hard to believe?”

Carrie shook her head, laughed, and looked away.

“My college buddies smoked, and I tried it. I still like to get stoned once in a while with friends. ... I’m cool with it.”

Carrie again drew the smoke deeply into her lungs, then exhaled toward the sky. She crossed her legs, rocked in her chair, and studied me. “What were your plans today?”

“Just want to see the town. This is great, actually. I love sitting in cafes and watching tourists, meeting people from other countries, the locals, just watching.”

She smiled. “So you’re a voyeur?”

“No, ... well, maybe. I just think it’s the best way to understand another culture. You can learn so much by watching. It’s fun; it’s relaxing. Let’s take a walk back toward the Rialto. There’s lots of action around there — shops, bars. We’ll get another coffee, or maybe a drink?”

Carrie hunched her shoulders, looked off into the distance, then crushed out her cigarette. I motioned for the server, paid the check, and we left.

A short distance from the restaurant, the unmistakable sound of an oboe drifted through the street. As we rounded the bend, sure enough, a man was standing against the building, playing a tall, black oboe. He had a music stand in front of him and an open instrument case to accept tips. He was quite good, and a small crowd gathered to listen.

Carrie grabbed my arm and asked, “Can we stop and listen for a minute?”

We moved out of the thoroughfare and took an unobtrusive position against a building, a few feet from the musician.

“I know I’ve heard that before,” I said.

“It’s Tchaikovsky,” Carrie said, “... It’s Swan Lake.”

“You know that?”

“You don’t?”

She dropped her purse and gracefully assumed an arabesque ballerina pose, her hands and arms in a graceful port de bras. Then smoothly and slowly, turned and gracefully moved into another pose, then another. I was shocked. She was rock solid, and very good. The contrast between her torn blue jeans and punky Converse sneakers made the scene even more dramatic. It was beautiful, and every passerby turned to watch. Some stopped. Even the oboe player smiled and nodded in agreement. After a minute, she again assumed her street posture, reached into her pocket, grabbed two of the thirty dollars she still possessed, and dropped them into the open oboe case.

We turned and walked in silence. As I watched Carrie curiously survey the beautiful building facades, I reflected on the morning’s events. Was this the woman who had just crushed out a Marlboro cigarette? What I had just witnessed was beautiful and belied her casual, relaxed demeanor. She had just done something not one in a thousand women could do, yet she treated it as if it were nothing. As I watched her walk, it all made sense. Her confident, graceful movements and her strong physical disposition were the result of dance training.

“Where did you learn to dance like that?” I asked. “Do you have formal training?”

“Yeah, my mother was a dancer. She started me at six. I really liked it and stuck with it. I was good. I always had a lead role in our recitals.”

“Do you still dance?”

“No, well, ... not formally. When my mother died, I was in the eighth grade, and I stopped taking lessons shortly afterward. My father thought it was foolish to spend the money if I wasn’t planning to be a professional. I was too short and curvy to be a

pro. Companies look for a certain build, you know — tall and thin, long neck.”

“Well, ... you’re very good.”

She looked up at me. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER 7 - SEEING VENICE TOGETHER

We followed signs posted on the corners of old buildings toward the Rialto Bridge. The alleys were tight and full of tourists. Carrie seemed lighter and more upbeat. I got the impression that originally she wasn't excited to see Venice. But now she seemed enamored by the beauty of the buildings, canals, shops, and artwork. It was sunny and approaching noon. The shops were bustling. The closer we got to the Rialto, the busier the alleys seemed to become.

Carrie grabbed my arm. "Look at that!" she said, staring into a window filled with Venetian carnival masks. "Look at that one," she said, pointing to a mask that covered just the eyes, nose, and upper cheeks. Brightly colored gold feathers decorated the top portion of the mask, making it feminine and sexy. Another mask featured a long, beak-like nose.

"Why do they make the nose so big?" she mumbled.

"During the Black Death, doctors stuffed the long beak with fragrant flowers. They believed they repelled the disease," I said. "I guess they thought the disease had something to do with the smell."

Another window displayed beautiful Murano glass — hand-blown, vibrantly colored vases, sculptures, beads, jewelry, and chandeliers, all intricate and delicate.

"How would you even get something like that home?" she

asked, admiring an ornate lamp.

I smiled. "I think they will ship it to you. If you have the money, they have ways."

We paused on a tiny arched bridge to watch gondoliers pole couples through the ancient canals. Carrie had the same reaction I did the first time I saw them. "Why did I think they'd be old and weathered?" she said. "They're beautiful ... and those guys are handsome. It's romantic. But I think it would be better in the evening, when it's dark, and there are fewer people watching."

"Is it romantic or cheesy?" I asked. "I mean, it's kind of a trope, right?"

"I don't know. A couple in love at night? Under a blanket, snuggling, in this setting? That would be romantic. Don't you think?" she said, brushing past me before looking up through her glasses with a playful smile. I fixated on her backside as she descended the bridge.

When we finally arrived at the summit of the stunning Rialto Bridge, Carrie braced herself on the heavy stone railing. She leaned out over the canal and sighed. "I feel so much better today than I did yesterday." She stared toward the restaurant where I'd found her the night before, and mumbled, "You're a genuinely nice guy, Francis."

I smiled and placed my hand on the small of her back to guide her through the tight crowd. A myriad of shops jammed the bridge. Jewelry, glass, hats, souvenirs, clothing, street food, and various other shops lined the beautiful structure and surrounding alleys. Carrie marveled at the collection of fine items for sale.

An Asian girl operated a stand displaying a myriad of packaged dried fruits and snacks. The stand, including a two foot

tall fountain made entirely from coconut shells. Coconut milk dripped down the pyramid of shells into a large, chilled reservoir, then recirculated to the top via a small electric pump. Chilled cups of large coconut shavings bathed in coconut milk lined the front of the fountain.

“Ooh,” said Carrie, dipping into her jean pocket. “I’m trying this.”

“Carrie, that crap. It’s not authentic,” I whispered. “These Asians set up these hokey stands everywhere in Europe. It’s a rip. Let’s look for something authentic?”

“Francis, it’s coconut. I love coconut,” Carrie said, handing the lady five dollars.

We made our way to the stone railing of the bridge. Carrie spooned the coconut into her mouth, chewed, and sipped the milk as vaporetos and other boats passed underneath us, cruising the Grand Canal.

“Here, try it,” she said, pushing a spoonful of the chilled coconut into my mouth.

“What? ... No.” Too late. I struggled to accept the spoon. Juice ran down my chin. Carrie smiled and dabbed the dribble with a napkin.

“It’s really good. Right?” Her devilish grin was ear to ear.

“I guess it’s okay,” I mumbled, chewing and looking off into the distance.

“Just okay?” she said, smiling. “It’s great. Right? Fresh coconut?”

“I guess it’s pretty good,” I mumbled, looking away.

As we stood in silence, I watched her bounce on her toes as she chewed and examined the buildings on either side of the canal.

After a few moments, I whispered, "It's beautiful, right?"

Her voice quivered. "It's amazing. ... So beautiful. ... I had no idea."

"Want to hear something that's really amazing? All these buildings, even this bridge, sit on huge wooden pilings."

"Why is that amazing?" she said, chewing.

"Think about it. The entire city is built on a swamp. To keep these heavy stone buildings from settling, they drove thousands of huge wooden pilings into the mud. Some of these buildings are 1300 years old, and look," I said, nodding toward the alley. "No cracks or settling. I think that's pretty amazing."

Carrie looked at me suspiciously and smiled. "Where did you learn that?"

"I saw it in a travel documentary."

We descended the bridge; the alley widened. High-end designer shops lined the corridors. As we wove through the crowd, the distant sounds of a bass drum, cymbals, and a squeezebox drifted toward us. Drawing closer, we spotted a short, one-man band marching in our direction. A large contraption — complete with a big bass drum, cymbals, a bicycle horn, and a tip bucket hung from his shoulders. One foot controlled the bass drum; the other controlled the cymbals. As he walked in rhythm, he played Italian standards on his concertina.

He wore an archer's hat with a long feather, a striped shirt, and baggy pants held up by red suspenders. As he passed, he caught my eye, silently suggesting he'd appreciate a tip.

"That is so cute!" Carrie said as we approached. She slipped behind the little man and mimicked his gait. He continued playing while Carrie followed close behind. It was comical,

and several other tourists watched and laughed as I snapped a photo.

“Well, we owe him a tip now,” Carrie said, fishing two more dollars from her jeans pocket, then dropping them into the little bucket. The little man smiled and moved on.

I shook my head. “Do you realize you’ve just spent thirty percent of your available funds on street food and musician tips?”

“I’ll go hungry. Those guys were too good, ... and I love coconuts!”

We wandered a few hundred yards farther down the alley and spotted about a dozen young adults gathered under a canopy in front of a small service counter. Each held a brandy glass filled with a reddish liquid, garnished with a straw, an orange slice, and a red cherry. They looked like locals, which piqued my curiosity.

“What are you drinking?” I asked a young couple standing in the shade. Each looked at me curiously and shrugged. “Cosa stai bevendo?” I repeated.

“Oh ... una bomba,” the young man replied.

“Una bomba?” I repeated.

The woman nodded.

“Sí, una bomba,” he said again, pointing to the counter.

I looked at Carrie. “Want to try a ‘bomb’?”

She smiled and raised her eyebrows. “I guess it’s about that time.”

I walked over to the counter and ordered “due bomba.” A few minutes later, the server handed us two drinks exactly like the

ones the others were drinking. We each took a sip. The drinks were good and tasted like bitter oranges.

"This is a strong negroni," Carrie said.

"Don't you like it?"

"No, I do. It's very good — just strong. Maybe that's why they call it a bomb instead of a Negroni," she laughed.

"What's a Negroni?"

"It's a cocktail made with Campari, gin, and sweet red vermouth. We don't serve many in Five Points, but the taste is unmistakable. The Campari gives it that bitter orange flavor. I really like it. This one tastes like it has more gin — and maybe a touch more vermouth," she said, smacking her lips.

We took a seat at one of the small tables and watched the burgeoning crowd perusing the store displays in the alley. We sipped our drinks, and Carrie lit another Marlboro Light. Again, I watched her as she smoked. I enjoyed watching her. She seemed confident and deliberate as she smoked — strongly inhaling, exhaling into the air, then tapping the ashes into a small glass ashtray in the center of the table. She noticed me watching her and said, "What are you looking at? ... Don't you like me smoking?"

"No ... nothing. I was just watching you."

"Thank you for the drink," she said, raising it and smiling. "This is so fun. ... So ... are you married?"

"Divorced," I said, looking away. "Almost two years now."

"I'm sorry. Was it hard?"

"Yeah, ... at first. I'm over it now. She married a guy she was working with.

"That must have hurt. How did you find out?"

“I suspected she was having an affair with him in the last months of our marriage. She kept accusing me of cheating, but I never did. After a while, I realized she was just projecting, ... accusing me of what she was actually doing.”

“Did you love her?”

“I thought I did. Now I don’t know. It’s cloudy, ... you know? It’s hard to tell sometimes. I thought she was perfect. ... But I guess I miscalculated.”

“I’ve never been in love, but I have been in ‘lust’ a few times,” Carrie laughed. “Sometimes, I think ‘love’ is a product Hollywood sells us. We all want to believe we’re more civilized than we are ... right? We all want to believe our relationships are deep and virtuous. It’s hard to come to grips with the fact we’re just animals breeding,” she said as she exhaled and looked off.

I laughed. “That’s insightful. I never thought of it that way. Maybe you have something there. There may be more to you than meets the eye.”

“Well, ... thank you. ... I guess? Was that a compliment? ... Are you dating anyone?”

“I’ve dated a few women. Nothing serious. ... As you get older, it’s hard to ‘date around’, right? You go out a few times, have sex, and then it’s decision time. Most single women over thirty are looking to have children, you know, ... before it’s too late. So ... you either ‘go all the way’, or you break up and start over. The ‘cycle’ usually takes a couple of months. You get tired of hurting people ... and getting hurt. What about you? You said you just broke up? Have you ever been married ... dated anyone special?”

“No ... and not really,” she said, exhaling into the afternoon sky. “It’s easy to meet men when you’re a female bartender in a

popular club. But you get bored with it after a while. Most of the guys who hang out at the club are cheating or losers. Solid guys come in with their girlfriends. Sometimes they come back alone. Sometimes you hook up for a while. They usually go back to their exes.”

The bombas were strong, and we were both feeling it. Carrie started laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was thinking about you teasing me on the plane — ‘We’ll probably make it. Nothing usually happens.’ That was cruel.” She laughed, bit her lip, and lightly kicked me under the table. ... “Wind shears?”

I smiled. “I don’t know why I like doing that. It is kind of cruel, I guess. Maybe it’s because everyone gets scared when they first fly. You remember what it’s like and realize how easy it is to plant those suggestions. I’m sorry. You were cute, though, ... punching me in the leg. ... Maybe that’s the reaction I was looking for? Someone to punish me for my wicked ways? ... I don’t know.” I shook my head. We both laughed and looked away.

It was going on 3:00 PM, and the tourist crowd was peaking. As we finished our drinks, I said, “Hey, let’s find a bar offering cicchetti and get a snack before dinner. I want to try it while we’re here.”

“What’s Cicchetti?”

“These little snack bites and small plates that the bars around here serve to attract customers. Venice is famous for them.”

We finished our drinks and wove our way back into the alley. “I don’t want to stop too close to St. Mark’s,” I said. “Those

places are probably tourist traps. I want something authentic. Let's go this way," I said, again placing my hand on Carrie's back to direct her deeper into the island. "There's this place I read about called Cantine del Vino già Schiavi, just west of the piazza. I pulled out my notes to check the address and map position. This way."

The Cantine del Vino già Schiavi was on the other side of the Grand Canal, west of San Marco Piazza. As the Rialto Bridge was in the wrong direction, we decided to cross the last of the three bridges crossing the Grand Canal, the Ponte dell'Accademia, or Accademia Bridge.

We climbed to the crest of the beautiful bridge, and again observed the myriad of boats, gondolas, and vaporettos navigating the canal. We stopped to rest and get our bearings.

Suddenly, my phone rang. I looked at Carrie, shrugged, and answered. "Ciao. ... Sì. ... Sì. ... Grazie mille. ... Sì, per favore, invialo all'hotel. ... Sì. ... Arrivederci."

"What was that about?" Carrie asked.

"It's a surprise. I'll show you later."

She winced, but said nothing.

The western side of the Accademia Bridge divides at right angles. Descending the left steps led to a small café. We descended the right steps and headed toward the Rio de S. Trovaso canal, a smaller canal leading away from the Grand Canal.

"What's that?" Carrie asked, pointing to an imposing white marble structure.

"That's the Gallerie dell' Accademia. The Academy of Fine Arts of Venice — a museum, mostly of Venetian paintings, I think. That's why they call that bridge the Accademia Bridge. Since

I was only planning to be in Venice for a couple of days, I decided to skip the museums and just soak up the culture and try the food. It would be fun to check it out sometime, though.”

As we passed the museum, the alley narrowed to single file before opening onto a wider path along the canal. Shops and a low wall ran along each side of the canal. Two ornate bridges crossed the water; the second stood before our destination.

As we approached the Cantine, we noticed a small group of people sitting on the low canal wall in front, drinking wine, eating cicchetti, and speaking mostly Italian. We entered the shop, not knowing what to expect.

A long glass showcase displayed various types of cicchetti. There were no tables. The patrons either stood in front of the counter or exited to the alley and sat on the canal wall. The rear of the store featured hundreds of wine bottles. Almost all the selections were Italian brands I didn’t recognize. Carrie and I watched the locals in front of us order wine and point at different varieties of cicchetti. Local wine was about €1.50 a glass, and the pieces of cicchetti ranged from €1.50 - €1.75 per piece — very reasonable. As Carrie and I waited our turn, I overheard the man behind the counter speak broken English, and I was relieved.

“What do you like?” I asked Carrie.

“I’m not sure what any of this is,” she replied. “I generally like everything, though. ... It all looks pretty good.”

I asked the man for two red wines and a plate of cicchetti, 8 total pieces, whatever he recommended. The man nodded and went to work. He quickly filled two plastic glasses with red wine and placed eight pieces of cicchetti on a paper plate. I handed Carrie her wine and paid. We exited the store and sat on the wall overlooking the canal. Several other English-speak-

ing tourists were sitting on the wall or standing close by.

Carrie and I both sipped our wine and studied the plate of cicchetti. "Where do we start?" I wondered aloud.

"That looks pretty good," Carrie said, pointing to what looked like sardines and onions piled on a piece of toasted bread.

"That's 'sarde in saor' or sweet and sour sardines. It's good, a lady next to us offered. That one there is tuna with cocoa powder. It's our favorite. Those are all good. That one, lardo with honey and chocolate, is good, and that one, roe with cream and blueberry, is delicious. It's a little sweet; ... save it for last."

"You sound like an expert," I offered.

"My husband and I come here whenever we're in town. Is it your first time?"

"Yes," I said. "... for both of us."

"You came to the right place. It's local and authentic."

Carrie and I looked at each other. We each took a piece and then took a bite.

"Oh, that's good," Carrie mumbled, pushing bits and pieces back into her mouth. "I've never tasted anything like that. Here, try it," she said, pushing the last bite into my mouth. She laughed as I struggled to accept it. Like the earlier spoon of coconut, she seemed to enjoy pulling me out of my comfort zone.

We tried each piece in turn. Everything was delicious. Even the wine was excellent, complex, with notes of black cherries. Unlike the US, where a house wine is usually a cheap wine, in Europe, house wines are a point of pride.

As we ate and looked out on the canal, I watched Carrie intently study the landscape. She seemed fascinated, commenting

repeatedly on the architectural details. The more time I spent with her, the more attractive I found her. She was inquisitive; she noticed things, and the black glasses I thought so unusual at the airport now seemed charming. Her smile was adorable, and her torn blue jeans and black sneakers couldn't hide her trim, strong frame.

"Can I do something?" I asked.

"What do you want to do, Francis?" she said, chewing.

"I want to touch your hair."

"You want to touch my hair?" She laughed.

"Yeah. It's so full and pretty — dark, thick, full-bodied. I've never seen hair like that before."

She shook her head and laughed. "Okay, ... but use your clean hand. I don't want any lardo or honey in it."

I gently touched the back of her head to gauge the thickness of her hair. She leaned back, pressing her head into my hand, then harder, sliding toward me on the wall until she mashed her hair into my face.

"Satisfied?" she laughed, still chewing.

I nodded and smiled.

"Here. Try this piece," she said, shoving the last bite of tuna with cocoa powder into my mouth. She grinned as she pushed it into my mouth with her fingers. "It's good. ... right?" She said with a grin.

"It comes from my mother's side," she said, picking up another piece and looking off into the distance. "She had beautiful, almost black hair. Sometimes, she'd be sitting in a chair, and she'd let me brush it. ... Life was good then. ... I miss her. ... I really miss her."

She looked away in silence for a few minutes, then looked back at me, still chewing. "Okay, now I get to touch your hair."

"What?"

"I get to touch your hair. Fair is fair," she said with a big grin.

"I don't know, Carrie. You've got a lot of sweet and sour sardine on your fingers," I said, watching her pick her teeth with her index finger.

"I'll clean them."

She licked each finger, then dumped a couple of drops of wine in her palm, rubbed her hands together, then wiped them dry with her napkin.

"See, they're clean." She said, waving her hands in front of me. "Now, close your eyes."

"What? ... Close my eyes? ... Why do I have to close my eyes?"

"Come on. You've got your fetishes, and I've got mine," she said, laughing. "I let you do your thing. Now close your eyes."

I hesitated and studied her face. What was she up to? "I don't know if I trust you, Carrie. You're making me a little nervous."

"Relax Francis. Man up. ... I'm not going to hurt you."

I studied her for a moment. She sat on her hands and held a devilish grin. I closed my eyes and said, "Okay. ... Go ahead."

I felt her five fingernails drop on my head and scratch vigorously as if I were a dog. She laughed wickedly as my hair flew in all directions.

"Carrie! Goddamn it! I knew you were going to do something like that!" I said, tying her up in a 'straightjacket' hug to restrain her. She bent over, laughing uncontrollably.

The couples sitting on either side of us laughed at our foolishness.

It was almost 4:30 PM when we finished the second glass of wine and the rest of the cicchetti.

“Let’s head back and freshen up,” I said. “Then I’ll take you to dinner. There’s a place called Ristorante San Silvestro I want to try. It’s supposed to be great.”

“Okay. ... But I don’t know how much ‘fresher’ I can get with these clothes,” she laughed. “I guess I could shower.”

Our hotel was directly north of our location, but traversing the island required taking a circuitous route. Tight, crowded alleys lined with bars, shops, and various businesses turned at right angles, and numerous canals required crossing ornate, arched bridges for passage. We popped out of one alley into a piazza with a huge brick cathedral in the center.

“What’s that?” Carrie asked. “It’s beautiful.”

“I’m not sure,” I mumbled, pulling my map and guidebook from my backpack. “Oh, it’s Basilica S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. Wow, it says here that they consecrated it in 1492. ... That’s pretty cool.”

“Why is that cool?” Carrie mumbled.

“That’s the year Christopher Columbus sailed to America! That’s a pretty old church. Let’s peek inside.”

We made our way through the crowd and entered through the main entrance. The nave was breathtaking, with carved wooden seats on either side and a vast pink and white marble floor. Over the altar was a huge painting of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Carrie clasped her hands together and froze in astonishment. “That is so beautiful!” she whispered. We walked

closer to get a better look. "Look at the folds in her garment and the dark shadows that contrast with the light from heaven," she mumbled.

I paused and watched her as she studied the painting. She was right. The dark shadows created a contrast with the upper part of the painting, emphasizing the brightness of heaven. "Come on," I whispered. "We've got to go if we're going to make dinner."

As we approached the hotel, I said, "Come in with me. I have something to show you."

Carrie followed me into the office. Again, the TV in the next room was playing. When the bell jangled, Geno rose and rounded the corner.

"Buonasera, signore. Numero dodici?"

"Sì, Geno. Il numero dodici ... e la mia valigia?"

Geno disappeared into a closet, then returned with an overstuffed blue suitcase.

"My suitcase!" Carrie exclaimed, clasping her hands together and bouncing on her toes. "What happened? How did you find it?"

Geno brought the case over, set it on the floor, and handed me the room key. I slipped him a few euros and handed the suitcase to Carrie. "When I went to the train station last night, I told the station manager about your stolen suitcase and asked him to check into it. He did. The train you were on from the airport to here only stopped at one other station — Porto Marghera. The manager there found it yesterday and put it in the lost and found. The thieves evidently rummaged through it

and left it on a bench in the station. He had it sent to the hotel today. The call I received on the Accademia Bridge was from him.”

“I can’t believe it!” Carrie said, running her hand over her bag. She looked up at me, threw her arms around me, and squeezed. “Francis, you are my hero! I mean it! ... I can’t tell you how much this means to me — all my stuff!”

“Well, ... your money and valuables are probably gone, but at least you got your clothing and other things.”

“I don’t care,” she said, hugging me and pressing her cheek tightly against my chest. “You’re my hero!”

CHAPTER 8 - HIGH IN THE PIAZZA

“You can use the bathroom first,” I said as we entered the room. “I’ll take a walk. How much time will you need?”

“Not very long-maybe thirty minutes? ... But you don’t have to go anywhere. It’s fine. I’m fine with it. Just watch TV for a few minutes?”

“It would be nice to lie down for a few minutes.” I kicked my shoes into the closet, flopped on the bed, then grabbed the TV remote. “It’s five-thirty,” I said, glancing at my watch. “Let’s try to leave by six-thirty?”

She placed her suitcase next to the desk and flipped it open. The clothes inside appeared rumpled. Someone had obviously roughly inspected the contents, then stuffed the garments and other items back in. Her money and iPod were gone, but the rest seemed intact.

I looked down at her as she sorted and folded her things. Her fair, indoor skin had taken on a bronze tinge from walking in the sun.

“What’s this place we’re going to like?” she asked, trying to figure out what to wear.

“It’s supposed to be nice; ... white linen, probably.”

Carrie picked out her clothes, grabbed her makeup bag, and moved into the bathroom. She turned and smiled as she shut

the door.

I clicked on the TV and turned it to the Italian news channel. A female reporter stood in a boat in the lagoon, pointing to a brood of ducks and speaking into a microphone. I lowered the volume and watched for a moment, trying to decipher what she was talking about, then closed my eyes.

When I opened them, the bathroom door was open, and Carrie was standing in front of the mirror, her back to me. I rubbed my eyes.

“How long did I sleep?” I asked.

“Not long, about twenty minutes, I guess,” she said as she leaned toward the mirror and applied a light coat of lipstick. “I’m done. You can have the bathroom.” She said, turning toward me, “Get up, sleepyhead.”

I was stunned. The punky woman in torn jeans and sneakers I had been with all afternoon now looked refined and stylish. Her glasses were gone. Her eyelids were smoky gray, her lashes darkened, and a hint of eyeliner framed her beautiful brown eyes. A touch of lipstick accentuated her full lips. She wore black leather flats, form-fitting slacks that revealed the muscle tone in her legs, and a loose-fitting, short-sleeved white blouse that accentuated the graceful ivy tattoos on her arms. I stared for a moment, moved by her transformation.

“Wow.” I smiled. “Where are your glasses?”

“I thought I’d wear my contacts tonight. They were in my suitcase. You okay with that?” she smiled.

I shook my head. “Wow,” I said as I rose.

As I entered the bathroom, she brushed past me, looked up, and smiled. “You have fifteen minutes, tough guy, ... if we’re going to stay on schedule.”

After showering and changing into a fresh white polo and black slacks, I led Carrie to the front desk to check my room key. Back in the main alley, I consulted my notes and map for the quickest route to the restaurant. As I did, Carrie wandered a few steps ahead to examine a poster in the alley. I watched her against the romantic backdrop of the old city. Before leaving, she dug a short-waisted black leather jacket from her case. The stylish bad-girl jacket now covered her white shirt and bare arms. We were both dressed in black and looked like locals.

"You look very Italian for an Irish girl," I said.

"Irish-Persian!" she corrected me. "You think I look Italian now? Wait till you see my temper."

We crossed the Ponte degli Scalzi, the first of the three great bridges crossing the Grand Canal. The bridge was directly across from the train station, and outbound tourists were flowing against us, toward the mainland. The island was emptying out for the evening. We wove our way down the tight alleys toward the Ristorante San Silvestro. We were on the west side of the Grand Canal now, but ironically, again, following the signs to the Rialto would put us near the restaurant. This time, instead of approaching the beautiful bridge from the east side, we would be approaching it from the west.

The signs twisted us through the tiny alleys between the old brick buildings. Many windows sported flower boxes filled with red geraniums. The sent in the air was unmistakable. At one point, we passed through a tight tunnel under a building and then across the Ponte Sant' Agostin bridge, spanning another wide canal. In front of the bridge, an old Italian man was sitting on a stool, fishing for what looked like flounder. A white bucket beside him contained several. As we crossed, a gondolier poled a couple along the canal beneath us. The couple was covered with a blanket and kissing. Carrie looked up

at me and whispered, “Aww, isn’t that sweet? ... So romantic.”

It was almost seven o’clock when we arrived. The sun had set, and the pedestrian traffic was light. The island city was back in ‘local mode’ — quiet and dignified. The restaurant, however, was lively. Three of the four tables in front were full, and loud banter emanated from the open door. We approached the entrance and examined the menu. The offerings were predominantly local seafood, risotto, and pasta. We opted to sit inside, and the host led us to a tiny table for two.

The interior was elegantly Venetian and smelled of savory seafood. The ceiling was white plaster, spanned by huge timber beams. The walls were brick and featured framed images of the city. White linen, polished silverware, and stemmed glasses adorned the tables. Dim, indirect lighting and flickering candlelight completed the warm atmosphere.

As the waiter handed us menus, I said, “Listen, Carrie. Don’t worry about money or prices tonight. This is on me. I do well. It’s my pleasure to have you with me. Let’s just have fun.”

She looked up at me, smiled, and tapped my leg with her foot under the table.

I looked into her eyes for a few seconds. I wanted to say something flirtatious, but refrained. “Red or white?”

“That’s a good question. I think I’m going to have seafood, so maybe white?”

“Una bottiglia di Soave Classico, per favore,” I said to the waiter.

“Molto buono, signore,” he replied, and then disappeared.

He returned a few minutes later and opened a tall bottle of white wine. He poured, then wrapped a white linen napkin around the bottle and left.

I held up my glass to toast. “We live our lives for moments. This one is special.” We clinked glasses and drank. The wine was wonderful, light, and crisp.

“Carrie, I have to say you look beautiful tonight. I’m amazed.”

She laughed, “Well, ... it helps to have your stuff, right? The suitcase made a big difference. I was in travel mode when you met me. I can clean up when I want to.”

“Well, ... you were cute in travel mode too.”

“When I moved to the city and took the job at the bar, I think I went a little overboard trying to blend in. Almost everybody in Five Points is punky or gothic, and I wanted to fit in.”

“So ... you’re not really that way?”

“Well, I am, and I’m not. It’s not where I come from. My dad made good money. We had a nice house and nice things. But he and I are very different. I took after my mother, the dancer. She was warm and artistic. They were very different. My dad wanted me to be ‘Miss Professional’, dress like a professional, go to college, and major in business, ... be like him. But that wasn’t me. I hung out with the art students in school, and dressed like ... well, you know. After my mother died, he got really strict and critical — always nagging me about how I looked. I guess I rebelled.”

“That’s funny. Jenny, the flight attendant, said, you probably had father issues.”

“You talked to her about me? When?”

“Just before I saw you in the rain last night. I was coming from the bar across the canal. The attendants from our flight were there on a layover.”

“Why were you talking about me?”

“Oh, she just asked about you. She saw us talking on the plane and said you were cute.”

Carrie smiled and gently kicked me under the table again.

The waiter returned. I ordered an antipasto plate to share, shrimp risotto for Carrie, and clam linguine for myself. He poured another glass of wine and emptied the bottle.

“Un'altra bottiglia, per favore,” I said to order another.

“Molto buono, signore.”

“Where did you learn to speak Italian?” Carrie asked. “I’m impressed.”

“Oh ... I’m from a very Italian family. ... That’s why I’m here ... right? You pick it up by listening to the adults. It’s funny, though. The old Italians didn’t encourage the children to speak Italian. They wanted us to blend in and learn English. They didn’t offer. I had to ask what things meant. To prepare for this trip, I bought language tapes and listened to them in my car, driving to and from work.”

The antipasto arrived with a basket of fresh, crusty bread. We dug in. It was a plate of Parma ham and burrata cheese. We were hungry. It had been some time since the cicchetti. I poured us another glass of wine.

Carrie smeared some of the cheese on a crust of bread, then draped two thin slices of prosciutto on top and took a bite. “This is incredible,” she said as she chewed a mouthful. ... “So good!”

I watched her chew. She always seemed completely present — fully absorbed in the moment. She didn’t just eat; she savored the food, commenting several times on subtle flavors and details I hadn’t even noticed. It amused me. As we finished the aged ham, I poured us each another glass of wine. The waiter

cleared the dishes and brushed the crumbs from the table with a tiny scraper he kept in his shirt pocket. Shortly afterward, our main courses arrived. Again, Carrie handled her silverware with a confident elegance that contradicted the first impression I'd formed of her.

"I thought we'd have dinner, then walk back to the Piazza to see it at night. It's supposed to be beautiful at night, quiet, empty, you know, without all the tourists?"

We finished our entrees and wine. As the waiter cleared and cleaned, I asked, "Do you like tiramisu?"

"Yes, very much," Carrie replied. "Who doesn't like tiramisu?"

"Espresso or Sambuca?"

"I'm thinking ... both," she laughed.

The waiter brought a generous slice of tiramisu, with two forks, two espressos, and two Sambucas, each with three coffee beans floating in the clear liquid.

"What do the beans mean?" Carrie asked. "I used to know."

"Health, happiness, and prosperity," I said. "How could a bartender forget that?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Smarty-Pants," she laughed. "Sambuca isn't a big seller in Little Five Points. I'm not sure we even have a bottle."

The tiramisu was delicious. The mascarpone cheese was whipped into a light cream and covered with cocoa powder. The sweet, espresso-soaked ladyfingers delivered the necessary coffee essence. It was a perfect dessert. We sipped our liqueur and studied each other. I felt satisfied and at peace.

"That was fantastic," Carrie said as I signed the voucher. "One of the best meals I've ever had." I was figuring the tip and

didn't look up. She kicked me under the table again to get my attention.

"I'm sorry," I laughed. "What did you say?"

"I said thank you for dinner, Francis. You're sweet."

I helped her out of her chair, then helped her with her leather jacket. As we left the restaurant, I said, "Are you up for walking to the Piazza?"

"Sure ... I'm counting on it. I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise for me?" I said, laughing. "What could that be?"

"You'll see."

The night air was slightly chilly, but brisk walking and warm jackets kept it pleasant. The sky had cleared, and a full moon hung overhead. Amber streetlights and the warm glow from shopfronts and flat windows lit the passages in golden tones. Every canyon glowed a warm amber color; every blind turn and mysterious alley cried out for investigation.

We climbed the Rialto Bridge and paused at the apex to take in the view. It was like an idealized poster of the magnificent city. Carrie grabbed my arm and pointed to a gondola passing underneath. A couple were tucked under a heavy blanket, hugging and kissing. "See. ... That's what I'm talking about," Carrie mumbled. "Don't you think that's romantic?"

"I never really thought about Venice before," she continued. "I'd seen pictures of those gondolas and the canals, but it just didn't register. It took a silly contest to make me aware of this beautiful place. It makes me wonder what else I've overlooked."

By the time we reached Piazza San Marco, it was nine o'clock. The square was nearly empty. Only the distant murmur of din-

ers at the outer cafés and the occasional flutter of pigeons disturbed the silence.

We walked to the back of the piazza, far enough from the restaurant tables to feel alone. Someone had set up a small stage for a presentation earlier in the day, but the stage and surrounding chairs were now empty. I turned two of them around to face the basilica and motioned for Carrie to sit.

We sat quietly, gazing at the magnificent architecture: the glowing bell tower, the domes of St. Mark's, and the luminous face of the astronomical clock. The piazza was bathed in a soft orange light from lamps and candle-lit cafés.

"Are you cold?" I asked.

"I'm okay," she said, wrapping her arms around herself and squeezing.

"Here." I put my arm around her and pulled her close. We sat in silence for a moment.

She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out her pack of Marlboro cigarettes, then dug for the lighter in her pants pocket. As I was looking off into the distance, I heard the familiar sound of the lighter striking. Suddenly, the unmistakable smell of marijuana smoke filled the air.

I looked at Carrie as she exhaled the smoke into the night sky and handed me a joint. "I told you I had a surprise for you," she said with a cough and a laugh.

"How the hell did you get pot through airport security?" I asked, taking the joint.

"Why? ... Is that hard?" she laughed. "I rolled a couple of joints and stuck them in the back of my cigarette pack. Nobody said anything."

I drew the smoke into my lungs and exhaled. "You're crazy, girl. You could have gotten into trouble." I shook my head, coughed, and laughed.

"What would they do?" She said, taking another drag. "Throw me in jail? It's only three joints."

"Oh, ... I don't know," I said, laughing as I passed it back. "They probably would have just confiscated the weed. ... But they might have held you for a while. You could have missed your flight."

We each hit the joint four times, then Carrie crushed it out and returned it to the pack. We were both drunk and stoned, sitting quietly and appreciating the beautiful scenery. Carrie leaned into me for warmth. "You were right about this, Francis. This is nice, ... so quiet, without all the tourists."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Twenty-seven. ... Why?"

"Oh ... I was just wondering."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-three."

Her cheeks tightened into a broad smile; her eyes beamed. As she studied the Piazza, I watched her closely and felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her. I thought about it for a moment, then bent and kissed her gently on the cheek. I felt her cheek tighten into a broad smile, as if holding back a laugh. She turned toward me, looked directly into my eyes, and said, "Is that the best you can do, ... Mr. Corporate America?"

We both burst out in wild laughter.

As our laughter subsided, I said, "Okay, smart ass, this is for you." I reached behind her neck, grabbed her hair gently, and

kissed her hard on the lips.

Without hesitation, she threw her arms around my neck and pushed her tongue into my mouth. It was on. All the pent-up connection and sexual tension of the last two days exploded. The smell of her hair and the rake of her nails through mine was intoxicating. I don't know how many hazy minutes we remained entwined, but the memory is wonderful. I pulled her onto my lap and warmed her with a firm hug, as we contemplated what had just transpired in that beautiful place. We studied each other, at first silent and serious, then smiling, and finally laughing at the explosion of our unexpected passion.

Carrie's pot was very good. Between the two bottles of wine, the Sambuca, the strong weed, and the earlier day's drinks and activities, we were both exhausted ... and very fucked up. As we finally regained composure, I said, "Come on, Carrie. We've got to get back to the room. I'm going to pass out."

We stood, steadied ourselves, straightened our clothes, and started back across the piazza, toward St. Mark's, the Rialto Bridge, and beyond. Pigeons fluttered away as we walked. I looked down at her and smiled.

"Can I hold your hand?"

She hugged me with both arms and laughed, "Yes, Francis. You can hold my hand."

"Well, I didn't want to make any assumptions. You know ... just because you pushed your tongue into my mouth."

She smiled, shook her head, and squeezed my arm tighter. "You're such a gentleman."

We both laughed and made our way through the narrow alleys

toward our hotel. The walk only took about twenty-five minutes, but we were tired and giddy, and it seemed much longer. The day was catching up with us. When we finally opened the hotel office door around eleven o'clock, we were both beat. Geno handed me the room key, and we walked down the alley to the room. As I opened the room door, I realized I had forgotten to grab a train schedule from the card rack in the front office.

"Oh ... I've got to go back to the office," I said. "I forgot something."

"What did you forget?" Carrie mumbled sleepily.

"I wanted to grab a train schedule," I said. "I'll be right back." With that, I closed the door and trotted back to the office. The tiny brass doorbell rang as I opened the door, and Geno rounded the corner from the living room.

"Forget something, signore?" He asked.

"Yes, I want to grab a train schedule," I said, taking a card from the rack. "Do you know when the first train leaves for Ferrara in the morning?"

"9:30 AM, signore. I'm certain of it."

"Oh ... Okay, we'll be checking out tomorrow morning then. Can I settle up now?"

Geno prepared the bill, and I signed the voucher. "Grazie. It was a pleasant stay, I said, returning the receipt.

"Just drop the key off in the morning, signore. You can put it in that slot if you want."

"Buona notte. Thank you, Geno." I said and left.

I trotted down the alley and unlocked the room door. Although exhausted, I felt excited to continue with Carrie. When

I opened the door, however, the room was dark. I carefully inched in, stumbling over shoes and bumping into the bed.

As I approached the center of the room, I saw Carrie sleeping face down on the blanket on the floor. She had taken off her outfit and hung it neatly over the desk chair. She was in a deep sleep, lying half-covered in just her panties; one leg and half of her back remained uncovered. I shook my head. I guess our night is over. I reached down and covered her fully with the blanket, then slipped off my clothes and crawled into the bed. I closed my eyes, and the room faded to darkness.

THE FOURTH DAY

Monday, October 28, 2002

CHAPTER 9 - A GRANDFATHER'S TOWN

I opened my eyes to the sound of the toilet flushing. The sink ran for a minute, and the door opened.

"Carrie, what time is it?" I said, rubbing my eyes.

"Eight o'clock, sleepyhead."

"Holy crap, we've got to get going. Have you showered?"

"Yes. ... Where are you going? What's going on?"

"The train to Ferrara leaves at 9:30," I said, running my fingers through my hair and preparing to stand.

"Ferrara ... you're going to Ferrara? What's in Ferrara?"

"We have to change trains in Ferrara to go to Felonica Po — my grandfather's hometown. I'll tell you about it on the way. Come on, you're coming too. Pack your stuff," I said, brushing by her into the bathroom.

Her eyes widened. "Good morning, Francis," she said sarcastically as I closed the door.

After showering and packing, we left for the train station. I hoisted my suitcase into backpack mode, and Carrie shouldered her large purse. She then struggled with her overstuffed case, bumping it down the brick street. At the station, she strained to pull the carry-on up the steps.

“Here, let me help you,” I said, grabbing the handle. As I carried it up the steps, I laughed, “Carrie, this bag is fucking heavy. It’s a neutron bag.”

“Well ... did you like my outfit last night? ... I have to put it somewhere.”

“Well ... yeah, but Carrie darling, you could wear that same lovely outfit every time you went out on this trip and nobody would notice.”

She frowned and mumbled under her breath, “Maybe I want somebody to notice?”

“What? ... What did you say?”

“I said. Good advice, Francis. I’ll take that into consideration on the next trip I win.”

I scanned the lobby, looking for the ticket office, then purchased two one-way tickets to Ferrara. As we proceeded deeper into the station, a prominent ceiling-mounted sign displayed the departure platforms for all trains. We followed the signs to our ‘Binario’ and turned onto the platform.

Our train was a modern, fast train, stopping only at Padua, Ferrara, and then on to Bologna, Florence, and finally Rome. The first-class and sleeper cars were up front, so we walked nearly the length of the train to our economy car. We crossed the threshold and bumped our way to our seats, then I helped Carrie get her case into the overhead. The seats were comfortable, like first-class airline seats. We settled in with a sigh. Carrie adjusted the footrest to prop up her small, Converse-clad feet as the train pulled away from the station.

“Hey, by the way, Miss McCall, I was really messed up last night. I’m sorry. I know I got a little aggressive in the piazza. I guess ‘your’ weed put me over the edge. ... So it’s really your fault.”

“Ah, ... I was there. ... I challenged you. ... Don't worry about it. ... It was fun.”

“Seriously, though, I just don't want you to think you owe me anything.”

“Of course, I owe you something. You're very generous, and a gentleman. I don't meet many of those in my line of work. I'd have been in real trouble if you hadn't helped me.”

“Well, ... I mean, like ... you know ... like affection ... or sex.”

“So are you saying we're not a thing anymore, Francis? You're not going to be holding my hand anymore?”

“Well, no. I'm not saying that. We could be a thing. Stranger 'things' have happened.”

She looked sideways at me from under her glasses and smiled. “I don't know. This 'thing' is pretty strange.” She pulled her jacket sleeve up to expose the bracelets on her wrists. “Here, ... I want you to take this,” she said, unfastening the heavy gold chain on her wrist. “This is my collateral. You know, for my expenses, until I pay you back.”

She clasped the chain around my left wrist. “There,” she said, smiling. “It actually looks pretty good on you.”

“No, ... you don't have to do that,” I said. “I never wear jewelry.”

“It's collateral, silly. You don't have to wear it. Put it in your shaving kit when you unpack. You can give it back to me when I pay you back. It's worth at least \$300. So don't lose it.”

I looked at Carrie for a long moment. She'd taken her makeup off when she showered, and was wearing her black glasses again. She was in her natural state. I studied her clear, light skin and

dark brown eyes. Her smile revealed straight white teeth, and her taut cheeks hinted at faint dimples. I then looked down at the bracelet. I had to admit; the chain looked good on my wrist. It wasn't loose, like it was on hers. It fit perfectly.

"Don't worry, Francis. It doesn't mean we're going together," she mumbled sarcastically as she turned to look out the window.

I looked down at the chain again, then back at her. She was intently watching fields of grapevines flash by. I thought about what she said. I wondered if she had simply gotten caught up in the moment in the piazza the night before. Was her kiss just a thank you for dinner and the room, or did she have any genuine feelings for me?

A little after eleven, our train pulled into the Ferrara station. I grabbed my suitcase and helped Carrie retrieve her heavy bag. The station was small but modern. We walked to the ticket window, and I inquired about trains to Felonica Po. The clerk informed us there were trains departing every two hours and the ride would take about an hour. We were between trains, however, and had an hour layover. I bought two round-trip tickets, and we found a small café in the alley outside to wait. We ordered coffee and biscotti, then settled in.

"I was thinking we could spend the afternoon in Felonica Po, then catch the train back and crash in Florence. Maybe have dinner, eat some gelato. Tomorrow see the Duomo, ... see David? Is that okay with you?"

"Sure. I'm not sure what or where that is, but it sounds good," she said, smiling and stirring her coffee.

"You'll see. It's famous stuff. I think you'll like it."

We sat quietly for a few minutes, watching pedestrians move along the narrow street and venture into the various shops.

“How long were you married?” Carrie asked.

“Seven years.”

“What happened? ... You must have loved her at some point? ... Right? Why did you finally split?

“I don’t think it was ever really love. We were young. We got close in college, but thinking back, it was all about the sex. I’d walk to her apartment every night; rain, snow, cold — it didn’t matter. After her roommate went to bed, we’d put on an album and have sex. It’s funny. It’s like what you said, ‘animals breeding?’ I think that’s all it was. I thought it was love, but it wasn’t. It was just a foolish addiction.”

“But, ... she was a star in high school and college — a 4.0 grade point average, ... a cheerleader. You know. She checked all the boxes. Lots of guys wanted her. After we graduated, things didn’t come together for her like she wanted. She was depressed. I think she just wanted a change, and marriage would do. She actually gave me an ultimatum.”

Carrie sat silent, watching, and sipped her coffee.

“Anyway, after a while, everything fell apart. She started traveling all the time with her job and worked late. She changed her mind about having children. Finally, she had an affair with her boss, and that was that. I caught her one night. She came in late from a ‘meeting’ and went directly into the shower. I challenged her to have sex, but that wasn’t happening. She had to get rid of the evidence.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I blame myself. We should never have married. I really didn’t want to, but she pushed, ... insisted. I was weak and gave in. It’s okay, though. We didn’t have any children, and she never quit working, so we just split up the assets and went our own

way. ... Have you ever been close?"

"To marriage? No, I don't think I've ever dated anyone for longer than a month."

"Don't you like commitment?"

"No. ... No. ... It's not that. There just aren't many quality guys out there, ... at least, not in the places I've worked, ... or frequented. I mean ... there are a lot of good-looking guys, a lot of willing guys. I get asked out all the time. But not the kind I'd trust or commit to for life."

"Do you want children?"

"I don't know. ... Maybe. ... Yeah, sure, with the right guy. My family was a little dysfunctional — actually, a lot dysfunctional. My father was violent, not physically, but verbally. He and my mom used to fight a lot, yelling and screaming. I didn't realize it at the time, but looking back, it was messed up. I figured out a few years ago that my parents had me out of wedlock. That's crazy, right? I just never thought about it. I just thought they didn't get along. Then, on one of their anniversaries, I did the math."

"I'm sorry, Carrie."

"Oh, ... it's okay. When you're a kid, you don't have anything to compare it to, right? You think it's normal. Then you grow up and see examples of what real families are like, what real love is like. But it is what it is. Nobody gets a perfect start. I feel relatively fortunate when I look around."

We finished our coffee and reentered the station. The train was at the platform, and we boarded. Felonica Po was only about thirty miles away, but the train was a short, slow train. It rumbled along the track and made many stops. Fortunately, the countryside was interesting. It was late October. Most of the crops were plowed under, but enough grapevines and domestic

animals were around to make it interesting.

“Check this out,” I said, showing Carrie some photos of the Felonica Po train station and my grandfather’s homestead.

She adjusted her glasses and looked at each photo with interest. “Is this your grandfather? He was handsome.”

The photo was of my grandfather in his World War I uniform. “Yes, someone took that just before he went to war in 1918. He was twenty years old. He was a cook. But the war ended just as he was walking up the plank to get on the steamer to Europe, so he never had to go. He was proud of that uniform, though. I think it made him feel like a real American. He kept it hung in a rifle cabinet next to the front door of his house.”

The train pulled into the Felonica Po station with little fanfare. Seven people were waiting to get on, and about a dozen got off. The station looked exactly as it had in the black-and-white photo taken over seventy years ago. We grabbed our bags and stepped onto the platform.

The station was situated in the middle of a great field. In front of it were acres and acres of plowed fields with deep furrows. Behind it, about a mile distant, the tiny town of Felonica Po.

“Hey, give me a minute to take a picture,” I said.

I left my luggage on the platform and walked out into the plowed field, far enough away to get the entire station. The deep furrows made walking through the field difficult. About fifty yards into the field, I turned to take the picture. Carrie moved to the side.

“Don’t move, Carrie. I want you in the shot.” She walked back over to our bags and struck a dramatic pose. We both laughed, and I snapped the picture. As I was focusing the camera to take another, a small Italian man in a gray uniform and conductor’s

cap walked out of the station.

“sei un giornalista?” he asked.

“A what? Er... un cosa?” I asked.

“sei un giornalista?” he repeated.

“Oh, you mean a journalist, a news reporter,” I laughed.

“Si. Si,” the man replied.

“No. No. My grandfather is from this town.”

“sei Americano?” he asked.

“Si. Si. Siamo americani,” I replied. “I’m looking for the home of my grandfather. Ah, ... sto cercando la casa di mio nonno?”

“Oh, va bene,” he said, then shook his head and returned to the station.

Carrie and I grabbed our bags and surveyed the situation. All the other passengers had left. It was quiet, slightly overcast, and cool — a nice fall day. “I guess we walk,” I said. “Can you make it?”

Carrie looked up at me in disbelief. “To that town over there? Of course.”

We started down the long, tree-arbores road to Felonica Po. There were no sidewalks or traffic, so we just walked down the middle of the road. Carrie was again struggling to carry her heavy purse and pull the heavy, wheeled bag on the old, rough asphalt road.

“Let me help you,” I said, reaching for the handle of her bag.

“No, I’ve got it. It’s not that bad,” she said. “I need the exercise anyway. ... What’s your father like, Francis? You haven’t men-

tioned him.”

“He’s dead.”

Carrie looked up. “I’m sorry. When? How?”

“It was a long time ago. I was nine. He was a doctor and died of leukemia. He died six months after the diagnosis. My mother speculated it might have been from radiation — the X-rays he was always taking, usually without proper shielding.”

“I’m so sorry, Francis. That must have been hard for you too.”

“At the time, I didn’t realize how hard it would be. But as I grew older, it became very difficult. All my friends had fathers, and I envied them—you know, at Little League sign-ups, Boy Scouts, and all the other father-son things. I think that’s why I try to control as much as I can, ... the things I actually have power over. There are so many variables in life, so many things you can’t control. You know?”

Just then, the sound of a compact car coming from behind us made us turn to look back. We moved to the side of the road, and a small Fiat sedan pulled up next to us. The door flew open. It was the station agent.

“Vieni, vieni,” the little man shouted, motioning with his hand to get in. “Ti porterò in centro.”

“You want us to get in? Entre?” I asked.

“Si. Si. Vieni,” he nodded. “Vieni.”

Carrie and I looked at each other, shrugged, and piled into the back seat of the tiny sedan. “What did he say?” Carrie whispered.

“I think he’s going to drive us to the center of town.”

The little Fiat motor whined as the agent shifted gears. Carrie fell into me as we made a sharp right-angle turn onto what looked like the main street. We both laughed at the absurdity, then composed ourselves. The Agent came to a stop in front of a café in the center of town. The sign read: "Caffè Po".

"Qualcuno là dentro lo saprà," he said. "You go."

Carrie and I got out of the tiny car. "Grazie, grazie," I said, shaking the man's hand.

"Va bene," the little man said. Then he made a frantic U-turn and sped off back toward the train station.

Carrie and I stood quietly on the sidewalk with our bags and looked around. Little shops and offices lined the main street. It was Monday. The shops seemed quiet, and there were no pedestrians in sight. The café behind us was open, however, and seemed like our best option for collecting information. We entered and looked around. It was a small room, about thirty feet wide by thirty feet deep. Small four-top tables filled the room, and an espresso counter ran across the back wall. The room was empty except for five older men sitting at the coffee bar and a lone barista. The animated men bantered loudly, but paused as we entered. The room went silent as the occupants stared curiously at the two strangers with luggage.

I walked up to the bar and said, "Does anyone speak English?"

"Yes," replied a thin man with gray hair, silver glasses, and a flat cap. "Yes, I do."

"Hi, my name is Francis Marino," I said, extending my hand, "and this is my friend Carrie McCall."

"Joseph Castalone," the man said, shaking my hand. The other men watched in silence. "I'm an English teacher here in town. You're American?"

“Yes, we’re both from Atlanta, Georgia. Do you know it?”

“Yes, I know it. What brings you here?”

“I’m looking for my grandfather’s house and any relatives still living in Felonica Po. Do you recognize any of these pictures?”

I asked, producing the photos.

Joe explained our situation to the others and passed the photos. “I know this house,” he said, handing me the picture of my grandfather’s house. “It’s just down the street. What was your grandfather’s last name?”

“Marino, just like me.”

“Conosci qualcuno che si chiama Marino?” Joe asked the others.

“Sì, la moglie di Michael Bruno è una Marino, no?” one of them replied.

“He said the wife of a neighbor of his is a Marino. They should be home today. We can visit her too. Come. I’ll drive you.”

“That’s very kind of you,” I said. “I don’t want to put you out.”

“It’s my pleasure. We don’t see many Americans around here. It will give me a chance to practice my English. Come.”

Carrie and I piled our luggage into the trunk of Joe’s tiny Fiat and slid into the seats, me next to Joe in front and Carrie alone in back. We drove a couple of blocks to a tiny white house with a small barn in back, and chickens running loose in the front yard. Joe parked, and we knocked on the door.

An older Italian woman answered. Joe explained the situation, then asked me to show her the photos. She looked at them briefly, then pushed the screen door open and motioned for us to enter the house. We entered directly into the kitchen.

The interior was modest, neat, and smelled of fresh-baked bread and cleaning solvent. An older man, presumably the woman's husband, entered the kitchen from the opposite side of the room. Joe recognized the man and shook his hand. He explained who we were and what we were doing. The man then motioned us to sit at the small kitchen table, then reached under the sink and produced a large jug of red wine. He then set the jug and four small tumblers on the table, and then poured. He slid a small glass in front of each of us, then sat down to examine the photos. Carrie and I looked at each other, overwhelmed by the strange act of kindness, and waited for the others to drink. The husband, still looking at the pictures, picked up his glass and drank the contents in one gulp.

Carrie and I watched as he replaced the glass on the table and wiped his mouth with his shirtsleeve. We looked at each other again, shrugged, then lifted our glasses and sipped the wine. It was surprisingly good for wine coming from a large jug. We continued to sip as the man and Joe spoke in Italian. The man then started an animated conversation with his wife. After a few minutes, he looked at Joe and shook his head.

"Neither of them remembers a Paul Rossi Marino," Joe said. "His wife's maiden name is Marino, but she doesn't remember any relatives named Paul Rossi Marino."

"It was a long shot," I said. "My grandfather came to America in 1898. He was nine. That was a long time ago."

We finished our wine, thanked them, wished them well, and returned to Joe's Fiat.

"Well, we struck out there, but I know where that house is for sure," Joe said as we turned onto Main Street once again. We made several turns onto back streets, then along a long,

tree-lined street across from the plowed field between the town and the train station. The car slowed and turned onto a stone driveway. Sure enough, it was the house in the photograph. We got out of the car, and I looked up at the large white house. The little stone water well in the front left corner of the yard was exactly like the old photo. Although the well was now covered, I knew without a doubt it was my grandfather's home. As we stood silently, the front door opened, and an elderly woman stepped out onto the front porch.

"Joseph, cosa stai facendo?" The woman asked. "Chi sono queste persone?"

"They're Americans visiting Felonica Po," Joe said. "Questa è la casa di suo nonno."

The woman looked us over for a few seconds, then said, "Come. Come." She motioned for us to enter the home. "Come. My name is Felicia," she said. "I would introduce you to my husband, but he died three years ago. I live here alone now. Please come in."

Carrie and I introduced ourselves and entered. The house was freshly painted, and the yard was well-kept. As we entered, I noticed the hardwood floors had recently been refinished. The woman seemed distinguished. She wore fine clothes, jewelry, and makeup. After a short tour around the ground floor, I showed her the old photos of the home, and she guided us into the dining room.

"My English is not too good," she said, motioning for us to sit around the formal table. She set the pictures on the table, turned, and produced a bottle of red wine from a hutch along the wall, then four small stemmed glasses from a corner china cabinet. She poured the wine and slid us each a glass, then sat. Silver reading glasses hung on a chain around her neck. She

put them on to examine the photos carefully.

“Sì, ... yes. This is the house. It looks the same,” she said, sliding the photos back to me. “Where are you from in America?”

“Atlanta, Georgia,” I said. “But I’m originally from Pennsylvania. That’s where my grandfather lived all his life. He met my grandmother there and worked in the coal mines.”

“Are you married?” Felicia asked, looking at Carrie and me.

“Oh, ... no,” I said. “Carrie and I are friends.”

Felicia looked at Joe, then back at me. We sipped our wine.

“I’m sorry,” Carrie said. “Can I use your bathroom? I had a lot of coffee this morning.”

“Sì, sì,” Felicia said. “Through that door, at the end of the hall.”

As Carrie exited the room, Felicia looked at me and asked, “What are you waiting for? She is a pretty girl, yes?”

“Oh, yes. She’s an attractive girl. But I haven’t known her long. We actually just met on this trip.”

Felicia tilted her head and looked at me for a few seconds. “Oh. ... So it’s a lucky accident, then?”

“Yes,” I smiled. “I guess it is.”

Carrie returned, and we finished our wine. We thanked Felicia for showing us the old home and said our goodbyes.

As we were leaving, I turned back toward Felicia and produced the old photo of the home from my pocket. “Here,” I said, handing it to her. “You take this. I have another copy at home.”

She looked down at it, smiled, and said, “Grazie mille.”

As we backed out of the driveway, I said, “This is so nice. It makes me wonder why my grandfather left.”

“It hasn’t always been this nice,” Joe said. “During the wars, the economy was bad. People struggled. It’s only recovered in the last couple of decades. The grape growers do well. Let me show you something else I think you’ll like.”

CHAPTER 10 - MARTINIS ON A TRAIN

As we drove back through the village toward the center of town, it occurred to me that the name Felonica Po included the word “Po,” as in the Po River. Oddly, we hadn’t seen the river yet.

“Where is the river?” I asked Joe.

“You’ll see. That’s where we’re going.”

He drove past the café where we first met, continued to the end of the street, then turned sharply into a small parking lot. Ahead, a high dike blocked our view. To the right stood a small, old church built of heavy stone — sturdy and imposing.

“That looks old,” Carrie muttered.

“It is. It’s called the Chiesa dell’Assunzione della Beata Vergine Maria — The Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was built in the 11th century,” Joe said. “You know, the Middle Ages. It’s one of the village’s main attractions.”

We exited the car and walked toward the old church.

“It used to have a Benedictine abbey attached to it. But unfortunately, that’s gone now. Too bad we can’t go inside,” Joe added. “It’s closed on Mondays. No services anymore — just a tourist site.”

I walked to it and touched the front door. “The Middle Ages,” I muttered. “This may be the oldest man-made thing I’ve ever touched. I wonder if any knights attended mass here?”

“Come on,” Joe said. “There’s a better view up here.”

We climbed the staircase to the top of the dike. The view was spectacular. To the left, the mighty Po River flowed toward the Adriatic Sea. It looked to be just over one hundred yards wide, and the current seemed strong. On the right, the medieval church stood defiantly. We stood for several minutes, surveying the view. The huge dike stretched as far as we could see in both directions. The top seemed to be used as a hiking or running trail. In the distance, we spotted several joggers running away from us.

“Do you have a flooding problem here?” I asked.

Joe smiled. “Not anymore. We used to. The town and fields would flood occasionally. They’ve been improving this dike, or argini, as we call it, since the 1800s. Everything was finally connected about fifty years ago. ... How long are you staying?”

“I thought we’d catch the four o’clock train to Ferrara.”

Joe looked at his watch. “It’s 3:15 now. I want you to meet my wife. Let’s stop by the library where she works — then I’ll drive you to the station.”

We headed back into the village and pulled into the lot of a modest, modern government building.

“Come on. Let’s say hello,” Joe said, motioning us to enter.

Inside, a dark-haired, attractive woman of about fifty years of age greeted us. She wore dark slacks, a cream-colored blouse, and flat black leather shoes. Joe put his arm around the woman and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She whispered something in his ear, and he kissed her again.

Carrie leaned into me and whispered. “Aww, ... isn’t that

sweet?”

“This is Carrie and Francis,” Joe said. “They’re visiting from America.”

“Hello, I’m Maria, Joe’s wife,” she said, smiling. “Are you two married?”

Carrie and I looked at each other, smiling.

“No,” I said. “We actually met a couple of days ago and decided to travel together.”

“Well, you look nice together. I hope you have a pleasant experience in Italy,” Maria said.

Maria and Joe were both schoolteachers at a local high school. Maria worked part-time at the Felonica Po Library. Both were full of questions about the United States. Carrie seemed a bit surprised and flattered that they asked her so many questions about life in America.

After about thirty minutes, Joe checked the time. “We’d better get going if you want to catch the four o’clock. It’s not always on time.”

We said our goodbyes, then Joe drove us to the station and parked the car. We unloaded our luggage and dragged our stuff to the platform. As we waited, Joe paced. I sensed he was a little sad to see us leave.

“Thanks for everything, Joe. I wasn’t sure what I’d find here. It was different from what I expected.”

“In what way?” He asked.

“Well, I didn’t really learn anything new about my family, but the people here are wonderful. Your town is beautiful. It was a good experience. I’m glad I came. I guess you can’t go back, but you can always learn something new.”

Carrie looked at me intently as I spoke, then turned to Joe. "Yes, thank you so much," she said, giving him a hug. "I can't believe everyone took us in and gave us wine. You don't see that much in America. Everyone here seems so kind."

A train whistle blew in the distance, and three cars pulled into the station parking lot. The occupants got out and joined us on the platform. Joe spoke with several of them in Italian, occasionally gesturing toward us. They nodded politely.

Soon, the rumble of the wheels shook the ground, and the smell of diesel exhaust filled the air. The screech of steel on steel and the banging of railcar hitches punctuated the train's arrival. Carrie and I thanked Joe again. I shook his hand; Carrie hugged him a second time.

"Thanks so much," I said, boarding the train.

We moved into wooden bench seats and looked out the window for a last look at the station. Joe stood on the platform, waving until we were out of sight.

The train back to Ferrara seemed slower and rougher than the one that had brought us. The bench seats were only slightly nicer than slatted public park benches. Shortly after we left the station, Carrie leaned into me and dozed off. I looked down at her, but tried not to move too quickly so as not to wake her. Under her black glasses, her eyes were closed, her mouth was slightly open, and her soft, dark hair fell against my neck. It hinted of the fragrant shampoo from the hotel. I gently dragged my arm from between us and wrapped it around her shoulder to warm her. She silently clasped her hands together and leaned further into me. I was glad she had come. She was a good sport.

The train pulled into the Ferrara station at about five o'clock. The railcar jolted as it stopped. Carrie shuddered, rubbed her eyes, licked her lips, and sat up.

"Are we here?" she asked.

"Yes, we're in Ferrara. Let's get our stuff and find out when the next train to Florence leaves."

Luckily, a fast southbound train was departing from the adjacent platform. I bought two one-way tickets, and we hurried across the causeway to the economy car. As we stepped aboard, an announcement chimed:

"Train 1023 to Florence is now departing — the doors are closing."

This train was far nicer — wide, comfortable seats and a plush interior. We stashed our luggage overhead and settled in. A few minutes later, the train jolted and moved. Carrie smiled, stretched, and yawned, attempting to recover from her nap. "What's the plan now, Mr. Big?"

"Thanks for being a good sport in Felonica," I said. "That probably wasn't as interesting for you as it was for me."

"No. ... It was interesting. I'd never, ever have done something like that if I weren't tagging along with you. It was surprisingly interesting. Those people were so nice, giving us rides, taking us around, giving us wine. Did you see the first guy chug that glass of wine? ... Is that what they do here?"

We both laughed.

"Hey," I said. "Speaking of wine, want to check out the bar car?"

"They have a bar car?"

"Yeah, I saw it through the window when we got on. They have

a restaurant and sleepers too. Come on, let's go."

"Hey, what about our luggage? I don't want to lose my bag again."

"This train doesn't stop until Florence. We're fine. The bar is only one car back. Just bring your purse."

I let Carrie out, and we made our way back to the last car of the train, the bar car, and settled onto stools. Several other passengers were sipping drinks, and a bartender was shaking a martini.

"Martini?" I asked.

"Sure. Whatever you're having. ... You're the money man."

I laughed and asked the bartender for two Tanqueray martinis, clean with olives.

Two Italian businessmen were intently discussing something at the end of the eight-seat bar. They sipped whiskey from short rocks glasses and pondered over papers. An attractive young couple next to us seemed to be on vacation, or maybe a honeymoon. They didn't seem interested in anything but each other.

"What do you think their story is?" Carrie whispered, stirring her martini.

I turned to see what she was talking about. I spun back toward her. "I don't know. My German isn't good enough to decipher any of that conversation."

We laughed and sipped our drinks. The martinis were strong, and soon we were relaxed and giddy.

"How did you get so smart?" Carrie laughed.

I smiled and stirred my drink. "I'm not really smart. I'm just disciplined. ... I just pay attention. ... just read the directions.

That's all. Most people don't. They just wing it."

Carrie smirked and pulled one of the three olives off the red drink pick and chewed. "No ... no, you are. You always seem to know what to do. What to say. How to act. I deal with people all the time. You're a smart guy."

"Well, ... I guess when my father died at thirty-eight, I assumed I wouldn't live much longer than he did. Looking back, I think that caused something of a panic to get ahead fast. I try to be efficient, ... make good decisions."

"I ask a lot of stupid questions. One of my favorite philosophers, Epictetus, said something to the effect, 'If you want to improve, be content being thought a fool'. It's one of my favorite saying."

"I don't get it? ... Why is it good to be thought a fool?"

"To learn anything new, you have to ask obvious, or 'stupid' questions. Then you ask the next stupid question, and the next. It's not easy. People with the knowledge haze you, or think you're dumb, but that's the price you pay for learning something new."

Carrie sipped her drink thoughtfully. "Do you think I'm smart?"

"Yes."

"No, you don't. You think I'm a silly bartender."

"No, I think you're very smart."

"Okay, smart guy, why?"

"Because you ask stupid questions," I laughed. "Only people who ask questions are smart. People who pretend they know everything are actually dull, or just cowards. They're afraid to ask questions. Their egos shatter if someone laughs at or makes

fun of them.”

“So you think I’m smart? You’re the first person who ever said that.”

“I do. Maybe more street-smart than academic, but that’s still real intelligence. You’re very observant. You notice things. You seem to want to learn, and that’s the most important thing. Besides, being ‘smart’ is overrated. You’re sweet, kind, and loving. You have this artistic vibe about you, and you seem like a genuinely good person. That matters more — at least to me. Since meeting you, I’ve been reassessing my whole life. That has to mean something ... right?”

Carrie tipped her martini glass high enough to let the last olive roll into her mouth, then set the glass on the bar. She chewed and studied me, then rubbed the toe of her sneaker along my calf and smiled. “You’re all right, Francis.”

It was six-thirty when the train pulled into Firenze Santa Maria Novella, the Florence train station. I’d always found it odd that American maps insisted on calling it “Florence” when the locals say Firenze. Why not just use the real name? Who knows? Maybe I was just irritable, fatigued from the morning’s activities, and buzzed from the giant martini. It had already been a long day, and we had to find a hotel and dinner before retiring.

Carrie had dozed off again. It seems trains relaxed her, and she slept like a baby for an hour. She woke with a start as the train lurched to a stop, stretching and yawning.

She yawned. “What now? What’s the plan, smart guy?”

“Find a room and get some dinner.”

We gathered our belongings and stepped off the train into the

bustling station, crowded with travelers towing luggage in every direction. Moving to a quieter area outside, I checked my notes and decided we should try Hotel Spagna, a modest hotel within walking distance of the station. The hotel was conveniently located near most of the major attractions. Carrie seemed refreshed after her nap and soldiered on with her heavy suitcase and purse. She dragged it as best she could over the bumpy cobblestones.

After a fifteen-minute walk, we found the hotel on a busy street lined with shops. We entered the lobby and inquired about a room. The clerk said they were very busy, but a room had just become available on the third floor. We were tired, hungry, and desperately wanted to stash our stuff and secure lodging. Without hesitation, I handed the clerk my credit card and took the room.

The elevator was tiny. We squeezed ourselves and our baggage in and shut the outer and inner gates. The little elevator shuddered as we began ascending to the third floor. The room was at the end of the hall. It had a clean tile floor, white walls, and a floor-to-ceiling window looking out on the street and shops below. The bathroom had a marble sink, shower, toilet — and a bidet.

“What is that?” Carrie asked, examining the unit.

“A bidet. You use it to clean yourself.”

“Clean myself?” She pushed the button and watched the water shoot upward. “Okay, ... got it,” she laughed.

The bed was peculiar — two full-sized beds pushed together with a wide walnut headboard. Carrie dropped her things near the wall, and claimed the bed closest to the bathroom.

“Let’s get organized, then go to dinner?” I said. “I’m starving.”

“If we’re going out, I’m taking a shower,” she said, digging

through her bag.

“Go ahead. It’s all yours. I’ll shower when you’re finished.”

I walked over to the window, opened the curtain and sheer, then turned the latch. The window squeaked as I pulled it open. Europe was nice that way. While many older hotels offered no air conditioning, the windows opened, allowing fresh air and street noise to enter the room. I looked out onto the street below. It was dusk. Amber streetlights glowed, casting the buildings in a warm, painterly hue. Many people were still walking the sidewalks and entering shops. Many looked up as they walked, suggesting they were most likely tourists. The smell of fresh bread wafted in from a bakery across the street, and chatter from excited tourists filled the air.

As I turned back into the room, Carrie walked briskly to the bathroom, clad only in lacy panties. A bundle of clothes and her bath accessories covered her breasts. I fixated on her smooth backside, legs, arches, and perfect toes as she walked across the shiny tile floor. She was strong and coordinated. It confused me. Under normal circumstances, I might not have given her a second look. At first glance, she didn’t check many of my “boxes.” She wasn’t the woman I’d been looking for. But after spending time with her, listening to her observations, and observing her gracefulness, I felt myself becoming infatuated and unexpectedly moved. She wasn’t just cute; her attractiveness ran much deeper. You had to know her to get it.

Twenty minutes later, she emerged, again wearing stylish slacks and a button-down blouse with the sleeves rolled up to her forearms, slightly exposing her ivy tattoos. Her contacts were in again, and her makeup tastefully accentuated her eyes and lips. She walked barefoot across the room and slipped into her black leather flats. She hummed and twirled in a playful pirouette. As she finished, she caught me watching.

I smiled. She couldn't help herself. She always seemed relaxed and fully present in the moment, radiating a lightness I wished I possessed more of.

She crossed her arms. "Do you know where we're going? I'm sure you've researched it thoroughly."

"As a matter of fact, I have. There's a small place near the Duomo. It came highly recommended. It's only a short walk. Give me a few minutes to shower."

As I toweled off, I detected faint singing coming from the bedroom. I silently cracked the bathroom door to peek out.

It appeared that earlier, when Carrie twirled, she discovered that her leather-soled shoes slid effortlessly across the polished tile floor. She was twirling, dancing, and singing as if she had the entire hotel suite to herself.

"... Sendin' out the message to all of my friends

We'll be lookin' flashy in my Mercedes Benz

I got lotsa style, check my gold diamond rings

I can go for miles if you know what I mean

I'm comin' up so you better get this party started

(I'm comin' up, I'm comin')

I'm comin' up so you better get this party started ..."

As I watched, my heart filled with joy. Her singing was adorable, and her energetic dance moves were rock-solid. She was

enchanting.

As much as I wanted to continue spying on her, however, it was getting late. We needed to leave for dinner.

When I finally opened the bathroom door, a little louder than necessary, Carrie's singing stopped abruptly. She dropped onto the edge of the bed with a bounce, her lips pressed together and her hands clasped in her lap. A mischievous grin tugged at the corners of her mouth, as if she had just been caught doing something she shouldn't.

"What's the Duomo?" she asked, struggling to suppress a smile.

I shook my head, amused by her childlike attempt at deception.

"The Duomo di Firenze is Florence's most famous landmark. It's a massive green-and-white Gothic cathedral, and it's beautiful. You'll love it. We'll see it tonight, and tomorrow we'll tour it."

CHAPTER 11 - DISCOTECA FIRENZE

The route to the restaurant cut through the Piazza del Duomo. As we entered the square, I said, “Look.”

The white marble Duomo glowed under the bright spotlights and amber streetlamps. The green marble trim popped, emphasizing the intricate detail and ornate design. We stopped for a moment, silently admiring the magnificent cathedral.

“Oh my God. That’s incredible,” Carrie said. “That’s the Duomo you were talking about?”

“Yeah. It’s cool? ... Right?”

“It’s magnificent,” she whispered, clasping her hands together and staring upward at the imposing cathedral.

She looked up at me and hooked her arm through mine. “Francis, thank you for bringing me. Don’t you want to hold my hand anymore?”

With her dark hair cascading over her shoulders, smoky eyelids, and flushed lips, she looked like she could be a local Italian girl. That excited me. I looked down at her and said, “I love holding your hand.”

She smiled, took my hand, and pulled me into a ballroom hold. She began swaying as if slow dancing, and whispered, “Italy is so romantic. ... Don’t you think? I had no idea it was like this. It’s just one beautiful surprise after another.” I pushed

my nose into her hair. The hint of pheromones behind her ears was intoxicating. With each passing moment, I could feel myself falling harder for her. We turned slowly for a minute, attracting glances from passing tourists, then broke, held hands, and continued on our way.

It was nearly eight o'clock when we arrived at the Ristorante Buca Niccolini, a small, intimate restaurant about a half-block from the Duomo. Inside, the aroma of pasta, truffles, and sizzling meat filled the room. By American standards, eight o'clock was late for dinner. But by Italian standards, it was prime time, and the room was nearly full.

Many small restaurants in Italy arrange small two-top tables in rows, each table separated by a small gap. This allows for seating flexibility. The small tables can easily be joined to accommodate any size group without wasting space. Buca Niccolini divided the dining room in half, with five rows of four small tables on either side of a central aisle. The host led us to a small two-top in the middle row, on the aisle. Two couples joined the two tables closest to the wall, leaving a vacant two-top separating us from the couples. The host handed us menus.

"I need a drink," I said. "It's been a long day. I want to get drunk and go to bed."

I was exhausted from the train ride and our visit to Felonica Po. Carrie, though, seemed fresh from her naps. I ordered a bottle of house Valpolicella and spaghetti carbonara. Carrie ordered truffle risotto.

"I just can't quit it," she laughed. "I love risotto. It's like the ultimate comfort food? ... Right?"

"You know, we should get a bottle of Prosecco at some point. It's the whole reason you're here," I said.

Carrie winced. "I've never had it."

"You're kidding me — seriously? You've never had Prosecco?"

"Nope."

"You sold the most Prosecco at your bar and never tasted it?"

"No. I sold a ton of it at the bar, but I never tasted it. It's fizzy, so you have to order a whole bottle. Once you open the bottle, it goes flat if you don't drink it all, so we didn't sell it by the glass. Most people seemed to order it for special occasions. I guess I never had a reason to celebrate."

I signaled the waiter. "Let's change that. We'll have a bottle of Prosecco instead."

"Laura Marca Prosecco, signor?"

"Si, grazie."

The waiter returned shortly thereafter and uncorked the wine. He poured us each a fluted glass, then wrapped the bottle in a white napkin and set it on the table.

"This is so special. Thank you," Carrie said, fingering the stem of her glass.

"To another surprisingly special moment with Carrie McCall," I said, raising my glass. She held my gaze for a moment, then sipped the sparkling wine in the flickering candlelight.

As the server delivered our entrees, the host seated a handsome young man at the table wedged between us and the two couples. He sat, ordered a glass of red wine, and studied the menu. He looked to be an Italian man in his late twenties, well-built, dressed in blue jeans, a light blue button-down shirt, and a nicely tailored navy sports jacket. He combed his near-black hair back over the top, and his olive skin seemed smooth and

conditioned. As he spoke animatedly with the server in Italian, he was hard to ignore, as his table was only inches from ours. When he returned the menu, I noticed his Patek Philippe wristwatch, manicured nails, and an ornate gold ring with a large green stone in the center.

Carrie shielded her mouth so the gentleman couldn't see. Her eyes widened as she whispered, "He's good-looking."

I rolled my eyes, but didn't respond.

We finished our meal and waited for the server to clear our plates.

"After dinner drink?" I asked.

Carrie smiled and nodded. "Sure. ... another Sambuca?"

The good-looking young man beside us suddenly spoke. "Are you Americans?"

"Yes, ... yes, we are," I said. "I'm Francis, and this is Carrie. Are you Italian?"

"Yes, I'm from Milano. Marco Caruso," he said, extending his hand across the table. "Are you vacationing?"

"Yes," I said as I shook hands. "We flew into Marco Polo last Saturday, visited Venezia for a couple of days, then my grandfather's hometown on the Po River, and now we're here to see Firenze. ... Nice to meet you. ... Your English is very good. I detect a slight English accent?"

"Yes, I went to school in London, at the Royal College of Art."

"What brings you to Florence?"

"I'm a sales trainer for Prada, the fashion company. Have you heard of it?"

Carrie jumped in. "Yes. I know Prada. I love Prada. Very cool

stuff.”

I looked across the table at Carrie and said, “Seriously? You like Prada?”

“Yes Francis. I can’t afford it, but I like it. I do clean up once in a while,” she said with a smirk, then turned to Marco. “You went to art school?”

“Yes, I majored in fashion design.”

“Wow, that’s so cool. What was that like?”

He thought for a moment and studied Carrie. “It was fun, ... but you soon realize how enormously talented some people are. It makes you question your own abilities. I realized that while I really enjoyed and appreciated fashion, I wasn’t talented enough to create it. So ... now I’m in sales.”

“What’s a sales trainer do?” she asked.

“I visit our outlets and train the staff on our new lines. I teach what we call brand storytelling — building value into the brand, client service etiquette, upselling techniques, etc. I’m here for a couple of days, then on to Rome. I heard you talking about an after-dinner drink; can I buy you one?”

Carrie and I looked at each other. Our eyes widened, and our shoulders hunched. “Sure,” I said. “Why not? ... Sure.”

“Do you like limoncello?”

We looked at each other. “I don’t think I’ve ever had it,” I said.

Carrie shook her head. “I’m a bartender, and I’ve never heard of it.”

“You’re a bartender?” Marco smiled, as if intrigued.

Carrie nodded. “Yep.”

Marco raised his eyebrows as if amused, then looked back at

me. "What kind of shoes are those?" he said, nodding at my feet.

"Oh," I said, slightly raising my left black oxford shod foot off the floor. "These are actually golf shoes. I'd read it gets wet here in October and it's prudent to wear waterproof shoes if you intend to walk a lot. Golf shoes are comfortable to walk in, and they're waterproof."

Marco grimaced and nodded. "I see."

He signaled the waiter and ordered three limoncellos. "This is popular here. I think you'll like it. It's a liqueur made from lemons. They grow a lot of them in southern Italy."

The waiter returned in a couple of minutes with three small shot glasses filled with yellow liquid. Marco passed one to each of us and held his in the air. "Cin cin!" he shouted, then raised the small glass and drank the cordial in one swallow.

Carrie and I looked at each other and did the same.

The limoncello was nice and went down easily. "That's good. ... Limoncello? I've never seen it," Carrie said, setting her shot glass on the table and smacking her lips. "It's sweet and sour ... nice. What does Cin Cin mean?"

"Cheers. ... Happy times?" Marco answered. "... I think."

The waiter picked up the empty shot glasses and cleaned our table. "Let's have another with our new friend," I said. Marco nodded, and Carrie shrugged. "Three more shots," I said to the waiter. He shrugged.

"Say it in Italian," Marco said. "Altri tre bicchieri di limoncello."

When the drinks arrived, I raised my glass. "Here's to the sweetest moments of my life, spent in the arms of another

man's wife. God bless her. I love her." I then raised the glass to my lips.

Marco tilted his head to one side and looked confused. Carrie gasped. "That's a terrible toast! What kind of toast is that?"

I smiled and continued, "...my dear mother."

The table burst into laughter — even the eavesdropping couples at the next table laughed and clapped.

Carrie shook her head and laughed. "You're bad," she said, kicking me under the table.

"One more," Marco said, ordering seven this time — three for us and four for the two couples beside us.

When the shots came, Marco raised his glass. "Beviamo! Perché un giorno senza limoncello è come un giorno senza sole!"

We toasted and clinked glasses.

"What does that mean?" Carrie asked, still laughing.

Marco straightened upright and announced, "Let's drink! Because a day without limoncello is like a day without sunshine!"

Everyone laughed.

Marco turned to Carrie and asked, "Are you married?"

"No. ... No. We're friends. We actually just met on the plane here," she replied.

"Sei cos' bella. ... Are you Italian?" Marco whispered, leaning in to her.

"No, Irish and Persian," she said with a smile, and then glanced back at me, raising her eyebrows and tightening her lips. She hadn't realized he'd called her beautiful in Italian, and I felt no urge to translate.

Marco drifted back in his chair. “Well, I like you — both of you. Enjoy your trip.”

“Are you married?” Carrie asked.

“No, I’m not married,” he said. “But you, ... Beh, con un bel viso come questo, non rimarrai single a lungo,” he said, looking into her eyes.

“I don’t speak much Italian,” she replied.

“I said, with a beautiful face like yours, you won’t last long.”

Carrie looked back at me, smiling, and whispered, “Thank you.”

I detected a slight slur in Marco’s compliment. We were all getting a little drunk. Carrie and I were feeling pretty good on two glasses of Prosecco and three shots each, but we weren’t slurring ... yet.

“Where do you get such beautiful dark hair — from the Persians or the Irish? Do you mind?” Marco asked, reaching out to touch it.

“Definitely the Persians,” she laughed. “My mother had the most beautiful hair — dark, thick, very shiny.”

“It’s beautiful,” he mumbled, looking into her eyes and pinching a lock between his fingers.

Carrie blushed, smiled and raised her eyebrows. “Thank you. You’re kind.”

I was growing fatigued and felt a sudden urge to leave. I signaled our server.

We thanked Marco, waved at the two couples, and paid our bill. As we steadied ourselves and turned to leave, Marco dropped several euros on the table and said, “Let’s go do some-

thing fun. Come. Come with me?" he said, looking at Carrie, then back at me.

"Where to?" she asked.

"There's a disco just around the corner, across from the Duomo. I go there often when I'm in town. Do you like to dance? Let's go? You'll like it. I'm meeting a friend there later. It's fun."

"That sounds like fun," Carrie said. "A disco next to the Duomo? That's got to be weird. Can we go?" she asked, bouncing on her toes.

I was drunk, tired, and ready to crash, but Carrie was bobbing up and down with excitement. She put her hands together as if praying, and her smile was ear-to-ear.

"Okay... but just for a little while. I'm beat."

We stumbled through the door and shuffled down the cobblestones toward the alley on the left side of the Duomo. Large spotlights illuminated the front of the cathedral, but a spooky darkness shrouded the sides. Carrie and I followed Marco and stared up at the imposing structure.

"You're going to like this," he said, pausing, waiting for Carrie to catch up. He then placed his hand on her back to guide her. She was bouncing with excitement.

As we approached the back left corner of the cathedral, sure enough, one of the brightly lit storefront signs read 'Discoteca Firenze'. We entered, and I paid our ten-euro cover charges.

The club was small, with a hardwood floor, mirrored walls, chrome stools, and a pulsing light show. A long bar stretched down the left side of the room. Loud rave music blasted through the speakers, and the moist air smelled faintly of spilled beer mixed with hints of cologne. We made our way to the center

of the bar. The crowd looked to be predominantly male, with only a few young women dancing together on the dance floor. The large group of men in front of the bar seemed well-tailored and groomed. As we passed, I felt a little underdressed and wondered if all young men in Florence sported expensive watches, tailored sports jackets, and manicured nails.

Marco leaned into the bar and ordered three more shots of limoncello.

I was drunk and exhausted. I didn't need another shot. My goal was to appease Carrie and then exit for the hotel and a warm bed as soon as possible. Carrie, however, seemed to have other ideas. She was in her element, and although she was at least as intoxicated as I was, she seemed fresher from her naps on the train.

Marco handed each of us a shot of limoncello and shouted, "Cin cin!" He then knocked his shot back in one swallow. Carrie and I dutifully did the same. My head was spinning.

Carrie slammed her shot glass on the bar and said, "Come on, Francis, dance with me! I want to dance with you!"

"Carrie, ... I'm beat... and drunk."

"Come on, Mr. Corporate America. Please? Show me your stuff," she pled, jumping up and down and pulling my arms toward the floor.

"Carrie ... I don't dance. I watch," I begged, laughing. "Go ahead, you dance, and I'll watch you," I said, settling onto a bar stool.

Marco smiled and leaned over Carrie's shoulder. "Ti piacerebbe ballare?"

Carrie smiled at him. "What? ... What did you say? I don't

understand.”

“Would you like to dance?” He smiled.

Her eyes lit up, and she bounced up and down on her toes. “Sure! I’d love to dance with you.”

Marco looked over at me and asked, “Do you mind if I dance with this beautiful woman? ... It’s okay?”

“Of course. It’s fine,” I said. “Have fun.”

Carrie grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the dance floor. As she tugged Marco through the crowd, he looked back at me, raising his eyebrows and smiling. Once on the dance floor, she let go of his hand and twirled into a wicked disco pose, then energetically swayed to the music. She lifted her arms over her head and spun lightly on the balls of her feet. Her hair haloed as it caught the spotlights on the ceiling and fanned around her. Her hands traced graceful arcs through the air, accentuating each movement with the poise of an accomplished dancer. She was beautiful to watch.

Marco clapped his hands together, then spread his arms wide and gyrated to the beat. He was obviously an accomplished dancer as well, and the two looked good together. His moves mirrored Carrie’s, and the pair soon became the center of attention on the floor. Marco pulled her close, then pushed her away, only to pull her back again. The two were in sync and laughing. Each time Marco pulled her close, he seemed to hold her a little tighter. He dipped her several times. Her back arched, and her neck elongated as she stretched her graceful hand toward the floor. Marco would then pull her back so close that their noses would almost touch.

I felt myself becoming uncomfortable. I had no right to be possessive. I had known Carrie for only a few days. We weren’t committed, but watching them dance bothered me. Worse,

she was smiling, laughing, and seemed to be having fun. The scene evoked memories of Jamie leaving me at her company parties to dance with her boss. I was naïve. ... I was a fool.

The music segued into a slow dance. Except for the black lights and the flying stars from the mirrored ball, the room went dark. Marco pulled Carrie close and held her tight, only letting go for her occasional pirouettes. He pressed his nose into her hair, laughing and whispering things I could not hear. At one point, he placed his hand on the small of her back, close to her bottom. She twirled away, like a figure skater performing a spin. When she stopped, he reflexively pulled her so close their cheeks touched. She pushed back to look into his eyes, and they began talking and laughing again.

As the music segued, another good-looking man entered the club and joined them on the dance floor. He wore a tailored sports jacket, like Marco, and his hair was neatly combed over the top. Marco “man hugged” him, then introduced him to Carrie. He pulled her into a tight hug and gave her the French “la bise”, or cheek to cheek kiss. Marco leaned in, hugged her tightly, and kissed her on the cheek. He then took out his wallet and gave her what looked like his business card and a pen. Carrie wrote something on a napkin, and Marco tucked the napkin into his pocket.

Flashes of anger and disappointment overwhelmed me. From my vantage point, Carrie didn’t seem to mind either man’s advances. She seemed to enjoy their attention, and it bothered me. My mind was foggy, and I didn’t have the energy or patience to think it through. I didn’t know whether to intervene or leave. The alcohol was running strong; my head was spinning; my eyes were heavy; and a sinking, sick feeling was swelling inside me. I should know better, I thought. That’s what I get for imagining myself with a punky bartender.

I didn't want to watch them any longer. I didn't want to be there any longer. She knows where the hotel is. I'll make it easy for her. I pushed off the stool, steadied myself, then turned toward the door and left.

Outside, the cool October night drove some of the fog from my head. My warm breath clouded as I stood for a moment to get my bearings. In front of me, the silhouette of the massive Gothic cathedral loomed large. The narrow alley was quiet and surreal. I felt as if I had walked through a portal back in time.

To hell with it, I muttered, wiping my eyes. I walked toward the hotel, one foot in front of the other, watching my feet on the cobblestones. My only thought was to get home and get into bed. I could reassess tomorrow.

As I crossed the piazza between the cathedral and the Baptistry, I heard slapping steps on the cobblestones, approaching from behind.

"Francis!" Carrie called out. "Where are you going? Are you leaving me?" She jumped in front of me to stop my progress.

"No. ... No, ... you looked like you were having fun. I'm exhausted. I want to go to bed. You stay and dance. You know where the hotel is. I'll leave the door open."

"Are you mad at me? ... Are you mad because I danced with Marco?"

I pushed her aside and started walking again. "What happened to Marco, anyway? You two looked like you were having a good time."

"He's dancing with somebody else," she said, trying to keep up.

"That's too bad," I muttered. "You lost your dance partner."

"Are you mad at me? ... for dancing with him?"

“No, I’m not,” I whispered. “I’m just exhausted. It’s been a long day.”

She darted in front of me again. “You’re mad at me! ... You may be Mister Worldly Man, but I know people, and you’re upset. ... Why are you upset?”

“No, I’m not!” I snapped, pushing past her and quickening my pace.

She grabbed my arm to stop me. “Francis, don’t be mad. He bought us all those drinks. He’s a nice guy and an excellent dancer. It was just dancing. ... Come on?”

“You exchanged phone numbers, Carrie.”

“Yeah. ... For free Prada stuff! What’s wrong with that?”

I pulled free and continued walking briskly in silence. Carrie jumped in front again. “I know what it is,” she grinned. “You’re jealous! ... That’s it! You ... are ... jealous! Francis Marino is jealous that a dashing Italian gentleman was interested in me,” she teased.

I pushed past her again and mumbled, “Carrie, ... you can dance with whomever you want.”

She walked faster to catch up and said, “You’re not going to admit it, ... are you? ... You weren’t just a little jealous?”

“That’s not it; ... I’m just tired. I need to get home. I need to get some sleep — I’m spent!”

“After kissing me in the piazza and holding hands, you’re not going to admit that you like me a little? ... and you were a little jealous?” She laughed sadly and struggled to keep up. “Francis, ... don’t you like me just a little? Weren’t you just a little jealous? Didn’t last night mean anything?”

I turned back to face her and stopped. She looked up at me

forlornly. We were now standing in front of the Duomo. The bright amber street lamps and the October full moon cast enchanting shadows over the Renaissance architecture all around us. The streets were deathly still. We stood in silence, and I looked off at the giant cathedral and the moon behind it. Then I looked down at her for a long moment.

“Well, ... maybe just a little.”

“I knew it!” she said, jumping up and down. “I knew it!”

As we continued toward the hotel, Carrie hung back a few feet, twirled on the street, and repeatedly sang. “Francis likes me just a little. He was a little jealous.”

We staggered into the hotel office to get our room key, and I rang the little silver bell on the desk. The clerk emerged through a red curtain behind the counter. As he retrieved our key, Carrie continued teasing me. “Francis likes me a little. He was just a little jealous at that disco.”

As the desk clerk handed me the key, Carrie shielded her mouth with her hand, pretending she didn’t want me to hear, then pointed at me and whispered to the clerk, “He likes me a little.”

We squeezed into the tiny elevator, facing each other. Carrie covered her mouth and looked away, struggling to hold back laughter, and it was pissing me off. I closed the two gates and pushed three. “I can’t believe you let that guy dirty-dance with you like that? ... and kiss you? We just met him?”

“I guess that’s just the way they do things here in Italy,” Carrie sang comically. “It’s your fault. ... Francis. ... I begged you to be my dance partner ... remember? Do you remember that part, Francis?” she laughed obstinately.

The elevator lurched as we landed on the third floor. I opened the gates and guided Carrie by the small of her back. We shuf-

fled toward our room door.

“What do you know?” Carrie continued to laugh and sing in a sleepy voice. “Francis likes me a little, ... and I made him just a little jealous tonight.”

I unlocked our room door and pushed it open. My head was spinning, but I’d had enough of Carrie’s teasing. As she moved past me, I pushed her up against the wall, grabbed the hair at the base of her neck, and pulled her into me. I clamped onto her like a steel vise and pressed my lips hard against hers. She placed her hands on the sides of my head and pulled me toward her, then pushed her tongue into my mouth. When we broke, I released her and said, “I don’t want you dirty dancing with any more Italian fashion trainers. ... Got it? ... Is that clear enough? ... Ms. McCall?”

Carrie looked into my eyes, trying not to laugh. “Francis, ... Marco is gay. Didn’t you pick up on that?” she said as she broke into wild laughter. “That was a gay disco, you fool! All those well-dressed guys ... were gay!”

“What?”

“He’s gay, you fool,” she laughed. “The manscaping, the clothes, the jewelry, the dancing, ... the facial moisturizer? That was his partner he introduced me to just as you were bolting for the door, Mr. Smarty-Pants! He wanted you to meet him.”

“You’re making that up.”

“No, ... I’m not, silly. He told me everything.”

Dazed, I slumped on the far bed, looked off, and reflected on what she’d said. “What???”

She grinned from ear to ear. “But Francis,” she sang, ... “you said some things outside the disco. I made you just a little jeal-

ous tonight.” She kicked off her shoes, shuffled to her bed, and collapsed. “Francis likes me a little ... just a little jealous.” Her whisper trailed off as she drifted into deep sleep.

THE FIFTH DAY

Tuesday, October 29, 2002

CHAPTER 12 - CARRIE'S PERSPECTIVE

"I feel like crap," I said, slumping into the desk chair. "I need coffee. Come on. Let's hit the streets."

Carrie stretched her hands in the air and peeked at me mischievously from under her covers. "Good morning, Francis," she said in a sleepy but cheerful voice. She smiled from ear to ear. "You were funny last night. ... You said things."

"Yeah, well, my recollection is a little hazy. Listen, ... I'm sorry I overreacted to the Marco thing. I was pretty messed up."

Carrie sat up and smirked. "You said some things," she repeated with a grin.

"Nothing offensive, I hope. I'm sorry. I got a little carried away; ... fucking limoncello."

She shook her head, still smiling. "What's on for today?"

"Let's go get coffee, then maybe see the Duomo, and then maybe David?"

"What's David?"

"Michelangelo's David ... the 17-foot statue of David carved from a solid piece of marble. You know, the guy who killed Goliath, ... the Philistine giant, ... with a slingshot?"

She tilted her head. "Drawing a blank."

"I guarantee you've seen it. It's just down the street in a museum called the Galleria dell'Accademia. I should have booked tickets, but I wasn't sure when we'd get here. I hope the line isn't too long. But we gotta do it."

We found a small outdoor café a couple of blocks from the hotel with a stunning view of the Duomo. It was almost ten o'clock by the time we sat with our coffee. The streets were busy. Locals and tourists dodged in and out of shops, talking and carrying bags of treasure. A couple nearby conversed animatedly in Italian. An elderly man in front of us sipped his espresso while holding a small dog in his lap.

Carrie leaned back, propped her sneakers up on the opposite chair, sipped her latte, and contemplated the Duomo. The cool morning air and hot coffee were clearing my head. I could think again. Sitting in a café and watching people has always been one of my favorite things. It's a great way to ease into the day, and the coffee here was especially good.

We sat quietly. I watched Carrie. She was in her natural state. The morning sunshine reflected off her clear skin, highlighting its velvety-soft texture. She had toned down the punk look for Florence. She still wore her black Converse sneakers, but her short black leather jacket, blue jeans without rips or holes, and white blouse made for a casual, stylish look.

She snapped her lighter and lit a cigarette, once again handling it with a confident, casual elegance. She took a long drag, held the smoke in her lungs for a moment, then looked up and exhaled slowly. She looked like a movie star from an old Humphrey Bogart film. It was beguiling.

A few minutes later, she crushed the cigarette into the ashtray, reached into her purse, produced a pen, and began doodling on a napkin.

As I sipped my coffee, I looked at the gold bracelet on my wrist. I hadn't taken it off since Carrie put it on me. I thought about taking it off and storing it in my bag, but left it on. I enjoyed looking at it. It reminded me of the moment we shared on the train. I caught Carrie looking at it several times, and I hoped she felt the same.

I watched her sketch on the napkin and wondered what she was doing. Her hair looked particularly nice this morning. The sky was clear, and the rising sun behind her made her silhouette glow. She tossed the napkin onto the center of the table and reached for another. I grabbed her sketch to examine it. It was a remarkably detailed drawing of the Duomo's facade — perfectly proportioned and rich in perspective.

"This is amazing," I said. "Did you study art as well as dance?"

"No. ... I just like to draw."

"You've never taken lessons?"

"Well, like everybody else, I took art class in high school. I was good. My stuff usually made it into the trophy case. I was kind of the high school art teacher's pet," she said, smiling and looking up at me through her black glasses.

"After my mom died, my high school art teacher, Miss Schelling, sort of took me under her wing. She was very kind, ... encouraging actually. Her specialty was fine art — drawing and oil painting. It fascinated me. I watched her, and she showed me things. She often let me work on special projects, you know, like the sets in the class plays and stuff. From eighth grade on, I basically lived in the art room. It became this hideout for art misfits. We'd sneak cigarettes out back near the clay pottery kiln. Nobody cared."

I continued to examine the napkin. "How can you draw like

this and not know what David is?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I just draw what I see. I probably should have paid more attention in history classes.” She then tossed another napkin onto the center of the table.

I reached for it. It was a drawing of the elderly man drinking espresso and holding his dog. It was beautiful. It wasn’t just a drawing; it captured the moment, the mood, and the emotion. It was real art. I shook my head, folded the napkins, and put them in my pocket.

She saw me and laughed. “What are you doing?”

“What?”

“What are you doing with those napkins?”

“I’m keeping them as souvenirs.”

She smiled, shook her head, and gently kicked me under the table.

We finished our coffee and crossed the street. It was eleven o’clock, and the pedestrian traffic was getting heavy. Tourists darted in and out of shops and restaurants, crowding the sidewalks. Scooters buzzed endlessly in the background.

Several areas of the Duomo require the purchase of a ticket. As we were short on time and had a lot to see, we opted to tour only the free main nave of the cathedral. We entered and took a minute to let our eyes adjust. The marble floors inside were breathtaking. A myriad of intricately cut and colored marble shapes joined symmetrically to create beautiful mosaics.

We wandered through the main nave, taking care not to interfere with tourist photography. Carrie stared up at the massive fresco covering the interior of the dome. It was a likeness of the

Last Judgment, complete with heaven, hell, angels, saints, and a few of the damned.

“I hope I’m not one of the damned,” she whispered. “That doesn’t look fun.”

As we continued to study the myriad of artworks, Carrie mumbled, “Can you imagine how long it took to build this? Seriously. ... Everything by hand? The fit and finish on the stonework and flooring are unbelievable. So beautiful! ... It’s inspiring.”

After touring the main nave of the Duomo, we set out for the Galleria dell’Accademia, home of Michelangelo’s David.

“I was afraid of this,” I said as we approached and queued in front of the main entrance. “This is a huge attraction here. Even tourists who don’t like art come here just to say they’ve seen it.”

The line to get into the museum was a hundred yards long. Fortunately, it seemed to move at a reasonable pace, and Carrie was a good sport. The closer we got to the door, the more excited she became.

“So what exactly are we seeing in here?” she asked.

“Michelangelo’s David. One of the most famous sculptures in the world. Do you know who Michelangelo was?”

“Actually ... no,” she said, smiling and shaking her head.

“This is unbelievable,” I said, glancing skyward. “You’re an artist. I can’t believe you’ve never heard of Michelangelo.”

“Alright, Mr. Smarty-Pants. Not everyone is as cultured as you. Just tell me who he was, and quit making me feel like a fucking idiot,” she said, punching me in the side.

“Ouch! Has anyone ever accused you of being a violent person?” I laughed. “That hurts.”

She threw another playful punch. I caught her hand and pulled her close.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make you feel foolish. He was one of the greatest artists of the Renaissance. He was a sculptor and a painter. He did the fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and the Pieta, ... the famous sculpture of the Mother Mary holding the dead Jesus? Ever seen that?

“I’m not sure. I guess I know when I see it.”

“And of course, David, which I hope we’ll see today,” I said, gauging the progress of the line.

We stood silently for a minute, listening to others around us grumble in foreign languages, presumably about the long, slow line.

As we inched forward, Carrie asked offhandedly, “So, what’s your story? Why are you so ... sad? ... I mean, there’s something going on with you, right? You’re such a gentleman, and so kind, but ... I don’t know, you seem ... a little sad?”

She hooked her arm through mine and pulled me close. I stood silently, thinking about what she had said. Then, out of nowhere, I closed my eyes, looked away, and tears welled. I sniffed and reflexively pulled a napkin from my pants pocket to wipe the tears from my eyes. I opened the napkin and noticed it was the drawing Carrie had made of the front of the Duomo; the tears made the ink run as if the structure itself were crying.

“Oh, no...” I mumbled.

“What is it?” Carrie asked gently, turning toward me.

“Look what I did to your drawings,” I said, carefully folding

them and replacing them in my pocket.

“Don’t worry about that,” she laughed. “I’ll make you another one. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. It was special. I liked it. I wanted to save it,” I mumbled.

The line moved forward a few feet.

“What’s going on, Francis?” Carrie pressed. “What’s upsetting you?”

As she looked up at me through her black-rimmed glasses, it occurred to me that she really cared. It wasn’t just curiosity; her face reflected concern. I struggled to recompose myself, then looked down at her.

“I’m sorry. I was just thinking about my fucking life, ... my divorce. I guess I’m not totally over it; I mean I am and I’m not. I’m over her. That’s for sure, but the whole event just bothers me — scares me, actually. I’ve wasted so much time.”

I glanced down at Carrie. She was still watching me intently.

“I committed to the marriage; I was deeply invested. I bought a house and busted my ass trying to make it special. I thought things were going well. I thought we were building something. Then, seven years into it, I came home one evening, and she handed me divorce papers. I was shocked. We had disagreements, and sometimes even argued, like every other couple, but I thought everything was fine.

While I’d been planning our future, she’d been squirreling away money and other valuables, transferring assets, meeting with lawyers, and falling for her boss. Everyone knew, ... except me.

It felt as though I had walked into a trap. I was the last one to know. I was the fool. Later, I found out she had had an abor-

tion without my knowledge. I don't even know if it was mine. It makes me wonder what else I didn't know about. I thought I had things figured out. I played by the rules, but I failed anyway. All that planning, all that wasted time, ... for nothing. ... I'm a failure.

Carrie pulled me closer and continued to scan my face. She looked away, and we continued inching forward toward the museum entrance. After a few minutes, she leaned into me and whispered, "You're no failure, Francis. You're a solid guy. That woman was the fool."

We finally reached the entrance to the museum. I purchased two tickets, and we moved inside. I noticed Carrie looking around like a kid in a toy store. She seemed to be enthralled by the range of artwork surrounding us. In one room, there were beautiful sculptures covering the floors and every wall. She commented constantly.

"Why do you suppose they carve everybody without clothes?" She asked. "Didn't they wear clothes in the Bible? Look, even the young girls," she said, nodding at a sculpture of what looked like a teenage girl. "Their clothes are all falling off!" she said, laughing. "Oh, and check this out. Why do men have pubic hair, but women don't? What's that all about?" she laughed. "Did they even have razors back then?"

We walked down a long hallway that seemed to feature the failed, experimental, or partial attempts of Michelangelo to carve David and other works. The sculptures seemed half-finished; all subjects seemed to be embedded in the stone.

At the end of the hall, we made a right-angle turn and bang. There it was. David. Framed through an arch at the end of a long hallway, the seventeen-foot-tall sculpture stood on top of

an eight-foot pedestal. On either side of the hall were more small-scale “attempts” at the final carving. Carrie stared in awe at the enormous figure as we approached.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured, then she smiled at me and whispered, “Get a load of the unit on that guy.”

Carey had no problem saying out loud what everyone else was only thinking. We both laughed at her playful remark.

About thirty other visitors cluttered the main rotunda. We walked around the figure for several minutes, then Carrie broke the silence.

“That may be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

We milled around the museum for about forty minutes. At around one o’clock, I said, “I’m starving. Let’s get something to eat, and then we’ll walk over to the Ponte Vecchio.”

Carrie was absorbed in thought, looking at one of “The Prisoners’ sculptures, stone figures that seemed half-carved, embedded in the stone. “What did you say?” she asked.

“Let’s get something to eat, then go to the Ponte Vecchio?” I mumbled, looking at my notes and map.

“What’s that?”

“You’ll like it. It’s a bridge across the Arno River. It’s very historic. The Medici family, Florence’s most powerful Renaissance family, used it to go between two of their palazzos. Because they crossed it frequently, merchants set up shops on it to sell them expensive stuff. It’s a tourist spot now, but it still has shops with expensive jewelry stores, art galleries, and other stuff. It’s interesting. You’ll like it. It looks like we can cut through the Piazza Della Signoria on the way.”

We made our way south on Via Camillo Cavour, then passed the Duomo on Via dei Calzaiuoli. It was early afternoon when we arrived at the Piazza della Signoria. The piazza was full of tourists looking up at the artwork, many sculptures, and Renaissance architecture. The Palazzo Vecchio, a massive fortress-like town hall, dominated the north side of the square.

“Is that David again?” Carrie said, pointing to a sculpture in the piazza.

“Yeah, it’s a replica. I think that’s where the original was before they moved it to the museum.”

There were a few cafés surrounding the piazza. We selected a small but lively one on the south side of the square, called Osteria dell’Orcagna. It was a little touristy, but the unobstructed view of the Palazzo was spectacular. Besides, how bad could they mess up a pizza? After a brief wait, the host seated us at a table for two. The waiter gave us menus. The café was full and alive with boisterous conversation.

“Thanks, Francis,” Carrie said as we settled in. “I have a good memory — I’m keeping track of what I spend. And of course, you’ve got my collateral.”

I looked down at the gold bracelet on my wrist. “Don’t worry about it. It’s been fun. You’re a good travel companion. You keep up. You don’t complain, and your curiosity about things makes me happy. I think it reminds me of the first time I saw or learned things.”

“Well, ... thanks anyway,” she said, looking up from the menu.

“Let’s see the Ponte Vecchio, then go back to the hotel to rest and freshen up. We can have dinner here tonight. I researched some restaurants. We can catch the train to Rome tomorrow morning?”

We each got a glass of red wine. Carrie ordered pizza, and I

ordered gnocchetti fatti.

“What is that?” Carrie said when the gnocchi arrived.

“It’s gnocchetti — potato dumplings. My great-aunt used to make it when the family came over on Sundays. We’d go into her house, and she’d have dishcloths spread over the tables in the living room full of uncooked gnocchetti. I guess they have to dry a little before you cook them.”

“It’s funny. I never asked why she did that. She used to make them from sweet potatoes, though. They were pink and covered with a light dusting of flour. I think it was a Northern Italian thing. Here. Try one.” I stabbed two dumplings with my clean fork, making sure to include a liberal amount of sauce, then held them over the table for Carrie. She smiled and opened her mouth.

As she pulled them off the fork, I again noticed her pretty smile and full lips. Her lips were sensual. I guess I hadn’t appreciated that. She chewed and smiled.

“These are great. It’s like risotto, great comfort food. The sauce is really good. I may get that next time.”

“Here,” I said, spooning a few onto her small plate. “I’ll share them with you.”

She ripped two small pieces of her pizza off and dropped them on my plate. “We’ll share. Try this,” she said.

We ate in silence for a few minutes, listening to conversations around us in Italian, French, and German. The afternoon was sunny and pleasant, almost too warm for jackets. When we finished, we sipped our wine and watched the pedestrians in the piazza.

“What do you think their story is?” I asked Carrie, nodding to-

ward a young couple walking hand in hand through the piazza. The young woman was whispering something in the young man's ear.

"Honeymoon," she answered. "They married in France and are here for a romantic honeymoon."

"What about those people?" I asked, nodding to a heavy-set older couple tottering through the piazza, carrying several shopping bags.

"Retired school teachers checking this one off the bucket list. Just bought souvenirs for their grandchildren," she said with a smile.

"How about those women over there?"

"That's the winner of the Jodie Foster look-alike contest. She's secretly just come out of the closet, and she and her girlfriend are trying to spend all of her old-geezer boyfriend's money in one afternoon."

We both laughed.

As we talked, Carrie again began to doodle on a napkin. She seemed to be roughing in the Palazzo Vecchio. I watched for a moment, then picked up the pen the waiter had left to sign the voucher and started my own drawing.

"Okay, let's see whose drawing is better," I said, glancing over at hers and mimicking her sketch.

Carrie smiled and shielded it. "No copying."

After a few minutes, curiosity got the better of me, and I leaned over to sneak a look.

"Here," she said, tossing the napkin into the center of the table.

Her sketch was wonderful — detailed and lifelike.

“Let’s see yours,” she said, reaching for mine.

I drew it away and flipped it over. She reached in and tugged at it, but I didn’t let go.

“Come on, Francis. I showed you mine. Fair is fair,” she laughed.

I gave in and released the napkin. Carrie flipped it over and studied it, then chuckled.

“You think it’s terrible?”

“No,” she laughed. “Terrible is a strong word.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Well ... it’s like a child’s drawing. You’re letting your mind get in the way. You’re drawing what you know is there, instead of how we actually perceive it. It’s a common mistake.”

I looked at her, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Have you ever stood in the middle of railroad tracks and looked toward the horizon?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then you’ve seen how the tracks seem to come together in the distance, right? Even though you know they don’t actually touch?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“That’s perspective. All parallel lines in nature appear that way. But most people ignore it because their brain insists on drawing what they know instead of what they see.”

She slid my napkin closer and began correcting it. “Look here — your mind knows the building is a cube, so you drew right

angles and parallel lines. But these lines, like the railroad tracks, should converge at a vanishing point over here.” She redrew my lines so they met at the edges of the page. “See?”

I studied the napkin. “Yes. You’re right.”

She smiled and said, “Did you notice that David’s hand was bigger than it should have been?”

“You mean on the sculpture?”

“Exactly. His oversized hand made the statue feel more imposing as we looked up at it; it forced our perception into perspective. It was brilliant, really. Same principle.”

I watched her for a moment. She radiated the same quiet confidence that drew me to her when she smoked. It was beguiling, and I wanted her.

“Well, here’s something I do know how to do,” I said, signing the credit card voucher. I smiled. “Let’s go to the river.”

As we approached the Ponte Vecchio, the number of souvenir shops and bank cash machines increased. It was hard to tell you were approaching a river; however, as the shops on either side of the alley blocked the view. As we walked along the row of high-end designer shops, the selection of expensive jewelry enthralled Carrie.

“Do you like jewelry?” I asked as I watched her scan the offerings.

“Yes, I do. This is out of my league, though. I usually buy my jewelry at art festivals.” She held her arm in the air and shook the bracelets on her wrist. “But hey, ... their originals.”

“Look at that ring,” she said, pointing to a twenty-thousand-dollar diamond dinner ring. “That’s beautiful.”

In the center of the bridge, the shops gave way to a portal looking out on the Arno River. We stood for a moment to contemplate the Renaissance buildings on either side. A bust of Benvenuto Cellini, a famous Florentine goldsmith, decorated the space. The tourist traffic behind us was heavy. We continued crossing the bridge, and Carrie continued to examine the window displays.

“Hey, wait here for a moment,” I said, as we passed a leather goods store. “I want to run into this shop to look at something. Just wait here on the bridge.”

Carrie nodded. “I’ll walk down the other side. I want to see that shop over there,” she said, pointing to the Rolex window.

“Okay, but don’t leave the bridge.”

I entered the leather goods shop and inquired about an item in the window. The clerk reached into the display and handed it to me. I examined it.

“I’ll take it,” I said, handing the clerk my charge card. “Can you gift-wrap it?”

The clerk placed it in a box, wrapped it in tasteful white and silver paper, and then put it in a bag. I signed the voucher, placed the item in my backpack, then reentered the alley to look for Carrie. Her nose was against the glass at the Rolex shop, studying a fifteen-thousand-dollar woman’s watch.

“You have expensive taste.”

“I like jewelry. I never considered an expensive watch, but seeing it all together like this makes me think things.” She laughed as she gazed at the watch one last time. “It’s so beautiful. Who wouldn’t want that?”

“It’s almost four o’clock. Let’s head home and rest a little before

dinner,” I said.

“Did you buy something?” she asked. “You weren’t gone long.”

“Yes, a gift for a friend,” I said. “It’s in my daypack.”

“Well, if it came from there, it must be nice,” she looked off, smirked, and mumbled in a singing voice, “She must be loved.”

CHAPTER 13 - HEAVEN ON EARTH

We headed north on Via Calimala toward our hotel. Every corner seemed to have either an espresso café or a gelato parlor. After passing three, I said, “Let’s try this gelato. It must be good; it’s everywhere.”

We walked into a corner parlor and scanned the flavors. The parlor was crowded and smelled dairy-clean. The long display case featured about a dozen deep stainless steel pans of freshly made gelato, each flavor artfully swirled and garnished: chocolate shavings on the chocolate, orange slices on the orange, lemon zest on the lemon. As Carrie and I pondered our choices, I noticed the striking Italian girl behind the counter.

“Look at the blue eyes on that girl behind the counter,” I muttered.

Carrie looked up. “Wow, those are blue eyes.”

The slim girl was extremely attractive. She had light skin and very dark, almost black, shoulder-length hair. Her blue eyes were so unusually light and bright; they were almost translucent. She wore a black leather jacket over a white blouse and black jeans. But what set her off was a diamond stud on the left side of her nose. It was beautiful and tasteful. As she waited on us, I became transfixed.

“Posso aiutarla?” she asked indifferently.

“Um... yes ... ah ... what flavor would you like?” I asked, turning toward Carrie.

My infatuation with the woman didn't go unnoticed. Carrie shot a suspicious glance at me and said dryly, “I'll have the salted caramel.”

“I'll have the same,” I said. “Thank you, ... per favore.”

The woman matter-of-factly scooped the gelato and placed the cones in a holder on top of the counter. “Saranno six euros,” she said flatly.

I handed the girl my card and asked, “Sei italiano?”

She handed me the voucher and receipt and said, “Si.”

“Da quale parte d'Italia vieni?” I asked as Carrie watched.

“Milano,” she replied curtly, then turned to the next customer.

We walked outside and took a seat at a little two-top table in the shade along the wall.

“So, she's from Milan?” Carrie asked.

“You understood that? ... You're learning fast.”

She nodded several times and slowly licked her cone — her eyes fixed on mine.

“Yes,” I said, looking off into the distance. “She's Italian, from Milan.”

“You think she's beautiful?” Carrie said dryly, still studying me. “You like her.”

“No, you're imagining things. I just wanted to know where she was from. I thought she looked Northern Italian, ... and I was right.”

“That's bullshit,” Carrie said with a sarcastic laugh. “You're ly-

ing. You think she's beautiful, and you like her. Admit it."

"Carrie? Please. ... I don't even know her! Okay, she's pretty. Yes, I think she's attractive. But she's probably a demanding bitch, and she didn't give me the time of day. What are you implying?"

Carrie stared, then looked away, slowly licking her cone. When she turned back toward me, she kicked me hard under the table.

"Ouch! Goddamn it, Carrie. That hurt!"

She continued to stare at me and lick her cone.

We walked the rest of the way to the hotel in silence. I opened the hotel door around five-thirty, and we staggered in. We were both tired from the morning's activities. I dropped my backpack by my bed and flopped down. Carrie flopped onto the adjoining bed and lay spread-eagle, looking at the ceiling.

"This feels so good!" she said, stretching and moving as if she were making a snow angel. "Wow!"

"I'm going to rest for a few minutes. If you want to use the bathroom, go ahead whenever you're ready. You're first. Let's plan on leaving for dinner around seven o'clock."

Within minutes, we were both asleep.

I woke to the sound of the running shower. I sat up, scratched my head, and then looked at my watch — six-thirty. The sink ran, and the toilet flushed. After a few minutes, the door burst open and Carrie emerged wrapped only in a white towel. Her bare feet made moist tracks as she walked across the floor.

"It's all yours," she said dryly.

Her suitcase sat open on the stand in the corner. She stood with her back toward me, rummaged through it for a pair of panties, then dropped the towel to the floor. I watched in disbelief as she stepped into her panties and pulled them up to her waist. She then produced a white satin, button down blouse, shook it in the air to remove wrinkles, and slipped it on. After buttoning the middle two buttons, she turned to face me and said, "You said seven, right?"

My heart raced. Again, she had her contacts in; her eyelids were slightly smoky, and her eyelashes were darkened. A light coat of lipstick made her already full lips glisten. The satin shirt was open to the middle buttons, revealing a hint of cleavage. With her toned legs and strong arches, she looked like a centerfold in a men's magazine. What is she up to?

"Yes, seven o'clock," I said, rubbing sleep from my eyes. "Let me take a quick shower."

We left the hotel shortly after seven. I wanted our last dinner in Florence to be special, and I had researched the area. The intimate, highly rated Ristorante Storico Sabatini, a short walk from our hotel, seemed to fit the bill. The host greeted us and led us to a small table at the back of the restaurant. I pulled the chair with the best view of the dining room for Carrie.

"Thank you. ... You're such a gentleman," she said as she sat.

The formal dining room had a green and white marble floor and was dimly lit with wall sconces. Flickering candles made the shadows from the glassware and condiments dance on the white tablecloths. To the right of us, floor to ceiling windows looked out on an enclosed garden with an open skylight.

"Prosecco?" I asked as we opened our menus.

"No, not tonight. It's too sweet. Why don't you pick a dry red? I'm feeling complex and full-bodied tonight."

“Una bottiglia di Soave Classico, per favore,” I said to the waiter.

“Molto buono, signore,” he replied, whirled, and walked away briskly.

“Hey Francis, ... I’m sorry I was testy with you earlier. I don’t know what got into me. You’ve been so kind. I have no right to judge you. I guess I was tired from all the activity, ... and a little pissed off that you were so infatuated with Miss Gelato Girl.” She stared out the window at the courtyard and mumbled, “I guess I’m getting a little attached to you ... and maybe a little possessive?”

The restaurant was filling, and the banter from guests competed with faint opera music in the background. I stood and pulled the silver and white gift-wrapped package I had been hiding from inside my jacket and placed in on the table, then hung my jacket over the back of my chair.

“Here. ... I saw this today and thought of you,” I said, handing Carrie the package.

She looked at me in disbelief, then opened the package. It was a small, black leather binder. Inside was a tablet of fine linen paper, and leather tubes holding several fine charcoal pencils. It was a sketchbook.

Carrie crumbled the wrapping paper and put it to the side, then examined the binder. She stared at it for a minute, then reached across the table to hold my hand. Her eyes were wet as she said, “That’s so sweet and thoughtful. Thank you. ... You’re making me rethink my whole life.” She dried her tears with her napkin.

The waiter returned with the wine. He uncorked it and poured us each a glass. Before I reached the stem of my glass, Carrie

raised hers and said, “To the most thoughtful man I’ve ever met, ... and the biggest surprise of my life, ... Francis Marino.”

We clinked glasses and drank. Sitting quietly, the world faded. Conversations from other guests and the faint opera music made our silence seem even more intimate.

“It’s weird; I used to have this image,” I began. “Back in junior high, of the kind of woman I wanted to marry. You know — smart, professional, polished, college-educated, and career-driven.”

Carrie listened closely.

“My high school was small, only about one hundred students in each class. We segregated ourselves into small groups. I qualified for two cliques: the ‘Academics’ and the ‘Jocks’. The general boys, or ‘G-Boys’ used to call us the ‘Accies’, for ‘Academics’. The girls were either in the ‘Proud Crowd’, the girls bound for college, or the ‘G-girls’, the girls who took home economics. I never considered a G-girl. I always thought I wanted a member of the ‘Proud Crowd’.”

I took a sip of wine.

“I never told you the rest of my marriage story. My ex-wife’s name was Jamie Reed. I met her in seventh grade. She was in the ‘Proud Crowd’. We passed notes in class and eventually ‘went’ with each other. She dumped me during my junior year in high school for the captain of the football team. I should have paid attention to that harbinger.”

Carrie swirled her wine and studied me.

“Anyway, after graduation, we shared rides to and from college. During our senior year, we grew close again, and after graduation, we moved in together. A few months later, she started pressuring me to get married, so eventually we did.”

“Like I said, things went well at first. We were both working, making good money, and enjoying life. We went out often, traveled, and had a lot of fun together. But by the time we reached thirty, our paths began to diverge. Our values were different.”

“I grew up surrounded by large Italian families, and I always envisioned that kind of life for myself. Before we married, we talked about it. I wanted children, a warm home, and a strong, nurturing mother to raise them. At first, she said want those things too. But somewhere along the way, she changed her mind.”

“She no longer wanted that life. She wanted a career, independence, and different priorities. As our goals drifted apart, so did we.”

“When she divorced me and I discovered she had cheated, I was crushed. I really didn’t see it coming. I questioned everything I believed about relationships. I went after, and got exactly what I wanted, and it turned out so badly. You asked me why I seemed sad, depressed. I’ve felt lost for the last two years. I thought I had things figured out, but I’ve been wrong about so much. I’ve got to restart my life, and I’m not sure how.”

We ordered dinner: Carrie chose the risotto with beetroot and goat cheese; I picked tagliatelle with porcini mushrooms. We tried each other’s dishes, smiled, and ate in comfortable silence.

“After-dinner drink?” I asked.

“How about a limoncello? I liked the way the last one turned out,” Carrie said, smiling from ear to ear.

“Two limoncello and an espresso,” I announced to the waiter.

“Make it two espressos,” Carrie said.

The drinks arrived. They served the limoncello in small stemmed glasses. This time, we sipped them.

“There’s a nine-thirty to Rome tomorrow morning. What do you think?” I said.

“Sounds good. What are your plans in Rome?”

“I’ve never been, so I guess the usual — the Colosseum, the Spanish Steps, the Vatican, Palatine Hill, the Pantheon, and the Trevi Fountain. It will be a busy couple of days. Then go back to Venice on Friday for our last night?”

She nodded and placed her espresso cup back on the saucer with a soft clink.

“So what’s your story, Carrie McCall? You must have some dark secrets you want to share?”

“It’s interesting,” she said, “how different our experiences have been.”

She sipped her limoncello, then continued, “My father was a professional, a ‘Mister Corporate América’, ... probably like you. After my mother died, he traveled a lot and worked all day. He had very little time for me. We led separate lives. When we were together, he just ordered me around and told me what to do. I got the feeling that he resented me. I was a mistake. He never really wanted me. I spent more and more time with my rebel friends. That made things even worse. The more I tried to fit in with them, the more he hated it. Looking back, I think I did it to upset him. At least then he’d pay attention.”

“Anyway, after high school, I started working as a server to get some money and independence. That’s when I got the ivy. He really hated that. A friend and I rented a small apartment and moved in together, and that was that. We saw each other less and less, and finally we didn’t talk at all.”

“How did he meet your mother?” I asked.

“My mother was a Persian exchange student. They met during his senior year of college. They went on a couple of dates, she got pregnant, and wouldn’t abort me. I think he always resented that.”

“What was your mother like?”

“Beautiful. Principled. Very smart. Artistic. She was an engineering major in college. She encouraged me to dance and pushed me to get good grades. When she died,” Carrie looked off, eyes wet. “I was crushed. I didn’t realize it at first, but over time ... well, ... you know. She was everything to me.”

“Anyway, I thought all businessmen were like my father, and I wanted something different. I didn’t know what, just different. My relationships have been all over the place. Mostly short. I’m embarrassed to say, a lot of one-night stands.”

“But then I met you, and like I said, you’re making me rethink my whole life. You’re so kind and solid. I really like that.” She looked down, and I sensed tears welling. “You make me feel safe. ... Is that weird? You’re the first guy that’s ever taken the time to know me.” Tears ran down her cheeks, and I squeezed her hand.

I signaled the waiter and paid the bill. We left the restaurant. The night air was cool and refreshing. The sky was cloudless, and the moon was almost full. I held Carrie’s hand as we walked down the sidewalk toward the hotel. It was almost nine o’clock, but the street was still vibrant with tourists and motor scooters. The amber streetlights flickered. We didn’t say much. We rode the little elevator to the third floor in silence.

As I unlocked the room door, Carrie said, “Thank you for din-

ner, ... and the sketchbook, Francis.” She grabbed the edges of my jacket and pulled me toward her, then kissed me on the cheek. I took her hand, pulled her into the room, and then locked the door behind us. I looked into her eyes and saw someone I hadn’t seen before. I placed my hands on her waist and ran them up the height of her sides, taking care to feel each rib under her shirt. I slid my hands around her back and pulled her close. She turned her head, and I placed my lips on her cheek, wanting to taste her more than kiss her. I loved the scent of the pheromones behind her ears and the texture of her hair against my nose. I slid my lips toward hers, and we kissed in earnest. Not hard, but passionate and exploratory, as if kissing for the first time. I hugged her firmly, pushed my nose into her ear, and said, “I’m having a really good time on this vacation.”

We walked over to our suitcases and disrobed. All semblance of modesty was now gone. I watched Carrie slip out of her pants, fold them neatly, and pack them in her case. She unbuttoned her shirt, let it slip from her shoulders, then folded it neatly and placed it in her suitcase. She hadn’t worn a bra that evening, and I looked closely at her tattoo. It was beautiful. The ivy ran up around one arm, draped across her shoulders, and then down around the other. The leaves were graceful and lifelike.

“That must have hurt.”

“What?”

“Your tattoo. It’s beautiful, but it must have hurt to have it done?”

She turned casually toward me and looked at each of her arms. “Yeah, ... it hurt. I had it done in three sessions. He first outlined it, then shaded the light green, then the dark green. It

took two weeks to fully heal.”

Her breasts were firm and beautiful. My heart raced. She could have answered without facing me, but I sensed she wanted me to see her. She turned back toward her suitcase, pulled a loose T-shirt from her bag, and threw it over her head.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” She asked. ... “One before bed?”

“No, I don’t mind at all,” I said, watching her walk across the floor in bare feet. “I love watching you smoke.”

She dragged the desk chair over to the window with one hand, while clasping her cigarette pack and lighter in the other. She opened the window and leaned back in the chair facing me; her legs were straight and splayed in front of her.

She held the cigarette loosely between her lips and snapped her lighter. The tobacco glowed as she drew deeply. She held the smoke in for a few seconds as she watched me strip to my briefs and climb into bed.

The buzz of scooters and pedestrian conversations drifted in with the cool night breeze. I turned onto my side to watch her. She continued to smoke and exhale out the open window, all the while watching me with serious, level dark brown eyes.

“Do you find me attractive?” she asked as she exhaled a stream of smoke.

I laughed. “Is this a trick question?”

“You haven’t made a move on me since we met. I was wondering if you found me attractive.”

“What are you talking about? We’ve kissed several times.”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

I laughed. “Carrie, I noticed you before we even left Atlanta.

I watched you at the airport gate. At first, I thought you a curiosity. But after these last five days together ... I think you're possibly the most beautiful woman I've ever met."

She looked back at me, exhaled up into the night air, and crushed her cigarette out on the windowsill. She locked the window and turned toward me.

"I want to sleep in your bed tonight."

I raised the comforter with one hand, offering her entry. She walked toward me, one bare foot in front of the other, and set her cigarettes and lighter on the nightstand. She pulled her T-shirt over her head and tossed it on the floor. Then she slipped her thumbs into the waistband of her panties, stretched the elastic wide over her hips, and let them drop to the floor. She slid under the covers. We held each other tightly, our legs intertwined.

Her nose touched my ear as she whispered, "Why haven't you tried to fuck me?"

"Oh, ... I've been thinking about that a lot. You make me think things, Miss McCall," I said, looking at the ceiling and smiling. "But it wouldn't have been proper, ... right?" I turned toward her, pulled her closer, and whispered, "You had to make the first move."

"Why wouldn't it have been proper?"

"Because I really like you, ... first as a friend, and now, ... well, hopefully something much more. I wanted to help you, not take advantage of you. I wanted you to know that my motives were pure, for selfish reasons."

"Selfish reasons?"

"If I had made a move on you, and you weren't interested in

me, where could you have gone? What could you have done? I would never have known whether you were placating me out of desperation, or if you genuinely felt something.”

She looked down and gently butted me with her head.

I lifted her chin and gently kissed her. She placed her hands on the back of my head and drew me closer. With firm lips, she kissed me harder, pushing her tongue into my mouth recklessly. I loved the way she kissed — liberated and instinctual. Her fire and passion made my heart race.

We lay still on the pillow, looking into each other’s eyes. “I knew I liked you when we parted at the airport, ... remember?” she whispered. “When I took the train and looked back at you? I didn’t want to leave you. You really seemed to know what you were doing, and you made me feel safe, ... protected.”

I laughed. “That’s funny, because I regretted not getting your phone number. I almost chased after you. I thought you might be fun to hang out with.”

“Really?”

“Seriously, I was sad. I thought you were cute. I enjoyed teasing you on the plane.” I laughed. “If we hadn’t met that night in the rain, I would have looked you up at the Yacht Club.”

“Really?”

“Yes, ... I would have.”

She leaned into me and bit my lip. “I couldn’t decide if you were being mean or flirting with me.” She reached between my legs to gauge the level of excitement. After a few moments, she whispered in my ear, “Is this the best you can do?”

I rolled on top of her, slipped my hands under her, and ... en-

tered. We continued kissing, holding, exploring, and studying each other. As we began to climax, I whispered in her ear, "Are you on the pill? ... Is it safe?"

"You'll probably be okay. Nothing usually happens this time of the month ... usually."

I froze. "What?"

"Don't worry about it. It's probably okay," she said with a straight face. "I usually don't get pregnant ... usually."

I pushed back to study her face. "What?"

She looked at me for a long second, then burst into laughter. "Yes, I'm on the pill, silly! Thanks to your finding my suitcase."

I dropped on top of her in exhausted relief. "Okay, I get it," I mumbled. "Thank you very much."

I could feel her giggling beneath me. "You deserved that," she whispered.

I pushed up and looked at her with a straight face. "Alright. You're going to get it now, McCall."

She looked at me, still giggling. "I'm counting on it, ... Mr. Corporate America."

We continued — not recklessly, ... reserved, tender, and affectionate. When we finished, I held her close and drew the comforter over us. She was soft and warm, and it occurred to me that this must be what heaven feels like.

THE SIXTH DAY

Wednesday, October 30, 2002

CHAPTER 14 - WE'RE A THING

I woke to the sound of pigeons warbling, scooters buzzing, and the faint murmur of passersby. I sat up and looked around. Carrie was sitting on the desk chair and again smoking a cigarette by the open window. The sky outside was blue, and the cool morning air felt pleasant.

"Wow... what happened last night? ... You are a bad girl!" I laughed and flopped back onto my pillow. I strained to focus and read the alarm clock on the nightstand. "What time is it? ... Oh, shit, it's eight o'clock. We've got to get going if we're going to catch the nine-thirty to Rome."

Carrie exhaled slowly, staring out the window in silence.

"Is something wrong?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

She crushed out her cigarette and turned toward me. "I'll shower first," she said, heading for the bathroom.

I slipped out from under the comforter and cut her off. I held her by her shoulders and looked into her sad eyes. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Last night was wonderful. Why are you so quiet?"

"It's nothing," she said, trying to slip past me. "I've got to get ready if we're going to catch the train."

"Stop it! ... It's not nothing. Something's wrong. ... What is it?"

She stood silently for a few seconds, then looked away and began to cry.

"I'm scared."

"What?" I laughed. "Scared of what? ... What are you scared of?"

"This is going to change us," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "It always does. ... It won't be the same. I know I'm disposable."

"What? Are you kidding? Carrie, do you realize how important last night was for me? I haven't been with anyone for two years. Since my divorce, my dating life has been a handful of coffee dates that went nowhere. Last night, I felt alive for the first time in ages. ... I think I'm in love with you."

She buried her face in my shoulder, sniffing. I felt her warm tears on my chest.

"Come on. I'm not going anywhere. ... Well, maybe Rome, if we can make the train." I pushed her back to look into her eyes. "Carrie, ... we're a thing."

She punched me lightly in the ribs and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

I smiled and teased. "Come on, that's not the tough, sassy girl I know." She smiled, cocked her arm to hit me harder, but I caught her hand and pulled her into a tight embrace, then kissed her softly on the lips.

When we broke, she whispered in my ear, "I'm sorry. I'm just afraid. ... I think I'm in love with you, too."

The Florence station was bustling. Several trains stood at their platforms; passengers scurried on and off. The banging of train

car couplings and the buzz of pedestrian chatter filled the air. At random intervals, the intercom announced arrivals and departures in Italian.

I used the cash machine, purchased two tickets to Rome, and we boarded our train. It was another fast train with comfortable seating, ample storage, a dining car, and a bar. We found our seats, stowed our gear, and settled in.

“Here,” I said, handing Carrie a fistful of euros. “That’s about one hundred US dollars, in case we’re separated and you need something.”

She looked at me for a moment.

“Take it,” I insisted.

“Is this my payment for last night?” She said sarcastically.

I stuffed the cash into her hand and said, “It will just make me feel better if you’re not broke. You may need personal items. Stuff you don’t want to tell me about. You know, women’s stuff.”

She butted me with her forehead. “Thank you. You’re sweet,” she mumbled. “I forget that. I’m not used to your world.” She shook her head and looked out the window. “I don’t have much experience with guys like you.”

The train left the station and headed south at high speed. We raced through the Italian countryside, passing farms, seas of grapevines, small hill towns, and cypress tree-lined roads. We sat silently for a while, enjoying the view.

“Are you hungry? Let’s check out the dining car and get some coffee?” I suggested.

We made our way down the aisle toward the front of the train. At the front of our car, an automatic door opened into the ves-

tibule connecting the next car. We passed through three such vestibules before arriving.

The dining car was a modest, modern car with tables lining the sides and a snack-bar at the far end. A barista prepared coffee and sold prepackaged snacks and meals, which passengers could warm in microwaves.

“Would you like something to eat?” I asked.

“No, just coffee — a latte, please.”

I ordered a coffee Americano and Carrie’s latte. The espresso machine hissed as the barista made our drinks and foamed the milk. We took seats at a table along the wall and watched the rolling countryside. The faint rumble and clacking of the wheels was relaxing. We sat in comfortable silence for a few moments. It was nice being with somebody you didn’t need to talk to constantly. Carrie stirred her drink, then took a sip. She placed the large cup back on the saucer and looked up at me.

“You have foam on your lips,” I said, smiling. I reached across to dab her with a napkin.

She looked out the window. “Does it bother you that I said I’d had one-night stands with customers at the bar?”

I laughed out loud. “No. No. ... In fact, in a perverse way, it kind of turned me on.”

“It turned you on?”

“Well, ... yeah, kind of. I don’t want you to keep doing it, but I like thinking of you as a ‘bad girl’. I never thought about it before, but I guess I’m drawn to that. You’re ‘bad’ in the best kind of way, sassy, sexy, fearless. I really like that. It keeps me on edge. It makes me feel like I have to chase you or tame you or at least try to. But even if I succeed, you’ll always have a little ‘bad’ in you. I like that.”

“Yeah, but what about sex with other guys?”

“It’s weird, but thinking of you having sex with other guys makes me jealous. It makes me want you more. Maybe I want to discipline you and show you who really owns you, like the other night after the disco? Maybe you need a spanking?” I joked.

She grinned. “You think I need disciplining? That could be fun.” We both laughed. She shook her head. “Maybe I do.”

I smiled. “It’s fun to play games, but you know I’d never hurt you. It’s just not me.”

Carrie smiled, and we stared at each other for a few moments.

“Francis, you’re bringing me down. I want discipline! ... I think I need discipline,” she mumbled. “We’ll just have to think of a good, safe-word.”

We both laughed and studied each other.

“You’re so different from every other woman I’ve dated. ... So unexpected. ... You make me think things, Carrie.”

“We’re dating? ... Did you say we’re dating? ... I like the sound of that,” she said, looking away. “Hmm ... dating.”

We pulled into Roma Termini, Via Giovanni Giolitti around noon. I helped Carrie get her suitcase to the platform, and we began towing and packing our luggage west. The guidebook recommended hotels on Via Forenza for their modest prices and central location. Carrie again struggled, bumping her suitcase along the cobblestone streets. Tiny beads of sweat gathered on her nose and forehead. Her glasses kept slipping down the bridge of her nose, forcing her to push them up repeatedly.

“Let me help you with that?” I pled. “Let me pull it?”

"No, it's not that bad. Seriously," she said, catching her breath. "You'll just make fun of it again. ... Hey, I'd never been here. I didn't know what to bring, so I just threw everything in. I'm a quick study, though. I'll be smarter next time."

"Well, it's not much further," I said, looking up the street. "Let's look for something around here."

We discussed a couple of options, then chose Hotel Seiler. We rang the silver bell, and soon a clerk emerged from the back room.

"I'd like a room for Mr. and Mrs. Marino," I said, shooting a glance at Carrie. She rolled her eyes and smiled.

A tiny elevator lifted us to the second floor. "After you, Mrs. Marino," I laughed.

We entered the room and began to organize. It was small but had a double bed, an adequate bathroom, and a floor to ceiling window that opened onto the street below. It was a mild day. Carrie slid the shears to the sides and opened the window. Our second-floor vantage offered a much more intimate relationship with the street. Small car engines, horns, bicycle bells, buzzing motor scooters, and loud chatter from a pizza café across the street made for a lively atmosphere. Carrie dropped her bag onto a luggage stand against the wall and slid onto the window ledge for a cigarette.

"What's the plan, chief?" She mumbled in her alto voice as the cigarette bounced off her lip. She struck her lighter and shielded the flame from the incoming breeze, then drew deep and exhaled high out the window.

I watched. She was in 'bad girl' mode again, confident and sassy. She sat with one converse shod foot on the window ledge, and the other dangling toward the floor. As always, she handled her cigarette confidently, flicking her ashes out the

open window and forcefully exhaling into the outside air.

"I love watching you smoke," I said. "It almost makes me laugh. You're so confident when you smoke. When did you start?"

"I think ... the ninth grade. We'd sneak cigarettes in restrooms, behind parked cars, ... outside the art room. It seemed cool to sneak around and smoke; you know, grown-up. We were breaking the rules and getting away with it. We were doing something that nobody knew about. It was like a ritual that bonded my little group of misfit friends. It was fun."

She stared blankly at the pizza cafe on the street below.

"But I've got to quit. You can't smoke forever." She shook her head while watching the traffic. "It's addicting, though. I crave them sometimes, like after meals and, ... of course, ... after sex." She looked over at me and smiled.

I walked over to the window and looked out. Carrie crushed her cigarette on the ledge and reached for my hand. We embraced and kissed.

"You taste like tobacco, ... bad girl."

"Does that bother you? ... I'll brush my teeth."

"No. ... I like the taste of my bad girl."

"Francis, did you mean what you said in Florence ... before we left?"

I smiled. "You mean about going to the Trevi Fountain tonight?"

"No! She said, lightly head-butting me and playfully punching me in the chest. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. ... Smarty-Pants."

"Of course I meant it. Why would you doubt that?"

She looked out the window into the distance. “I’ve never been in a real relationship ... ever. I’ve never been in love. I’ve never dated the same guy for more than a couple of dates — really just hookups.” She laughed sadly. “Most of the guys I meet bore me.”

She slipped off the ledge, then looked at herself in the large mirror on the bathroom door. “You’re the first guy who’s ever taken me to a nice restaurant. You’re the first guy who ever said he loved me. I get emotional just thinking about that,” she said, looking off and crying. “You make me feel good about myself, and I’m really, really scared. You’ve given me a glimpse of something I don’t want to lose.”

I leaned against the window ledge, watching her in silence.

“Guys at the bar look at me like I’m a novelty, a strange alien from another world. I know it’s my fault. Until four weeks ago, my hair was blue, and I wore a silver nose ring,” she said, studying herself in the mirror.

“Guys ask me to hang out, get high, ... hook up. We get together a few times, have some laughs. But they either don’t see me as a serious girlfriend, or I get bored with them. One of us ends it. You know? It kills the loneliness for a while. But it’s not intimacy — more like self-medication, an addiction. It makes you feel wanted for a while — then you need another dose.”

I walked up behind her and placed my hands on her shoulders. She turned, leaned into me, and hugged me tightly.

“You had blue hair and a nose ring?”

She wiped her nose and giggled. “Yep.”

“You had blue hair? ... and a nose ring?”

“Wanna see?” she asked as she tilted her head and pulled her nostril open with her finger. “See the hole in my septum?”

“Ouch! ... That had to hurt.”

“Yeah. It did. ... Another silly attempt to fit in. Everybody’s pierced in Five Points.”

“What about your blue hair? What happened to that?”

“Oh, ... it’s just this temporary stuff. You put it on and it eventually washes out. It was just streaks,” she said, grabbing locks of her hair. I’m finished with all of that.

I leaned into her. “It’s not the length of a relationship that determines the level of intimacy. I was married to the same woman for seven years, and I wasn’t wanted. I didn’t know it, ... but I wasn’t. I was just a tool, a stepping stone. After the divorce, I swore off relationships. I didn’t want one. It’s like what you said in Venice, ‘a product Hollywood sells us’. It didn’t work for me, and I didn’t want to go through it again. Thank God we didn’t have children.”

Carrie held me and started swaying as if dancing slowly.

“Want to hear something funny?” I said. “I’m ashamed to admit it, but I judged you at the airport before we left.”

“At the gate?” she smiled.

“Yes, I told you, I noticed you sitting on the floor, against your bag, playing with your iPod. I was watching everyone. It’s what I do — you know, Mr. Voyeur. Of all those people at that gate, you’re the one I fixated on. There was something beguiling about you. I was curious and conflicted. At first, I thought it was that you seemed relaxed, while I was so anxious. I started weaving a story about you in my mind: a spoiled liberal living at home, or some punky rocker heading to a concert, a protest rally, or something like that. Then you boarded first class, and since then, it’s been one fascinating contradiction after another. I was thrilled when I saw my seat was right next to yours.”

“When I was sleeping with my mouth open against the wall?”

“Seriously, my heart raced. You fascinated me.”

I held her tight and continued whispering in her ear. “I’m astonished I’ve fallen for you this deeply. You’ve made me realize something profound. All my life, I’ve been looking in the wrong direction, for the wrong thing. I didn’t really know myself. You’ve awakened me from that coma. My relationship with Jamie was so hollow. I’ve been clinging to this formulaic illusion of a perfect woman, ... a perfect relationship.”

“But just spending the last five days with you shattered that illusion. When I first saw you, I was attracted to you. I was curious. I thought you were pretty, but not like now. You make me laugh and think. I’m fascinated by your grace and poise and talent, and grit. I think what I really want is a queen to serve — a woman who wants what I offer and is worthy of my loyalty and effort. You may be my little queen, Carrie.”

I felt her shudder in my arms. I held her close. Her tears were warm against my chest. “You’re wonderful. You fill me with joy. I’m not leaving unless you push me away.”

“You’re my hero,” she whispered.

“I love it when you say that. Jamie never thought of me as a hero. I was just the guy who paid for everything and cut the grass. I never thought of myself as a hero, but the more you say it, the more I want to be one. I want to be your champion; your protector, ... your defender. I want others to see you the way I see you — deeply talented, beautiful, and introspective.”

I pushed her back to look into her eyes. “The answer is yes, I love you, Carrie, and I’m happier than I’ve been in a long time. Yes, ... I meant what I said in Florence — with all my heart.”

CHAPTER 15 - ROMAN HOLIDAY

We gathered what we needed and set out for the Colosseum. It was nearly half-past one. The plan was simple: tour the Colosseum, wander the ruins of the Forum and Palatine Hill, then find dinner near the Pantheon.

The Roman streets were alive with traffic and excitement. They made Florence and Venice seem sleepy by comparison. Tiny Fiats, Alfas, and Renaults sped along the streets, intermixed with the buzz of scooters and pedestrian noise. Rome felt like a real city. Offices, apartments, grocery stores, and government buildings mixed in with ancient artifacts to make an interesting soup of human history. The three-to-five-story buildings lining the streets, built of plaster, stone, or brick, blended as best they could with the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance structures. As you walked through the ancient city, it was common to have a modern building next to a medieval cathedral, a Renaissance castle, or a fenced-off block of Roman Empire artifacts. Most streets were cobblestone, dotted with monuments, sculptures, and fountains in small neighborhood piazzas.

As we approached the Colosseum, we were awestruck by its size and antiquity. The ancient monument I had seen so many times on TV was real, and in front of us.

“Wow,” Carrie said. “It’s in terrible shape. Half of it’s gone?”

“Yeah, it’s old, and they usually only show the good side on

TV,” I laughed. “It’s a shadow of its former self. A lot of it has been stripped away.”

“Still...” Carrie said, “It’s pretty cool though.”

I hadn’t purchased tickets in advance, and the line was long. We took our place at the end and studied the sea of tourists as we waited.

“Look at that guy,” Carrie said, grabbing my arm and pointing. She’d spotted a man dressed as a Roman centurion, posing for photos with tourists.

“That’s so cheesy,” I said. “It’s a costume ... and not even a very accurate one. He’s charging those suckers for photos, like overweight showgirls on the sidewalks in Las Vegas.”

After twenty minutes of waiting and watching, we reached the ticket window. The tickets were ten euros each, but also covered admission to the Roman Forum and Palantine Hill. We entered the ancient stadium and made our way to the center, about halfway between the arena floor and the top. Interestingly, the stone steps were deeply worn in the center, polished smooth by centuries of foot traffic.

“How many people have to climb stone steps to make them look like this?” Carrie laughed, running her hand over the deep swale. “That’s a lot of footsteps.”

It was getting cloudy, and looked like it might rain. We sat on the stone seats in the arena and contemplated the view.

“I heard they even filled the bottom with water once to simulate a naval battle,” I said.

“Really?” Carrie mumbled.

“Yeah, and it used to have a roof on it, too.”

“A roof?” Carrie looked up dubiously.

“It was canvas, like a giant tent, to shade the spectators. You wouldn’t want to get sunburned while watching gladiators kill each other. Right?” We both smiled.

“Oh, and look at this,” I said, rubbing my hand on the bricks.

“Yeah, what is so special about bricks?”

“Think about it. Why didn’t the medieval church we saw in Felonica Poe have mortar like this between its stones? The Middle Ages came well after the Roman Empire, right?”

“I don’t know, genius. But I’m sure you’re dying to tell me.”

“Because they lost the recipe.”

“They lost the recipe? ... The recipe for what?”

“Cement.”

“Cement?”

“Yeah, well... good Roman cement, anyway. I read that when the Roman Empire fell, the barbarians who conquered it lost the recipe.”

“You’re making that up,” Carrie laughed.

“I’m totally serious.”

The sky was darkening, and light sprinkles began to fall. Many of the tourists headed for the exits, leaving only a few in the stands. “Let’s go over to that overhang,” I said. “I don’t think this rain will last long.”

We made our way to a high aisle and sheltered under a ledge. As we did so, another young couple joined us. “We had the same idea,” the young man said. “This could get worse before it gets better.”

“Are you from Ireland?” I asked, noticing the heavy Irish ac-

cent.

"I am," he replied. "Her, too." He nodded to his companion. "I'm Sean, and this is my fiancée, Erin."

"I'm Irish," Carrie said, pulling out her cigarettes and lighter. "Well, at least half Irish. My father was Irish."

"Fancy that," Erin said. "Where from?"

"You know, I'm not sure. ... I never asked," she mumbled, as the cigarette bounced on her lip, "... but I wish I had." She struck her lighter and drew deeply.

"Could I have one of those?" Sean asked. "I'll pay you for it."

"On me," Carrie said, shaking the pack toward Sean so that a couple of filters protruded from the opening. "Would you like one?" she asked, extending the pack to Erin.

"No. ... No, I don't smoke."

Carrie struck the lighter and held it for Sean. He cupped his hands around the flame and drew deeply. "Thank you," he said. "I've been wanting one all day, but I wasn't sure if you could smoke here."

"I don't think you're supposed to," Carrie said. "I saw a sign on the ground floor. I'm being bad. But it's raining; nobody's around. What are they going to do — arrest us for smoking?"

We leaned against the wall and watched the rain. It was heavier now. Only a few other tourists lingered in the tunnels. "I can't get over how old everything is here," Carrie said, exhaling smoke into the gray sky. "When it's empty like this, it's easy to imagine you're back in time."

"Are you two married?" Sean asked, exhaling smoke into the sky.

Carrie and I looked at each other, and I said, "Not yet."

“Engaged?” Erin asked.

Carrie looked at me, smiled, and said, “Not yet. ... But he’s still wearing my gold bracelet,” she laughed, pointing to the gold chain on my wrist.

“That must mean something,” Erin said, smiling. She reached into her pocket and handed Carrie three Irish pence. “For the cigarette. Throw all three in the fountain at once, for luck. It’ll make your dreams come true.”

Puzzled, Carrie studied the coins, then slipped them into her pocket. “Thank you.”

The rain eased to a light sprinkle. We said goodbye to Sean and Erin, and parted. We made our way to the basement complex of tunnels, chambers, and passageways beneath the arena floor to have a look. As we were poking around the passageways, we ran into a tour group, led by a knowledgeable guide.

“Let’s tag along with this group for a few minutes,” I said.

The guide led the group into a small chamber that featured a glass closet along one wall. Inside the closet hung weapons, helmets, and the armor used by the gladiators who fought in the arena.

“I guess, when you really think about it, a divorce is nothing compared to fighting for your life in a Roman arena.” I smiled at Carrie. “I guess it’s better to be a divorced marketing manager than a Roman gladiator. Right?”

Carrie whispered, “Cheer up, Francis.”

“Notice the size of the helmets and armor,” the guide stated. “The average height of a man in Roman times was 5’5”, small by today’s standards.”

We stared at the items for a few minutes, then Carrie laughed.

“Francis, I think you could have taken those guys. They were so small! The Romans would have painted posters of you and hung them outside the arena — See Francis the Giant.” She smiled and looked sideways at me from behind her glasses.

I laughed. “Alright, check this one off the list,” I said. “Let’s move on.”

We left the Colosseum and crossed the Piazza del Colosseo. The Roman Forum, Foro Romano, was just across the street. Our passes allowed us to enter, and we started through the ruins.

For centuries, the Forum was the center of Roman life, hosting many temples, markets, and government buildings. Now it was a sprawling archeological site. But enough pillars, arches, and cobblestone trails remained to give any visitor a small window into life in ancient Rome.

“Look at all the cats,” Carrie said, looking across the vast, fenced patchwork of ruins and archeological digs. She clicked her tongue, calling out to them. A few stopped to look, but most moved on. One small white kitten walked cautiously over to the waist-high iron fence and looked up, presumably hoping for a treat. Carrie reached over the fence and picked it up.

“What are you doing, Carrie? These cats are feral. They may have rabies or flees.”

“Oh, come on, it’s just a kitten,” she said, holding it up in the air. She cradled it against her chest and stroked it gently. The kitten purred.

“What happens if that cat bites you?” I asked. “We’ll all end up at the hospital.”

“Oh, Francis, calm down. They’re used to tourists. They live here. There’s nothing but sweetness in this little guy. Look at him,” she said, rubbing her finger on his head. “I’m beginning to think I want something to take care of,” she said, smiling at the kitten. “Do you need some love?” she whispered in baby talk. “Do you need someone to love you?” she whispered again, scratching the kitten gently on the head. She put the kitten on the ground, and it stepped back through the fence. It looked back at us, then walked over to a stone wall to join several others.

We continued on through the ruins. Inside one dig, a group of archeologists congregated. An older man with gray hair and a gray beard seemed to be lecturing in Italian. I couldn’t make it out, but I decided it was a class of students.

We climbed the Palantine Hill and walked a long trail that wound through the ruins of several palaces. Lining the trails were medium-height trees with long, fine green leaves. I reached out to touch them.

“Look at this,” I said, combing through the leaves. “This is an olive tree. I’ve never seen one. Look, here’s an olive,” I said, separating a small berry from the leaves.

Without hesitation, Carrie plucked it from the branch and popped it into her mouth. She chewed for a minute, then made a sour face. “It’s not ready for a martini yet,” she said, spitting it on the ground.

At the top of the hill overlooking the Forum, we found a long stone bench. We sat to rest and observed the surroundings. The tourist traffic was very light due to the earlier rain. But the sky was now clearing.

As I was looking off toward the Colosseum, I heard Carrie snap her lighter. In a few seconds, I felt a sharp bump on my

shoulder. I turned to see her handing me the remains of the joint we had started in Piazza San Marco.

"You're crazy, girlfriend," I said, laughing and looking around to see if anybody was watching. I discreetly pulled hard and filled my lungs with the sweet smoke, then lowered my hand so as not to be spotted. "Somebody is going to smell this," I said, looking around nervously.

"Am I your girlfriend now?" she said, exhaling skyward. "Because I thought I just heard you call me a 'crazy girlfriend'."

"Well, you're a girl, and you're my friend, ... and sometimes crazy," I said, passing the joint back.

"Seriously," she said, punching me in the side. "Don't tease me. You know how insecure I am." She hit the joint and passed it back.

"Okay, ... you're my girlfriend. How about that?" I said, laughing. "Are you happy now?"

She looked at me with puppy-dog eyes and leaned her head on my shoulder. "Is that the best you can do?" she whispered.

I crushed the joint out on the bench and handed it to her. She slid it into her pack of Marlboro Lights. When she looked up, I leaned into her, softly kissed her on the cheek, and said, "I love you, Carrie. How about that?"

As she looked at me, I sensed her becoming emotional. Her eyes were shiny and wet. She leaned into me, and we looked out onto the ruins and the beautiful city beyond.

"I don't think I've ever been happier," she said. "I love you too, Francis. You're my hero."

We walked down the hill and made our way out of the Forum,

then set out for the Pantheon. The sun was peeking out now, and the pedestrian traffic was surging. We proceeded northwest along Piazza Venezia, past the Piazza de S. Marco.

“What a coincidence,” I murmured. “We’re back in Venice.”

The Roman version, however, differed greatly from the Venetian version. At the foot of Capitoline Hill, the piazza was one of the most prominent in Rome. The Altar of the Fatherland, or *Altare della Patria*, a massive marble monument honoring Italy’s first king, dominated the piazza. It looked impressive, with its massive steps, pillars, and chariot sculptures on the roof, but I read it had only been open since 1938, and smacked of the fascism that almost destroyed Italy. It looked old, but it was not ancient. That didn’t keep massive crowds of tourists from visiting, however.

“That looks cool. What is it?” Carrie asked.

“It’s impressive, but nothing like what we’re about to see. It’s a government monument, and not very old. I think it was Mussolini’s headquarters during the war. He made speeches from the balcony.”

We finally turned north on Via Della Minervia. We were getting close, and the pot was making us giddy and amorous. We held hands and bumped into each other.

The cobblestone streets open onto small piazzas at regular intervals. Each featured a monument, a sculpture, or a fountain at its center, usually filled with residents, children kicking soccer balls, or tourists taking pictures.

As we continued north, a building on the left stood out from the others. “That looks old,” Carrie remarked. “It’s not like the others.”

Sure enough, it was the back of the ancient Roman temple,

the Pantheon. Like the Colosseum, builders constructed the rear of the 2,000-year-old temple from brick and mortar. As we reached the front, however, the fascia elevated to marble. It was magnificent. Carrie and I climbed the two steps to the portico and looked up. I touched one pillar and said, "This is a 2,000-year-old building. Think about that. Romans in togas worshiped here."

Carrie touched the pillar and looked at me. "I don't know what I was thinking," she whispered. "This is so much better than I expected — the art, the history, the culture. I just didn't get it when I won the ticket."

We moved with the other tourists inside and looked up. "Is that a hole in the ceiling?" Carrie asked. "It looks like a hole."

"It's called the Oculus. It lets light in and hot air escape. Look, it's the only source of light in here. Look how bright it makes it. They didn't have electricity, and where would you put windows? They needed sturdy walls to hold up the giant dome. This was the largest dome in the world until they built the Duomo in Florence. You know, the dome we saw yesterday?"

Carrie looked up again at the dome, then around the walls, at the artwork and sculptures. "I guess I just didn't get it. It's beautiful."

It was going on five-thirty when we finished touring. I held Carrie's hand as we walked outside to sit by the fountain in the piazza. We found a tiny space between two young couples and squeezed in. I held her close, and we looked back at the ancient temple. The couples on either side of us seemed to be more interested in each other, oblivious to the ancient temple and the beautiful surroundings.

"I guess we should kiss. Everyone else seems to be doing it," Carrie whispered, watching the other couples around us. "I'm

stoned.”

“Do you think?”

“Well, ... only if you feel compelled,” she said, rubbing her sneaker against my calf.

I leaned over and rubbed my nose against hers, then tilted my head and kissed her on the lips. “What did I say earlier?”

She rubbed her finger against the gold chain on my wrist and said, “Francis, thank you again for taking me with you. I would never, ever have done this by myself. I didn’t even know it existed. I should have paid more attention in school.”

“Are you hungry?” I asked. “These cafes look a little touristy, but I’m fucking starving. Maybe it’s that goddamn pot you keep forcing on me,” I joked.

We looked at each other, our smiles tightened, and we burst out laughing. We held hands and walked to the back left side of the piazza to look at a posted menu in front of the Caffè Di Rienzo.

“Looks good to me,” Carrie said, struggling to keep her composure.

The host seated us at a table with a perfect view of the fountain and the Pantheon. The square was alive with tourists, children, and young couples. Teenagers crowded around the fountain, sitting on the ledge and steps, holding hands, hugging, smiling, and kissing. The sun was setting behind the buildings, and long shadows stretched across the piazza. It was dusk, and amber streetlights and temple spots made for a romantic amber glow. As we perused our menus, our waiter lit our candle. By the time we ordered wine, the perimeter of the square was

glowing with flickering candlelight from the other café tables.

The waiter brought a bottle of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, and poured. As he left the table, I teased, "Seafood Risotto, again, Carrie ... my dear?"

She smirked and gently kicked my leg with the toe of her shoe under the table. "No. ... I'm going to try something different ... Mr. Smarty-Pants."

"Carrie," I laughed. "Where does the hitting and kicking come from? Don't get me wrong, I like it. ... I love it. I think it's cute, ... and feisty. But I'm curious. Where does that come from?"

Carrie's laughter subsided. She swirled her wine and looked out at the fountain. She was silent for a minute, then smiled. "When I was a toddler, about three years old, my father would lie on the floor in front of the TV. We didn't have a couch then, so he would sprawl on the floor. We played this game. I'd toddle over to him and poke him to provoke a reaction. I guess I wanted attention. He'd grab me and wrestle with me gently. At first, he'd hold me tight, like a bear hug. Sometimes he'd roll over, trapping me underneath him. He wasn't being mean, just playing. He'd hold me just tight enough so that I couldn't get away."

She took a sip of her wine, looked into the distance, and continued. "After a minute or two, I'd start to cry or fuss. He'd laugh, and gradually ease up on his hold until I could fight my way free and get away."

Carrie started laughing to herself. "Of course, as soon as I was free, I'd go back over and poke him again, and the whole thing would start over. He'd grab me and trap me, then I'd wrestle my way free. Each time I'd poke him, he'd pretend he didn't feel it, so I'd poke him harder. Eventually, I'd have to punch

or kick him to provoke a reaction. Sometimes, I'd punch him really hard ... for a three-year-old. It was fun ... one of the best memories I have of my father." Her voice trembled, and she looked away.

"Your dad doesn't sound like a bad guy," I said. "Maybe he was just lost after your mom died. Maybe he's changed. Maybe he feels differently now?"

Carrie took another sip of wine. "Maybe so," she said. Her eyes wet.

"Maybe when we get home, you should reach out?"

Carrie sniffed, and I handed her a napkin to blow her nose. "Maybe. ... maybe."

Trying to lighten the mood, I said, "So when you punch me, you want me to wrestle with you?"

She smiled. "I just want attention."

CHAPTER 16 - I AM LIFE ITSELF

The waiter arrived to take our order. Carrie looked at me and said, “I’ll have the Spaghetti Carbonara, per favore.” She smirked at me while handing the server the menu.

I smiled. “I’ll have the porcini mushroom risotto, per favore.”

Carrie rolled her eyes and looked away, shaking her head. “You’re just doing that to tease me.”

“Per favore?” I said. “Listen to you speaking Italian.”

“Anyway, no. I’m not teasing you. You’re reading too much into it. It looked good, and I was thinking of sharing it with you, Pumpkin — so you’d get your risotto fix too.”

“Pumpkin? Where did that come from? I don’t know whether I like that. It makes me sound fat. ... Do you think I’m a fat, round pumpkin?”

“No! Stop it. ... It’s endearing. You’re my little pumpkin.”

“Little, round, fat pumpkin.”

The wine was multiplying the effect of the pot. My smile tightened, and I began to laugh. “I’m just teasing you, Carrie. You’re too easy. ... Common; you’re not fat. Why would you even think that? You’re trim and athletic, ... beautiful, and I love you, ... just the way you are.” I looked away and smiled.

“Just the way I am? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

You do think I'm fat?" She stared at me in disbelief, then kicked me lightly with the toe of her sneaker and shook her head. "You think I'm fat."

"Will you stop it! You know you're not fat. Why would you even say that? You have a great, strong body. You're very attractive."

"Yeah, ... attractive, not beautiful."

"I used that word on purpose. There are many beautiful women, ... you included. But not all beautiful women are attractive, ... at least not to me. I'm attracted to you."

She stared at me for a minute and shook her head, then reached into her purse and pulled out the leather sketchbook I'd given her. "That's a great picture — with the Pantheon in the background. Sit back and hold relatively still ... if you can." She smiled and rested the pad against the table. "This paper is very nice, by the way — very good quality."

As she drew, she seemed to go to another place. She was still sitting there, but only half present. She seemed deeply focused on her work and continued to doodle for an entire glass of wine. I amused myself by watching the tourists in the piazza. She worked quietly, occasionally looking up, occasionally looking over my shoulder at the ancient temple.

When she finally finished, she replaced the pencil, closed the pad, and tucked it back into her purse.

"Can I see it?" I asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have my reasons," she smiled. "Drink your wine."

"By the way, I saw your tattoo in its entirety when you un-

dressed the other night. ... Oh, I forgot. I already told you. ... Anyway, I've been thinking about it."

"What have you been thinking about it?"

"It's growing on me. I mean, the concept of tattoos is growing on me."

"How's that?"

"Well, like I said, I used to think they were a kind of self-deprecation — like people didn't like themselves. Or maybe they didn't think they were attractive enough, so they decorated themselves like a Christmas tree to compensate."

Carrie held her wine glass by the stem and stared at me. "And now?"

"Now I realize they can be more than that. Sometimes they're markers — pointers to an event, a low point, or something someone wants to remember. If they're done tastefully and with meaning, they can be sexy. I really like yours. ... You wouldn't be Carrie without it."

"I'm glad you think so, because I've decided I'm going to run more ivy up one leg, across my butt, and down the other leg when we get back to Atlanta. The first one worked so well, I figured a second would make me irresistible."

"Stop it! You're not. You're not doing that? Don't say that."

"I thought you liked it," she said, swirling her wine. "Wait until you see the next one. I've got ideas."

"Come on. One's enough! You're not getting another one. The one you have is beautiful and sexy. It reminds me of your vulnerability, and I like that. But one is enough. I love you just the way you are."

"Is that an order?"

“Yes, Pumpkin ... that’s an order. No more tattoos.”

“You can’t tell me what I can and can’t do, ... Mr. Corporate America.”

“Okay, I’m begging you. Please, no more tattoos? I don’t want you to change anything about the way you are,” I said, looking off into the distance.

Maybe it was the pot and the wine, but I suddenly felt myself getting emotional. I was starting to cry. I wiped my eyes with my napkin and mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” Carrie said, reaching across the table to hold my hand.

“I just don’t want you to change. I want you to stay just the way you are right now. You’re as beautiful as you can be ... right now. You don’t need to do anything differently... for me.”

“I’m sorry, Francis,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just teasing. I’m not getting another tattoo.”

Just then, the waiter brought our entrees. I wiped my eyes again. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. Maybe it’s this fucking pot. I feel as though someone just handed me this incredibly serendipitous gift, and I don’t want to lose it. ... I guess I’m a little scared too.”

We sat quietly, hands clasped.

“Okay,” Carrie said. “No more tattoos. Let’s eat.”

We ate in silence for a few minutes. The food was surprisingly good for such an obvious tourist location.

“This is very good,” Carrie said. “I think I have a new favorite: spaghetti carbonara!” She looked at me to gauge my reaction.

“This is good, too. ... Try some,” I said, spooning a little onto

her plate.

We continued to eat in silence. I caught her watching me several times, as if checking to see if I was okay. As we were finishing, she said, "What about one across my lower back reading 'Francis Enters Here' ... in all capital letters with an exclamation point?"

I shook my head and smiled, "You're crazy."

We ordered a tiramisu to share, along with two espressos and two sambucas.

"I'm whipped," I said. "Another long day. Think about it. We woke up in Florence this morning. We've covered a lot of ground."

"I'm really thinking about sleeping with you," Carrie said, holding up her sambuca and swirling the flies. "I've been thinking things all afternoon, ... quite a few things."

"Seriously?"

She swirled her sambuca and nodded slowly.

"Then we'd better get going. I want to have some energy left for you." I signaled for the check. "We can stop at the Trevi Fountain on the way."

"What's the Trevi Fountain?"

"It's a famous water fountain in Rome. It's probably the fountain Erin wanted you to throw those pence in. I think you'll recognize it when you see it. It's very famous."

We said goodbye to the Pantheon, taking one last look at the piazza before leaving.

"It's so beautiful," Carrie said. "The temple, the fountain, all

those candles — it's one of the most romantic places I've ever seen."

We walked, hand in hand, east of Via del Seminario, north on Via del Corso, then east on Via delle Muratte. It was seven o'clock; the sky was dark, and amber street lamps were again casting a warm glow on the cobblestones. It was a cool but pleasant October evening. As we got closer to the fountain, the density of souvenir shops, retail stores, coffeehouses, and restaurants increased. The Trevi Fountain was a major attraction, and the merchants understood that well. A hundred yards from the piazza, the sound of splashing water mixed with the banter of tourists, the buzz of motor scooters, and soft music leaking from open restaurants. The smell of Italian food and braziers roasting chestnuts filled the air.

Carrie and I held hands as we wove our way between tourists and closed in on the fountain. At the end of the tight alley, we could see a large crowd queuing to take pictures and toss coins.

"It's prime time," I said. "We should come back late at night, when there are fewer tourists. It's more romantic. This is crazy."

"I don't know. I think it's kind of exciting," Carrie said. "I want to see what all the fuss is about."

We emerged from the alley and entered the Piazza di Trivi.

"I've seen that!" Carrie shouted. "I've seen that! A guy I dated a while back made me watch this movie that he said was special to him. That fountain was in it."

"Was the movie black and white?"

"Yes! It was late at night, and this beautiful woman had a cat on her head. She sent her boyfriend to get milk. When he came back, she asked him to join her in the fountain!"

“Did you like the movie?”

“I liked it. But I fell asleep before it was over. We were high and a little drunk. I don’t know how it ended. Have you seen it?”

“Yes, it’s one of my favorite movies. *La Dolce Vita*, directed by Federico Fellini. It’s a classic film noir. Anita Ekberg was the lady with the cat on her head.”

Carrie bounced on her toes. “I finally know something about Rome!”

It shouldn’t have made any difference. I knew Carrie wasn’t a virgin. But thinking about her watching one of my favorite movies with another guy made me cringe with jealousy. I’ve never been a jealous guy, I thought. Why is this bothering me so much? But I couldn’t stop thinking about it. The more Carrie celebrated knowing the fountain, the more it bothered me. I wanted to show it to her and share this moment together. I wanted it to be special.

“Come on, let’s toss the coins in and make a wish,” she said, pulling me toward the steps. As we wove through the crowd, Carrie seemed to sense that something was wrong. I was quiet.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Just disappointed by the crowd. I wanted this to be special, ... romantic.”

Carrie continued to watch my face, as if not convinced. “Come on, it will be fun,” she said, punching me softly. “It is special, just you and me. Come on.”

We waited three deep on the rail for other couples and tourists to take pictures and toss their coins. As we waited, we studied the magnificent fountain. I estimated it to be about fifty yards wide, and as tall as a two-story building. The water glowed aqua blue, and spotlights up-lit the stonework. The rushing

water from the various outlets in the sculpture made a splashing rush that was calming and hypnotic.

Finally, the crowd in front of the stone rail ebbed enough for us to move forward. Carrie reached into her pocket and retrieved the three Irish pence.

“Do you think these will work?” she asked. “Or should we ask somebody for Italian coinage?”

“I think they’ll be just fine. What should we wish for?”

“You can’t say!” Carrie exclaimed, “Or it won’t come true. I know what I’m wishing for, and I’m not telling you.”

“Do you have a wish?” she asked, motioning a toss with her right hand.

“Yes, I do. Do you want to hear it?” I laughed.

“No! ... Stop it!”

Carrie motioned one, two, and three, then tossed the three coins. They flew high into the air, splashing toward the back of the fountain.

“Awww, that’s so sweet!” a woman with a thick Italian accent next to us exclaimed. “I wish you many blessings and healthy children!”

Puzzled by the woman’s comment, Carrie and I looked at each other, then back at the woman. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“You tossed three coins. That means marriage. One coin — you return to Rome. Two — you fall in love. Three — you marry.”

“Did you just meet?”

“Yes,” Carrie said. “Not quite a week ago.”

An elderly little man with gray hair, standing next to the woman, nodded. "We tossed three coins into the fountain thirty-seven years ago. Here we are."

"Congratulations! You should kiss!" the woman insisted, clasping her hands together.

Carrie and I looked at each other and smiled. "Erin," I said, shaking my head. "That's why she gave you three coins. Who knew?"

"It doesn't matter," Carrie whispered.

"Why not?"

"I'm not saying," Carrie smiled as a tear rolled down her cheek.

We stood silently for a moment. Carrie looked away. I knew why it didn't matter. We had both wished for the same thing.

"Come on," I said. I wiped her tear with my thumb and lifted her onto the stone ledge of the fountain. She wrapped her legs around me and ran her hands through my hair. We kissed passionately. It was magic. She was right. It was very special. The crowd, the noise, even the fountain faded away. It was just the two of us.

"Awww, the Italian woman said, clasping her hands together tightly. "Sono innamorati!"

We looked into each other's eyes, and the world disappeared. Who was this woman who moved me so deeply—so unexpectedly, so overwhelmingly? She filled my heart to the bursting point, leaving me breathless and wondering how someone I had known for such a short time could matter so much.

"Why do you have this effect on me?" I whispered. "Who are you, Carrie McCall?"

She locked her ankles behind me and arched backward toward

the water. Dipping her hand into the fountain, she scooped up a palmful and, with a mischievous smile, drizzled it over my hair.

“Francis,” she said softly, “I am life itself. ... You should know that by now.”

CHAPTER 17 - BATH BY CANDLELIGHT

We left the Trevi Fountain and walked back to the hotel, hand in hand. It was close to eight o'clock, and we were worn out and ready to unwind. As we approached the entrance, I spotted a small convenience store beside the busy pizzeria across the street.

"Carrie, let me duck into that store for a second," I said, pointing. "I need something."

She nodded and waited by the hotel entrance while I crossed the street.

The shop was tight, but seemed to have everything necessary for a visiting tourist staying in a strange hotel. At the back, a wall-to-wall cooler displayed a wide array of wines. I grabbed a bottle of Prosecco and headed to the counter. As the clerk was ringing it up, I noticed a bag of six disposable votive candle refills on the wall behind him.

"Posso averli anch'io?" I said, pointing to the candles.

The clerk turned, pointed, and said, "Questo?"

"Sì, per favore."

The clerk placed the two items in a bag. I grabbed some paper matches from a bowl next to the cigarette display case and said, "Gratuita?"

"Sì, gratuita," the clerk replied.

I placed the matches in the bag and crossed the street to rejoin Carrie.

“That was quick,” she said. “What did you need?”

“It’s a surprise,” I replied, avoiding her gaze.

“A surprise? For me? From a Roman convenience store? ... You are so sweet. I can’t wait,” she smiled with a tinge of sarcasm.

We retrieved the key from the front desk and took the tiny elevator to the second floor. Carrie dropped her purse beside her suitcase and headed straight for the window. I turned on the bedside lamps, dropped my daypack and the bag with the Prosecco on my suitcase, and joined her. She pulled back the sheer curtain, opened the window, and perched on the ledge. I sat across from her as she prepared to smoke.

“Let’s finish that roach,” I said. “Then I’ll show you your surprise.”

Carrie studied me for a second, then took the cigarette out of her mouth and placed it on the window ledge. “Okay,” she laughed as she dug into her cigarette pack looking for the roach. She produced the one-inch-long roach, and then a new one, saying, “This is what we have left.”

“Let’s smoke the little one and save the big guy.”

Carrie lit the roach and drew deeply.

“It’s interesting,” I said, exhaling into the breeze, “how hotels over here have windows you can actually jump out of.”

“I think it’s pretty cool,” Carrie said, exhaling into the night sky, then handing me the roach. “Why do you think that is? Are the buildings just old-fashioned here?”

“Maybe. I think it’s more of a liability thing. In the U.S., hotels are terrified of lawsuits. Someone jumps or falls, and it’s auto-

matically their fault.”

Carrie laughed. “Right. Damn negligent hotel owners. Always pushing people out of windows.”

We both laughed and passed the roach back and forth. Below, the street buzzed with life. Scooters zipped past. The pizzeria across the street brimmed with customers, and the air smelled like sausage and pizza with a trace of car exhaust.

“I love how the streets stay busy here,” she said, gazing down. “It’s almost nine on a Wednesday night, and the place is still hopping. I wonder what it’s like on a Saturday.”

I hit the roach one more time, then said, “Here, finish this. I’ve got to use the bathroom.”

“When you gotta go ...” she muttered, taking the last drag.

I snatched up the bag on my suitcase and went into the bathroom. I shut the door and began drawing water into the bathtub. I pumped the bottle of bath wash mounted on the wall above the tub several times and let the soft soap fall in to make bubbles. I then placed the six votive candle refills around the room and lit them.

“Are you taking a bath?” Carrie shouted from the windowsill.

I ignored her as I quietly opened the Prosecco and unwrapped the two hard plastic cups sitting on the vanity. When the tub was full of comfortably hot water, I turned off the light.

“Carrie,” I called. “Can you help me with something?”

I heard the window latch click. A moment later, the door creaked open.

“What’s going on?” she asked as she stepped into the dimly lit bathroom.

I handed her a cup of Prosecco. “Let’s take a bath together?”

She took a sip and glanced around, smiling at the flickering candlelight. The plain white tile glowed gold. She hesitated for a second. I reached for her hand and gently pulled her toward me. I kissed her softly, then I took her cup and set it on the edge of the tub. I slowly began to undress her, starting at her feet. I untied her sneakers, peeled off her socks, then stood to unbutton her jeans and shirt. Each piece fell away with quiet ceremony. I unhooked her bra and let it slide to the floor. Only her panties remained.

I knelt once more, pinching the sides gently and sliding them down. She stepped out, and I tossed it aside. Her skin was smooth and warm under my hands. She ran her fingers through my hair as I kissed her stomach. My heart raced.

I rose and led her to the tub. She gracefully raised her leg, making a right angle between her thigh and calf, and pointing her toes at the bubble-covered water, stepped in and sank to her neck.

I ripped off my clothes and stepped into the opposite side of the tub, next to the faucet, and slid under Carrie's legs. I then placed my legs on either side of her. The tub was relatively large, and the water was just hot enough. The room was mysteriously lit, and we were high. We relaxed in the neck-deep water, sipped our wine, and watched each other carefully. The pot was taking hold. After a couple of minutes, our smiles tightened into laughter.

"I didn't see this coming," Carrie laughed. "You really got me. This is so romantic. I feel terrible for teasing you earlier."

I ran my hands under her legs, from her thighs to her ankles, then raised her toes above the waterline to kiss them. "You passed the 'toe test' in Florence, by the way."

"The toe test? ... What's the toe test?" She laughed, raking my face with her suds-covered toes.

I grabbed her ankle to stabilize her foot so I could nibble on her toes. "Any girl I get involved with has to have nice toes," I said, laughing. "Toes are important to me."

"You're serious?" She said, giggling.

"Dead serious. Cute toes are non-negotiable. It can be a 'deal breaker'. Fortunately, you have particularly cute toes," I said, examining them. "It's the first thing I noticed when you put your sneakers on in Venice that first morning. But you really put the hook in me when you walked across that marble floor in Florence barefoot. I think that put this relationship 'over the top'. ... Seriously."

As I kissed and nibbled her toes, she giggled, half from the bizarre knowledge of my toe fetish, and half from the tickling sensation caused by my attention.

She laughed, then grabbed my foot. "Let me see yours."

"Oh, no! My feet are off-limits. I'm way too ticklish. ... Seriously. Carrie, ... you can't do that!"

We began a wrestling match, Carrie trying to tickle my toes, and me trying to avoid it. The water splashed over the tub, extinguishing two of the candles. I finally turned and pulled her arms playfully around her like a straitjacket. We spooned under the water.

"Okay! Okay! I quit," she laughed. "Your feet are off-limits. I get it."

I let go, and we went quiet again, catching our breath and watching the flickering candles.

"You know, you are very beautiful. Why do you try to hide it, like, when I first saw you at the airport? I didn't know what to

think of you. I couldn't take my eyes off you, but I couldn't figure out why."

"Maybe I was just waiting for the right guy — a guy who would take the time to really know me. Maybe I was just waiting for a hero."

"Let's go to bed."

We drained the tub and dried off. After brushing our teeth, I took one last look at Carrie before blowing out the candles. It was hard to keep my hands off her as she walked toward the bed. She had a strong, confident walk that suggested her poise and grace. She set her glasses on the nightstand and slipped under the covers. Her full, dark hair splayed across the pillow.

She turned onto her side and caught me watching. "What are you doing?" she laughed. "Are you coming to bed?"

"Yes, I'm coming. ... I'm just looking. ... By the way, I've made a final decision regarding your tattoo."

She laughed, "Really? ... So what have you decided?"

"I love it. I really do. It's beautiful, and you wouldn't be Carrie without it. When you walk away from me, I can't take my eyes off you. You're my little bad girl."

She smiled and raised her hands above her head and said, "Hold me, Francis. Make me feel wanted and safe, like you do."

I walked over to my side of the bed and turned off the lamp. I squirmed over toward her, and we interlocked tightly. I pushed my nose into her hair. She smelled like Carrie, and it was intoxicating. We lay still, watching the shadows from passing cars glide across the ceiling and listening to the street noise one floor below.

“What’s the plan tomorrow?” she whispered. “I know you have one.”

“Oh, ... sleep in with you, get some brunch, and then maybe go to the Vatican? I’d like to have a nice dinner tomorrow evening. Maybe in the Trastevere area of town, across the Tiber, south of the Vatican?”

She kissed me on the neck and whispered, “Perfect.”

I kissed her softly on the lips. My hands roamed over her body. From her lips, I moved to her midsection, then kissed all of her.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I’m not perfectly smooth like those Florentine statues. I didn’t think to pack a razor. Who knew I’d be sleeping with Mr. Corporate America?”

“Don’t apologize. I like it. ... I actually prefer it. You’re gorgeous,” I said as I went down on her.

She looked up at the ceiling and ran her fingers through my hair. “Okay, I got it, toes and pubic hair. We’re made for each other,” she panted.

As I continued, she twitched slowly. Her breathing quickened. She dug her nails into my scalp and pulled me into her. She was clean after our bath. She smelled and tasted delightful.

“My God, Francis, you’re such a good lover. You know just what ... to do.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I’m embarrassed to say ... I am ... a little surprised.” She said, panting in orgasm. “I guess I ... prejudged you a little ... too.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, Ms. McCall, I read the directions. ... You should know that by now.”

We both laughed as she caught her breath. I crawled on top of

her; she pulled her knees back, and we locked in a firm kiss.

“I’m yours,” she whispered playfully.

“I love you, Carrie,” I whispered as we joined.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and panted in my ear.

“I love you too, Francis.”

THE SEVENTH DAY

Thursday, October 31, 2002
Halloween

CHAPTER 18 - A VESPA TO THE VATICAN

I awoke to the buzz of a scooter on the street below. Carrie must have opened the window, I thought. I was sober again, and the previous evening was like a beautiful dream. Where was she? I reached under the covers and patted her side of the bed. Nothing.

Rubbing my eyes, I braced myself on my elbows to scan the room. A sudden movement on the floor caught my attention — an arm gracefully extended toward the ceiling in a fourth-position port de bras. The elegant hand, with soft, expressive fingers, moved with quiet control.

Carrie, eyes closed, was doing a leg split on the floor. At brief intervals, she folded at the waist, hugging each thigh, then returned to center, sitting tall, elongating her neck, and raising her arm in a meditative rhythm. I watched in silence, struck by her grace.

As I observed, I reflected on the past few days. I was unaware of how isolated and alone I had become. Now, I felt full — of hope, of connection, of possibility. Carrie's childlike curiosity and quiet elegance reminded me how wonderful life could be. Her presence peeled back my assumptions. What I once saw as eccentric now revealed a depth I hadn't anticipated. I found myself obsessed with uncovering the full extent of my misconceptions. What else had I been wrong about?

Carrie sensed me watching, paused, and slowly opened her eyes. She beamed and said, “Good morning, Francis.”

“Come here,” I ordered.

She gracefully stood, smiled, and then twirled into a playful Broadway finish. She held the finish for a couple of seconds, then walked to the bed, one foot in front of the other. I reached for her, took her hand, and pulled her under the covers. We kissed, held tight, and lay in silence until the street noise reminded us that our last full day in Rome was slipping away.

“I need coffee,” I said.

“I get the bathroom first,” she sang, then slipped out from under the covers and danced into the bathroom.

I groaned, fell back onto the bed, and pulled the comforter over my head.

After six days on our feet, the Vatican seemed too far to walk. I picked up the phone to ask the desk to call a taxi. “I’m getting a taxi to take us to the Vatican,” I mumbled.

“No,” Carrie said. “Let’s take a scooter?”

“What?”

“A scooter ... like the ones that buzzed past us all day yesterday? There’s a shop that rents them two doors down from the hotel. The sign says: twenty-five euros a day. The taxi fare will be at least that much, ... right?”

I put the phone back on the cradle. “Are you kidding me? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“No, I can drive one. I drive one all the time. It will be a blast, ... like real Romans?”

“You can drive a Vespa?”

“Yes, Carol has one. I drive it all the time.”

“You can drive a Vespa?”

“Yes. That’s how I get around; I either walk or ask Carol to borrow her Vespa. I don’t have a car.”

“I don’t know, Carrie. The drivers here are aggressive. It’s not like Atlanta. It’s dangerous. Can we both even fit on a Vespa?”

“Yes. Just put your daypack on your back. Common. It will be fun. We’ll take side streets.”

I looked at her in silence. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Yes,” she said, bouncing on her toes and hugging my arm. “Can we please?”

“All right,” I said, shaking my head. “We’ll check it out. But if it doesn’t look safe or convenient, I’m calling a cab.”

Carrie bounced and clapped her hands together.

We entered the street and walked south about thirty yards. Sure enough, a small shop was renting bicycles and Vespas. The clerk spoke broken English, and Carrie took the lead.

“We’d like to rent a Vespa,” she said, struggling to hold back her excitement. “What’s the story?”

“You pay me twenty-five euros, and you can have one for the day. Just bring it back before midnight in good condition with a full tank of gas.”

“Do we return it here? Is this the only place?”

“No, we have several locations in Rome.”

“Is there one near the Vatican?”

“Yes, we have a location close to the Vatican.” He tore a small map from a tablet of maps on the counter and handed it to Carrie. “Here, see,” he said, pointing with his pen. “Here are all our locations.” He circled the location closest to the Vatican. “If you’re going there, go this way. It’s not as busy,” he said, drawing a route through the city in red ink. “Tiny alleys won’t slow you down much on a Vespa.”

Carrie handed him the euros and her driver’s license. The clerk took down her information, then wheeled a mint-green Piaggio Vespa to the sidewalk. He handed us the keys and two helmets. “Have fun. Be careful,” he said. He turned unemotionally and walked back into the shop.

Carrie jumped on and pushed the electric starter. The scooter roared — ping, pa, ping, ping, ping. She looked back at me with her helmet on and a big smile. “Common, ... let’s go!”

I put on my helmet and mounted the small scooter. Sitting behind Carrie, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her tight. “I like this part,” I joked. “But I’m a little nervous. I don’t know if I trust you. Please take it slow until you get the hang of it.”

With that, Carrie gunned the throttle, and the little bike sped off into the street.

“Carrie, ...you’re scaring me.”

“Don’t worry,” she laughed. “These things usually get where they’re going, ... usually. We’ll probably make it. ... We’ll probably be okay.”

“Ha, ha, I muttered.”

She zipped into an alley and floored it. The scooter topped out at about thirty miles an hour, but that felt plenty fast. We flew down the tiny alley, passing pedestrians, tiny cars, and other scooters. Carrie seemed to have things under control however,

and my apprehension eased slightly.

“Hold on,” she yelled as she made a sharp turn into another tight alley. She beeped the tiny horn to let crossing pedestrians know we were behind them.

“You seem to know what you’re doing,” I yelled reluctantly.

“Yeah, I’m still learning. I’m not quite as good as Carol, but we’ll probably get there. Nothing usually happens. ... Usually.”

“Okay, smart ass, I got the reference to the airplane teasing. It’s funny,” I said sarcastically. “Just pay attention to the road.”

She was cute driving the Vespa. It was like her cigarette smoking; her confidence was seductive. She didn’t have to think; her coordination was superb; she just acted and reacted.

The twenty-minute ride to the Vatican was scenic and lively. We zipped down narrow streets clogged with tiny cars rarely seen in the States. We recognized the makes, but not the tiny models. As always in Rome, the incessant buzz of oncoming motor scooters was ever present. The old buildings lining the route were beautiful, debauched only occasionally by illegible bits of graffiti. I couldn’t understand who would vandalize something so timeless.

As it was our last night in Rome, and we planned to dine in a nice restaurant, Carrie had elevated her look to full Roman. She wore contacts instead of glasses, a subtle touch of makeup, her black leather jacket, snug black jeans, and sleek flat shoes. She’d unloaded her purse so she could sling it casually over her shoulder. With her dark, shoulder-length hair and dark sunglasses, she could easily pass for a local. She looked like an Italian movie star. As we crossed the Tiber on the Ponte Principe Amedeo Savoia, Castel Sant’ Angelo appeared in the distance.

“What’s that?” She yelled.

"I think they started it during the Roman Empire," I yelled. "But it's been remodeled so many times, nobody really knows what it is anymore. Officially, it's a medieval castle — supposedly where Emperor Hadrian's remains are buried. Same guy who built the wall in northern England to keep the Scots out."

Carrie looked at the castle, then yelled back, "I think I'm going to dance more when we get back to Atlanta. I really enjoy dancing."

"You're very good. I can't keep my eyes off you when you dance ... except, of course, when you dance with Prada Sales Trainers," I yelled, looking away.

She turned her head and yelled. "Ha ha. ... You know that didn't mean anything ... right, Francis?"

When I didn't respond, she reached over and pinched my thigh. "Right?"

From behind, I nuzzled her neck and kissed her cheek. She turned toward me and yelled again, "Right?"

It seemed important to her I acknowledge it, so I smiled and said, "Right."

"So, you're going to start dancing again?"

"Yeah. There are a few little theaters around town that occasionally need dancers for shows and stuff. If I can't make that work, maybe I can teach. There's a studio for young kids close to Five Points. Maybe they'll let me teach little girls." She stared ahead and mumbled, "I don't want to go back to the bar. I've gotta find something else. I don't want to deal with the drunks anymore. Maybe I can sell my artwork."

I listened and wanted to say something, but I didn't. I reflexively wanted to offer support and a long-term commitment, but something held me back. I was conflicted. Was I imagining

this bliss? Had I been so lonely, so disconnected and hollow, that any woman might have filled the void? My mutually exclusive feelings were making me sick. Pushing back seemed vanilla and safe. A singular thought agitated me, like a splinter in my mind. Would the window to grasp the most beautiful thing I've ever encountered close? Could I take that chance?

We had met only six days ago. But how many women had I known for much longer who didn't move me the way she did? She affected me in ways I hadn't felt since I was a child. Maybe being "smart" only led to isolation. Maybe the only thing more foolish than falling too quickly was not falling at all — or trying to calculate happiness? ... Calculate the perfect woman? Maybe we should choose mates with our hearts instead of formulaic calculation — choose what feels wonderful instead of what checks all the boxes?

As we reached the far side of the Tiber, I pointed to a tiny coffee shop called Chiosco Bar Rovere. "Let's stop there," I yelled. "I need coffee."

Carrie jumped the curb and drove up to an area where other scooters were parked. She shut off the bike, and we dismounted. I took off my helmet and stood for a moment, trying to get my land legs back. "You thought the flight was scary? That was scary."

"Oh, come on. We were under control," Carrie laughed. She grabbed my arm. "Thank you. That was so much fun. You're a good sport. I loved that."

We went up to the counter and ordered, then took our coffee and biscotti to an outdoor table in the fenced-in café. We sat and watched the traffic, the river, and the castle in silence.

"I can't get over the layers of history here," Carrie said, stirring her coffee. "Everywhere you look, you see a different period of history: modern, ancient, Renaissance. I guess it never really registered how young the United States is."

I sipped my coffee and watched her.

"Believe it or not, back home in Five Points, I'm considered hip and cool. I'm a master of that little world — that insignificant world defined by the four walls of that tiny bar. She shook her head. But here, ... I feel totally ignorant. ... I'm so glad I decided to come. It's so interesting. Inspiring actually." She looked away. "I should read more."

It was a beautiful morning. As I stirred my coffee and listened to Carrie confess, my heart filled with a sappy playfulness, I could only attribute to being in her presence. I loved listening to her and being with her. The harder I tried to be logical, the harder my heart pushed back in the opposite direction. She made me feel light and alive. Why didn't anyone else see what I saw?

"You seem to know everything, though," she continued. "And it's pissing me off!" She looked at me seriously, nodding her head in a 'yes' motion. "I want to know these things! You did this to me, Francis! Congratulations, Mr. Smarty-pants. Now I'm discontent." She laughed and sipped her coffee. "All I wanted to do in Five Points was fit in, ... to be 'normal'. Now, I'm confused." She looked down the river and mumbled, "I think you and prosecco opened a door that I can't close."

"You are a quick study, Carrie."

She slipped her foot out of her shoe, then pushed it between my thighs under the table. She grinned mischievously as she pushed into me. I looked down at her beautiful toes, then smiled as I sipped my coffee.

When we finished, I said, "I want to try the Vespa."

Carrie handed me the keys and smiled. "It's fun, right?"

I put on my helmet and fired up the tiny engine. Ping, pa, ping, ping, ping. "Come on, baby. Let's ride this hog."

"Wow," Carrie laughed sarcastically. "I didn't think you could look any hotter."

"Let's get our money's worth and take this thing for a spin before we return it."

Carrie put her helmet on and smiled from ear to ear. She jumped on and held me tight. "I just can't resist a man on a Vespa."

We took turns driving the Vespa for about an hour, weaving in and out of streets and alleys in the Prati district, just north of the Vatican. It was a beautiful day, and shops, cafes, and locals filled the treelined streets. Carrie was right. The Vespa was a good call. We laughed all the way. It was a little after noon when we referenced the tiny map to locate the scooter rental shop closest to the Vatican, then filled the gas tank and returned the scooter. We regained our street legs, then walked the two blocks to the Vatican City.

The line for the Vatican stretched a least a hundred yards. We waited patiently, watching the thousands of pilgrims and studying the magnificent architecture of the cathedral beyond. The crowd was a mixed bag of the old and the young, and represented what seemed like every country in the world. It was a testament to the reach of the Catholic Church.

"Are you Catholic?" I asked Carrie.

"Well, my father was Irish, and my last name is 'McCall', so

what do you think?"

"Well, I'd think probably. But your mother was from where? ... Iran right? Not too many Catholics there. Was she Muslim?"

Carrie laughed and shook her head. "Why does your intelligence irritate me so much? I don't know if you've picked up on this, but I'm very competitive. ... I guess I want to be more like you, ... Mr. Smarty-Pants."

"Yes, ... my mother was Muslim, but she didn't seem to like it much. She never spoke of it, or tried to teach it. They baptized me in the Catholic Church, ... or so I was told. We didn't go to church much. Usually only on Christmas and Easter, and I didn't go to catechism after the third grade. So I'm stupid about religion too."

"Come on, Carrie," I laughed. "Don't let me hear you say you're stupid. I hope you're joking. You're smart and very talented. You engage me. I love listening to you. You're my little muse. You inspire me. You make me think things!"

She looked up at me to confirm my seriousness. "Thank you, Francis. I'm just frustrated. I guess all this culture makes me feel a little small and stupid. You,... and Prosecco did this to me!" she laughed. "Are you happy now?"

I held her hand, kissed her on the cheek, "You're very curious, and you ask a lot of questions."

"Yeah, ... stupid questions."

"What did I say on the train? ... That's a sign of high intelligence. I love that you're gritty, talented, and street-smart. Besides, you're loved, ... and ultimately, that's all that matters."

She looked up at me seriously. "Are you a Catholic? I'm guessing you are with a name like Marino."

"Yeah, I'm Catholic, twelve years of catechism, altar boy for

six.”

“Is there anything you don’t know?”

“I don’t know how to dance, and I can’t draw a stick figure. ... You take yourself for granted. You’re far more talented than you think. Other people can’t do what you do. Don’t sell yourself short. You’re very special.” She leaned into me and pulled me close.

We bought our tickets and started toward the square in front of St. Peter’s. After pausing to take a picture in front of the basilica, we climbed the steps and entered.

“Wow,” Carrie whispered as we entered. We stood in awe for several minutes, trying to decide which direction to go.

Nothing prepares you for the opulence of St. Peter’s. Everywhere you look, lavish fixtures, sculptures, carvings, paintings, frescoes, and stonework jump out at you. The beautiful marble flooring, intricate capitals, ornate ceilings, and general spaciousness overwhelm you.

To our right, Michelangelo’s Pieta rested on a ledge. “That’s Michelangelo’s work,” I said. “You know, the same guy who carved David, the giant sculpture in Florence?”

“It’s so beautiful,” Carrie whispered. “It’s so smooth. Look at the folds in the fabric of her dress. It’s wonderful.” She clasped her hands together, and a tear rolled down her cheek as she studied the sculpture.

We wandered around looking at artwork for what seemed like an hour. Directly under the dome, above the papal altar, Bernini’s Baldachin loomed large. The giant bronze canopy over the altar was magnificent.

As we looked at the angels guarding the tomb of Benedictus XIII, Carrie asked, “Do you believe in God?”

I stood in silence for a moment, then answered. “I believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ, ... the scriptures.”

“But do you believe there’s someone watching over everything, ... someone who created everything?”

“I don’t know. But I believe in the Church. I believe the church serves an important and noble purpose. The teachings of Christ give many people hope and a reason to behave.”

“Is that why you behave?”

“No. I behave because that’s the world I want to live in.”

As we continued to walk between the tombs, Carrie whispered, “I think I’m a sinner.”

“You’re a sinner? Seriously?”

“Yeah, ... I’ve done some things. That fresco on the dome of the Duomo in Florence made me think.”

“We’re all sinners. Every time you covet someone else’s stuff or envy someone, you’re sinning. But I think the transgressions of the damned portrayed on the dome of the Duomo were a little more serious than that.”

“Well, ... I’m going to try to be a better person,” She whispered. “Do you believe in heaven?”

I grinned and looked away. “Oh, I know heaven exists. I was there last night.”

After wandering around the basement, looking at the tombs of the various popes, I asked, “Would you like to go to the roof? I hear is pretty awesome.”

“They let you go to the roof? ... Sure!”

I bought tickets, and we took the elevator as far up as we could go. But to reach the summit, you must still climb 320 steps from the dome base to the cupola. At the base of the cupola, a walkway circled the entire circumference of the dome. At one time, a low steel rail was the only barrier from falling to the floor of the papal altar. But now, the steel fence extended some ten feet higher. Unfortunately, the fence obstructed the magnificent view.

We walked the circumference, then started up. The stairs vacillated between tight spirals, semi-curved staircases, and straight, forty-five-degree ascensions. Carrie was ahead of me on the steps, and I enjoyed watching her strong legs make the climb.

“Do you recognize any of this?” I asked her.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Should I?”

“There was a scene in *La Dolce Vita* when Marcello chases Sylvia up these stairs, then her hat blows off on the roof?”

“Oh yeah. I do remember that scene. But this looks different.”

She was correct, and I was disappointed. They had covered the graffiti prevalent in the movie scene with tile and wood paneling. Diamond plate now covered the steps in many places. The passage seemed sterile compared to the classic movie. The stairs, however, were still as tight. Many times during the climb, we had to squeeze sideways past the oncoming traffic.

When we finally reached the top, the view was indeed breathtaking. Again, the church had prudently extended the railing upward to inhibit the insane from leaping to their deaths. The vertical bars were close together, so there was no chance Sylvia could lose her hat on this balcony today. I had hoped to take a great picture of Carrie leaning over the rail, with Rome in the

background. But unfortunately, the fence was too distracting. We settled for a hug, a kiss, and a magnificent view of the ancient city.

CHAPTER 19 - DINNER IN TRASTEVERE

It was four-thirty when we left the Vatican. For our last dinner in Rome, I chose an upscale restaurant in the artsy Trastevere district called Nannarella. On the map, it appeared to be a twenty-minute walk south of the Vatican. We retraced our steps to the coffee shop, crossed the street, and followed the river until Via della Lungara veered directly south toward Trastevere.

Trastevere is renowned for its narrow, winding cobblestone streets, medieval houses, and vibrant atmosphere, especially at night when its many restaurants, trattorias, and bars come alive with locals and tourists. It has a reputation for being an authentic Roman neighborhood, originally populated by Rome's working class, but presently inundated with artists and other bohemians. The district was similar in culture to Little Five Points in Atlanta, the area where Carrie worked, and I thought she might enjoy it.

The cobblestone street was narrow. There was no sidewalk, and barely enough room for cars to pass single file. A few times, we had to flatten ourselves against a residence to avoid oncoming cars or motor scooters. As we crossed side streets, we noticed benches along the residence walls supporting locals sitting, chatting, and relaxing.

"I just can't imagine defacing any part of this beautiful city," I

mumbled, studying the graffiti covering the walls.

“Feels like Five Points,” Carrie said.

“In a way, it is. This is Rome’s artsy district. But I still don’t get the graffiti. Can you explain that, art girl? Why do bohemians tag walls?”

“I don’t really know. I guess some of the more frustrated artists think it’s art? Maybe they’re hungry for the attention they’re not getting with their serious work? Maybe it’s a finger in the eye of those who are commercially successful? Politics? I’m not sure, but I don’t like it either. It’s like stealing someone else’s canvas. ... How did you find this place, anyway?”

“It’s on the card,” I said, pulling my note card from my pocket. “It’s highly rated. The neighborhood should get better a little farther south.”

Soon the road widened enough for parked cars, a sidewalk, and the occasional outdoor café. An ornate stone arch marked the entrance to the Palazzo Corsini and the National Gallery of Ancient Art. As we passed through, the atmosphere shifted. Pedestrian traffic increased. Shops and restaurants lined the streets. Tourists strolled past, shopping bags and cameras in hand.

It was getting dark, and again the amber streetlights and flickering candles from the outdoor tables created a soft, romantic ambiance. Young, attractive people shuffled over the cobblestones in all directions, chatting and holding hands.

“Look,” Carrie said, pointing to the Halloween decorations hanging in an outdoor café. “Looks like they celebrate Halloween here?”

“I guess when you think about it, Halloween is tied to the Catholic religion, ... right? It’s All Hallows Eve, the eve of ‘All Saints’ Day’ in the Catholic Church. I never thought about it

either. I always thought it was an American thing.” The deeper we descended into the district, however, the more Halloween decorations we noticed, until we realized we were in the middle of the local celebration.

“I completely forgot about Halloween,” Carrie said. “It’s tonight, right?”

The restaurant faced a small, triangular piazza called Piazza di San Calisto. In the center, several young boys were kicking a soccer ball toward a makeshift goal of netting strung between two garbage cans. As we approached the restaurant, one boy missed a pass, and the soccer ball rolled in front of us. Without hesitation, Carrie tiptoed forward and started working the ball back and forth between her feet as if challenging the boy to steal it. He squared off against her, but she quickly sidestepped him and kicked a sharp shot between the other boys and into the top corner of the makeshift goal.

“Score!” she said with a big smile, raising her fist in the air and pirouetting to look at me. The young boy defending her raised his hand to salute her. She high-fived him as the others clapped and shouted, “Bravo! Fallo di nuovo, gioca con noi. Per favore!”

“They want you to play with them,” I said, smiling and shaking my head.

One of the young boys passed the ball back to her and said, “Farlo di nuovo, per favore!”

Carrie tapped the ball back to him and pointed to the restaurant. “I have to eat dinner with my friend,” she said, shaking her head no.

The host greeted us at the entrance. It was a pleasant evening. The café provided small heaters on the ceiling, so we decided to sit outside and watch the action in the piazza. In addition to the boys playing football, many locals and tourists were passing by, heading for restaurants and other shops. Occasionally, scary costumed pedestrians would drift by, reminding you of the evening's significance. Several other cafés surrounding the piazza provided outdoor seating, and the many flickering candles added to the romantic amber atmosphere.

"What are we drinking on our last night in Rome?"

Carrie smiled. "I think I want to start with a martini."

"Make it two," I said to the waiter. "Dry, clean, and with olives."

"Molto bravo, signore," he replied, then pivoted toward the door.

I watched Carrie as she casually studied the menu. She looked beautiful in the candlelight. Her 'tom boy' display in the piazza completely enamored me.

"Okay, so where did you learn to play soccer?" I finally asked.

She looked up from the menu and said, "What?"

"Where did you learn to play soccer?"

"Oh, ... when I was little, the boy next-door had a soccer ball, and a bunch of us used to play kickball and soccer in his backyard almost every night after school. I was pretty good. When we were choosing teams, I got picked first ... a lot."

"I was always good at gym class, and our gym teacher was also the women's soccer coach. She asked me to try out when I was in the seventh grade. I made the team and lettered my sophomore, junior, and senior years. We were pretty good. In my senior year, we almost won the district. We lost by one goal to

a much larger school in the final.”

“Your father must have liked that?”

“He only ever came to one game—my senior year. I really wanted to play well. I wanted to show him that I could do something. Two minutes in, I slid between two girls trying to kick a goal, and twisted my ankle. It swelled like a grapefruit, and I sat out the rest of the game, ... so he really never saw me play.”

“Do you still play?”

“No. I looked into joining a woman’s league after high school, but never followed through. They meet on Saturday mornings, and I was always too hungover from closing the bar — the late nights. That’s another thing I probably should do when I get back. I have to get out of that bar and find a day job first, though.”

Our drinks arrived with a bowl of warm focaccia seasoned with garlic butter and rosemary. The smell from nearby tables reminded me how hungry I was.

“What should we toast on our last night in Rome? ... Halloween?”

“No. ... To Francis, my hero, the man who changed my life.” Carrie said, smiling and bumping my glass.

We both sipped the chilled gin.

She set her glass down and said, “I have a confession. I didn’t even want to come on this trip. I wanted to win the contest because I’m competitive by nature — I wanted to win, but I never considered the prize. I didn’t even know what it was. When I won, I wasn’t even sure where Venice was. I tried to sell the ticket. It just seemed like a lot of money and stress. I didn’t know where I was going or what to bring. You love to

make fun of my neutron bag, but I had no idea. I just threw everything in, trying to be ready for whatever.”

“But Francis,” she said, raising her glass. “You have made this vacation the most wonderful experience of my life. I’m re-thinking everything. The world seems full of possibilities again. I don’t care if I ‘fit in’. It doesn’t matter anymore. There’s so much out here. Just seeing how hard people worked to create such beautiful things here makes me feel better about myself and my situation. It’s inspiring. I feel like I can create things too.” She looked away. “You make me feel like I have something to offer.”

“That’s sweet, Carrie. Thank you.” I took a sip and studied her, then looked away. A couple passed within a few feet of the café, dressed like a hooker and a pimp. I shook my head. Carrie and I looked at each other and laughed.

“Why are you so quiet?” she asked.

“Oh, ... I was just thinking while you were talking. You made me think. That’s what you do,” I laughed. “From the moment I met you, your questions and playfulness made me feel young again. Before we met, I had this rigid idea of what I wanted in a woman. You’ve made me rethink that. It feels good to be with you.”

She squeezed my hand as the waiter returned to take our dinner order.

“I don’t care what you say. I’m getting the Tonnarello Carbonara. I know I ordered carbonara the last time, but I like it, and I’m having it. So there,” she said, as she smiled and slapped her menu on the table.

I smiled at her. “I’ll have the special, Tonnarello Nannarella? Is that how you say it? ... with eggplant, olives, capers, and cherry tomatoes. ... Ah, ... anche una bottiglia di Montepulciano

Abruzzo. Per favore,” I said as the waiter scribbled.

We continued to sip our drinks and watch the street. An older woman leaned out of a second-story window and yelled something in Italian toward the piazza. The young boys playing soccer immediately picked up the ball and ran toward the residence.

“Must be time for dinner,” I said, watching the boys scamper away, dodging other pedestrians. “By the way,” I said, moving to unfasten the gold bracelet from my wrist. “Here. This trip is completely on me. Your company has more than made up for any expenses. You don’t owe me anything. It was my pleasure to spend this time with you.”

Carrie reached across the table and covered my wrist with her hand. “No. Please don’t take it off. I want you to have it. Even if you don’t wear it after this trip, keep it. You can look at it once in a while and think about our week together. It’s yours. ... Just like I am—for as long as you want me.”

I let go of the chain clasp and instead held Carrie’s hand. She smiled warmly. A tear rolled down my cheek, and I looked away.

“What’s wrong?” She said, reaching for my other hand.

“I’m just happy,” I said, drying my eyes with my napkin. “This has been a big deal for me, too.”

We ate our dinner in silence, watching the street and listening to the buzz of the café. The waiter returned several times to refill our wineglasses, then cleared our empty plates.

“Vuoi vedere il menù dei dessert?”

“Sì, per favore. Sarà la donna a scegliere.”

“Molto buono, signore,” the waiter said, handing Carrie the

dessert menu.

“You get to choose,” I said.

“Well, ... you know what I want. I don’t need this,” she said, handing the dessert menu back. “Tiramisu, per favore,” she said.

“You’re getting pretty good with that Italian girl,” I joked. “Due espressi e due sambuca, per favore,” I instructed the waiter as he turned.

“Molto buono, signore.”

We shared the tiramisu and lingered over our espressos. Carrie had a cute way of eating it. She would scoop a tiny portion with her spoon, then turn the spoon upside down and lick the soft cake into her mouth with her tongue.

She noticed me watching and laughed.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

She knew.

You know you’re truly infatuated with a woman when you can’t stop watching her eat her dessert.

“You know,” Carrie said as she licked her spoon. “I’ve been thinking about St. Peter’s. It was so beautiful. I’ve never seen anything so big and ornate before. How long did it take to build that?”

“Something like 120 years.”

“Can you imagine building something like that by hand, without power tools, cranes, or trucks? You could work on it your whole life and not see it finished? Right?”

“Oh yeah. The average lifespan was much shorter back then too — something like 30-40 years in the 1500s.”

“Wow, ... that’s like three generations of workers?”

We sat for a few minutes, reflecting. Then Carrie said, “I felt sad for them at first, you know, the workers not being able to see the finished project. But in a way, we’re all like that, right?

It’s kind of like a metaphor for all of us. We work our whole lives and never really see what effect we have on the world, you know, our work, our children, the things we do, and the choices we make. None of us ever really sees the finished product.”

I smiled at her as she licked another spoonful of cake into her mouth. “See how smart you are? Another thought-provoking observation by the beautiful and talented Ms. Carrie McCall.”

She smiled from ear to ear and rubbed my leg with her toe under the table.

After finishing our dessert and sambuca, I paid our tab. We were a little drunk, and I asked the waiter to signal a cab to take us to the Spanish Steps.

It was almost seven o’clock as the cab crossed the Tiber and proceeded north on Via Arenula.

“So, what are the Spanish Steps?”

“Another ‘must see’ Roman landmark. Their beautiful steps connecting a big piazza and fountain to the Spanish Embassy. Over the years people started sitting on them like bleachers in a stadium. It’s a great people watching spot.”

Carrie intently looked out her window. “There are so many cool spots in this town. Look at that,” she said, pointing to another two-block long ancient archeological site on the right. Roman columns rose from a brick structure about ten feet below street level. “How does all this stuff get buried?”

The cab driver turned toward us and responded with an Indian accent. "I asked the same question when I arrived here. As the structures decayed, the residents just built on top of the rubble. In those days, they didn't have trucks to haul it away, so they just leveled it out and built on top of it."

The town was bustling. Tiny cars and scooters zipped by. Elderly ladies wearing babushkas, black coats, and high heels walked with purpose into stores and shops. Younger ladies clad in stylish black leather coats and sporting diamond nose studs leaned into good-looking men, held hands, whispered confidentially, while meandering to unknown destinations. We turned onto Via dei Condotti. The Spanish Steps and the famous Piazza di Spagna fountain were only a few blocks away. High-end designer shops lined the street. We were a little drunk, and I was feeling sentimental. As I watched the shops flash by, I was overcome by the urge to buy Carrie a gift, something special to remember the trip.

As we sat at a light in front of a jewelry store, I bade the driver to stop. "Questo è buono, per favore lasciaci qui." The driver pulled over, and I helped Carrie out.

"What are we doing?" she asked. "Where are the steps?"

"The steps are just over there," I said, pointing down the street. "I want to look in a couple of these stores. I need to buy some gifts. Can I meet you at the fountain in front of the steps in about an hour?"

"Sure," Carrie said. Is something wrong?

"No. No. ... I just need to buy some souvenirs for my nephews. Here," I said, handing her another hundred dollars' worth of euros. "Just in case you need something. I'll meet you at the fountain over there, just down the street, in an hour."

"Okay," she said. We kissed and parted.

Not wanting Carrie to see me enter a jewelry store, I entered a men's clothing store just to the right of it, then watched out the window to make sure she wouldn't see. She looked around for a moment to get her bearings, then walked down the street toward the fountain. When she was out of sight, I emerged from the men's store and entered the jewelry store.

CHAPTER 20 - THE SPANISH STEPS

The plan was to buy Carrie a souvenir or a memento. I didn't know exactly what that would be. I only knew that I wanted something special — something that represented how much our time together meant to me. I wanted to leave no doubt in her mind that I hoped our relationship would continue after we returned to Atlanta. But what could capture that?

As I scanned the jewelry cases — necklaces, bracelets, rings — I immediately ruled out anything costume. It had to be some kind of real gemstone. It had to be as genuine as the feelings I had for her. After about twenty minutes, I asked the clerk if there were other jewelry stores nearby. I was looking for something very specific.

“Sì, questa strada è piena di negozi di gioielli,” he said, pointing to a tight alley across the street.

I left the store and wandered into the alley. But after visiting two other high-end stores. I was still struggling. One block further down the street, I saw a sign that read “gioielli d'epoca”, or vintage jewelry. Time was running out, and I was running out of options. I walked over to the window and looked through the glass. There, in the middle of a blue velvet drape, surrounded by a myriad of beautiful antique pieces, was a ring that represented the moment I found Carrie. It was perfect. Without hesitation, I entered the shop and asked about it.

The jeweler spoke English and said, “Yes, that's a good one.

We've had a lot of interest in it lately."

I knew that was pawn speak for, "If you really want it that badly, you're going to have to pay top dollar."

I summoned all the emotional control I could muster and said, "How much?"

"4,200 euros," the clerk said matter-of-factly.

"What's that in U.S. dollars?"

He pulled out a calculator, referenced the current exchange rate, and, looking over the top of his small reading glasses, said, "About \$4,100."

"Wow, that's a lot. What kind of stone is that?"

"It's a two-carat amber, diamond, and the setting is 17-carat gold. It's a very nice ring."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was a diamond. I've never seen an amber diamond before."

"They're much rarer now than they used to be. Everyone wants white, clear diamonds now. Believe me, if it were a white diamond, I'd be asking a lot more, maybe three times as much."

He handed me a loop, and I examined the ring from all sides. It was beautiful. But that amount was half of my current liquid savings. Buying such an expensive ring wasn't in the plan. ... Still, ... it was perfect. It perfectly symbolized the moment our relationship began and the depth of my feelings for her. I felt conflicted.

I hesitated, then reflexively said, "I'll give you \$3,500 US for it."

The jeweler frowned and again punched the keys on his calculator. After a minute, he looked up and said, "No. I can't

go that low. Actually, I can't go any lower than \$4,000 on this particular piece."

I carefully set the ring back on the velvet pad. I was sick with disappointment. This is crazy, I thought. I've known Carrie for only a week. Get a hold of yourself. Think logically. Stay on plan. Who falls this hard for any woman in a week? What am I missing?

"Okay, I said, turning toward the door. It's beautiful, but that is more than I planned to spend."

As he returned the ring to the window, a young couple walked up to the storefront and looked through the glass. The woman pointed at the ring and bounced on her toes, the way Carrie did when she was excited. The man hugged her tight, smiled, placed his hand on her back, and guided her toward the door.

I froze and felt sick.

That was Carrie's ring. It perfectly symbolized the serendipity that brought us together and the depth of my feelings for her. I wanted it for her. I spun toward the jeweler and said, "Okay. \$4,000. I'll take it."

I paid by credit card, then stuffed the little boxed ring into my daypack. Over an hour had passed since I had left Carrie. The shop bell jangled as I dashed back into the street. I looked around to get my bearings, then hurried toward the main road and on to the fountain. I felt bad about leaving her alone in the strange city; but what else could I do? I wanted the gift to be a surprise. She was a big girl and had a lot of grit, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I had abandoned her. The last time she was alone in Italy, things didn't turn out so well, and I was a little worried.

As I left the street and entered the piazza, the number of peo-

ple rambling around the fountain and loitering on the steps overwhelmed me. I hadn't expected the crowd to be so large. It was Halloween, and young people were four deep around the fountain, many dressed in spooky or sexy costumes — witches, ghosts, zombies, prostitutes, dancers, and cats — laughing, holding hands, conversing, sitting, and kissing. Tourists weaved through them, studying the beautiful buildings, the fountain, the staircase, and the chaos. So many people covered the steps that climbing to the top would require a very circuitous route. It was now half-past eight. The sky was dark, but the amber street lamps and spotlights on the fountain, buildings, and steps made for a beautiful ambiance. However, spotting a particular person in such a large crowd under the dim amber lighting was challenging.

About a hundred yards from the fountain, two men on a motor scooter whizzed past me. They brushed so closely that I froze for a moment, trying to process what had just happened. The scooter swerved toward a sharply dressed woman, and the passenger grabbed her purse. She fought back, but he overpowered her and pushed her backward. She stumbled and fell onto the street, hitting her head on the cobblestones. Several people rushed to help her as the scooter sped away. I regained my composure and quickened my pace.

I walked the circumference of the fountain, looking into the crowd for Carrie. There were so many locals and tourists that finding someone in the dim light required looking closely at each individual. No sign of her. As I scanned each person's face, my anxiety worsened. What if she had gotten lost?

She had my phone number and could call my cell if she could figure out this odd Italian phone system and pay for the long-distance charges. Could she really be shopping? I knew she had only a little over \$100 US. That wouldn't take long to

spend.

I looked at my watch again. It was eight-thirty, a half-hour past the rendezvous time. Where could she be? She wouldn't go back to the hotel? Without a map, she couldn't find it; could she? She had to be here.

I climbed about halfway up the steps to get a better view of the piazza. Leaning on the rail, I strained to observe every person in the square. I tried to eliminate anyone without long, dark hair and a black leather jacket. That wasn't much help, as all the locals seemed to have long dark hair and black leather jackets.

The purse-snatching shocked me. Might Carrie have gotten hurt, robbed, or molested? Hit by a scooter or a car? Maybe she was in the hospital needing help? Petty crime was common in European cities, and Carrie wasn't wise to it. Could someone have tricked her into some alley and beaten her to take her purse?

I looked at my watch. It was almost nine o'clock. I saw two police officers sitting on bicycles at the far end of the piazza. Should I report this? I wondered. I'll give it ten more minutes, then I'm reporting it.

As I started down the steps to contact the police, I saw a woman about ten yards from the fountain with dark brown hair, black pants, and a leather jacket. That's her, I thought. I raced down the steps, excusing myself for brushing into pedestrians crowding around the fountain. I came up behind the woman, placed my hand on her shoulder, and said, "Carrie?"

The woman turned around and shouted loudly, "Di cosa stai parlando, Carrie? Chi è Carrie?"

"I'm sorry. Ah, ... mi dispiace. Pensavo fossi qualcun altro. I thought you were someone else. Please forgive me."

My stomach sank. I was beginning to feel sick. The crowd was

growing. I looked toward the north end of the piazza to locate the police officers I'd seen on bicycles. I think it's time.

Then a familiar voice behind me called out, "Francis!"

I turned toward the fountain. The crowd had parted, and there she was, sitting on the low wall around the fountain, one knee pulled to her chest, apparently painting her toenails?

"Are you looking for me, Francis?" she laughed. "Were you worried about me?"

I breathed a deep sigh of relief and hurried toward her.

She screwed the top back onto a bottle of red nail polish and said, "What do you think?"

"Carrie ..." I said, with a tear in eye. "Where have you been? Pumpkin, I've been looking for you. I thought something had happened ..."

"I'm sorry. I've been sitting right here, where you wanted me, for at least forty-five minutes. Look. I did all this while I was waiting." She spread her fingers and toes to display her work.

I looked down. She had neatly painted her fingernails and toenails bright red.

"I must have missed you when I walked around the fountain. Maybe there was someone in front of you. I don't know." I wiped my eyes and said, "Come on. Let's go sit on the steps."

"Wait, ... I can't put my shoes on yet," she said, slipping her leather flats into her purse. She took my hand and gracefully tiptoed over the cobblestones in bare feet to the base of the steps. We ascended, taking care not to bump into other couples, until we reached the halfway point and sat.

Carrie again splayed her fingers and toes out in front of her and smiled at her work. “This is the first time I’ve ever painted my toes,” she mumbled. “I think I like it.”

I put my arm around her and squeezed her tight, then kissed her on the cheek. “They’re beautiful. Did you do that for me?”

Carrie smiled and nodded. “Yes, I did, Mr. Toe Man. Do you like the color?”

“I do. What color is that?”

“Whore Red,” she laughed. “I want to be your little Italian whore. I can’t go totally suburban.”

We both laughed.

“It’s actually called British Red.”

She hugged and leaned into me. “You are so emotional, Francis,” she said, studying my face. “You were really worried about me down there, weren’t you?”

I nodded.

“Awww,” she said and kissed me on the cheek.

She dropped her shoes on the step and let her feet rest on them to dry in the night air. “You should have seen the color I almost bought — bright fluorescent blue. I had it in my hand and started toward the cashier. But I had second thoughts and put it back. It made me think about what you said, ... about my tattoo?”

“What did I say?”

“You asked me on the plane if tattoos were ornamentation or self-depreciation.”

“I asked you that?”

“Yes, you did. Don’t you remember? Anyway, when I looked at

the blue nail polish, it reminded me of what you said. I started wondering why I was attracted to such an odd color. Why was I always choosing unusual things to represent me? Was I trying to call attention to myself ... or searching for continuity between my self-image and outward appearance? Do I really want to be fluorescent? Pretty deep, right?"

I held her tight as she stared blankly at the fountain.

"After my mother died, my father and I grew distant. He traveled a lot for work. I got the feeling he resented having to take care of me. We hardly spoke. When we did speak, like at the kitchen table, or in passing, he would always berate me for not wearing makeup. He'd say I was plain and needed to fix myself up — dress better. The more he pushed me, the more I pushed back. The less he noticed me, the more extreme I became. Your comment made me think. I guess for a child, any attention is better than no attention. Right?"

Carrie's comment made me sad. How could any parent ignore such a beautiful and promising child? "I'm sorry," I said, hugging her tighter. "That was so cruel. You're anything but plain. You're beautiful, Carrie, ... and so talented."

She looked away. "You really think I'm beautiful? ... I never got asked to the prom."

"Of course I do. I never went to the prom either. It's silly. But I would have been proud to have you on my arm."

She turned back toward me with tears in her eyes, threw her arms around me, and pressed her cheek against mine. When we broke apart, she sniffed and said, "You're the only person who's ever said that to me ... ever."

I pulled her tight and kissed her on the cheek. She leaned into me and whispered, "I feel like I'm dating my therapist."

She wiped her tears on her sleeve, and we sat in silence, watching the crowd around the fountain and the other couples on the steps. It was a beautiful moment. You could feel the love on the steps and the magic in the square.

“What else did you buy? What’s in that bag?” I asked, looking at a medium-sized shopping bag from an art supply shop. “Did you get some art supplies?”

“Well... after I bought the nail polish—and a razor, but don’t worry, it’s only for my legs and underarms. I’m not going to get too crazy. I may shape things up a bit, but I know what you like. Anyway...” She pointed to a shop farther down the street. “I saw that art supply store over there. I was looking at all the cool art stuff, and then I saw this.”

She reached into the bag and pulled out a picture frame. It was black, with a molding about an inch and a half wide, and sized to hold a standard sheet of paper. Handing it to me, she said, “It’s for you.”

Puzzled, I looked down at the frame, then flipped it over. Under the glass was the drawing she had made of me sitting in front of the Pantheon. It was remarkable. She had painstakingly filled in all the details. In the bottom corner, she had written: “Francis, thank you for the best week of my life. You’re my hero. Love always, Carrie”

“I worked on it some more before I did my toes. Do you like it?”

“It’s wonderful,” I said, as my eyes teared up. “There ... now we’re both crying. See what you’ve done?”

“I was a little worried it might upset your spartan suitcase-packing regiment, but if you don’t have room, I think I can carry it back in my purse,” she said, laughing. “I’m not going to get Chick-fil-A this time.”

"I love it, Carrie. I'd leave clothes behind to take this home."

We sat in silence for several minutes. From our high perch, we watched the activity on the steps and in the piazza. It was an odd assortment of tourists mixed with local teenagers and costumed revelers. The tourists gawked at the surroundings, while the teenagers coupled up, hugged, held hands, and kissed around the fountain wall. Almost every step held couples holding hands.

I glanced at my watch. "It's half-past nine. We've got to catch the train to Venice at nine-thirty tomorrow morning. Maybe we should head back? We could get high, take another bath... and I could kiss your freshly painted toes." I laughed.

We strolled hand in hand down the Via Sistine, in the general direction of our hotel. When the road crossed the Via Venti, Carrie gently tugged me north.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "It's this way. Isn't it?"

"No, it's this way. Come on."

"Carrie, I think you're mistaken. I'm pretty sure it's this way ... one more block south."

Carrie turned toward me, took both of my hands, and looked up at me earnestly. "I'm sure it's this way. I know which way it is because I pay attention to little details; I notice things. While you were thinking your deep thoughts and pontificating on the history of Rome, I was watching the street signs. It's north on Via Venti, then south again on Via Firenze. Remember ... the street you said was recommended by the guidebook?"

"I don't remember. Let me check the map," I said, taking my daypack off my shoulder.

Carrie stopped me and said, “No, Francis, you don’t need to check your notes or your map. I’m sure. If I weren’t sure, I wouldn’t say I was. Trust me. I notice things, like street signs.”

I hesitated. We stood looking at each other in silence. “I do trust you. But why don’t we check the map anyway? It’s getting late, and we might get lost?”

“Francis,” Carrie said with a playful smile. “Do you trust me when I say I love you?”

“...Yes.”

“Then trust me when I say I know the way home.” She squeezed my hand and pulled me forward. “Come on, hero. Trust me.”

We walked for about ten minutes before I muttered, “Carrie, I still think it’s the other way. Can we just check the map? ... Please?”

Carrie looked up at me with a big smile, shook her head, and mouthed the word ‘No’.

She kept glancing up at me as we walked, smiling and giggling as though she held a delightful secret. When we reached Via Firenze, her smile widened. She let go of my hand and began dancing in front of me — skipping backward, twirling, arms raised above her head, radiant with laughter. It was beautiful to watch, and she made me smile. How could anyone not love this woman?

“See? This is our street,” she sang, beaming. “Don’t you recognize the buildings? You pointed them out earlier. You mentioned the ‘human scale’ of the architecture.”

“You remembered that?” I said.

“I remember everything. This is the street!”

“Well ... maybe it is,” I mumbled.

"It definitely is, homeboy. ... Admit it. ... I was right!"

"It might be our street," I mumbled, dodging her gaze with mock resistance.

"See! ... There's our hotel sign! Do you recognize that, Smarty-Pants?"

"That could be our hotel ..."

"Could be?" She laughed, feigning outrage. "Why can't you just admit I was right?"

"Well, ... maybe you got this one right," I said, secretly holding back a laugh and trying to catch her fist as she tried to punch me in the ribs. I pulled her into a 'straitjacket' hold and pushed my nose into her hair. She knew something I didn't, and it wasn't just the way home.

As I put my key in the room door, Carrie said, "Francis, I think I'm too tired for a bath. Let's just take quick showers and get in bed and snuggle?"

We dropped our things by our suitcases, and I flopped on the bed. Carrie undressed, folded her clothes neatly, and laid them on her suitcase.

"Just give me fifteen minutes," she said as she walked toward the bathroom. I picked up the TV remote and tuned to The Simpsons with Italian voices dubbed over the English.

When I finished showering, I opened the bathroom door to see Carrie perched on the right side of the window ledge in her panties and again in the loose T-shirt sporting the image of P!nk, and the words "Get the party started." The window was open, and she was preparing to smoke. She held her right knee tightly against her chest and displayed her freshly painted

toes on the ledge. Her left leg hung loosely toward the floor, swinging slightly from side to side.

“Want to join me for my last cigarette?” She said, bouncing the cigarette on her lip and snapping her Bic lighter.

I walked over to join her and sat on the window ledge, opposite her. As she lit her cigarette and drew deeply, I studied her painted toenails.

“Are you really quitting?”

“I’m not buying anymore. I may ‘bum’ one occasionally, but I’m going to try to quit.” The cigarette bounced on her lip. “I guess you’ve given me a reason to live longer.” She smiled, then exhaled into the cool October sky. We sat silently, watching the traffic below. A scooter sped along the opposite side of the street, carrying two costumed people, one dressed like a skeleton, the passenger like a witch. As they passed the pizza café, the diners cheered.

Carrie noticed several people eating alone in the café and asked, “Do you ever get anxious when you’re alone sitting in a restaurant or out in public?”

I laughed. “Why do you ask that?”

“Like those guys over there,” she said, pointing with her cigarette. “Like when you dine alone ... or just sit outside alone?”

“No, ... I’m invisible. Nobody notices me. It’s my superpower,” I laughed as I looked off. “I can walk through a crowded room and nobody will notice.”

“You’re exaggerating,” she laughed.

“No, I’m not. Beautiful women, especially women like you, the kind that dress dramatically, have a distorted impression of public visibility. Men notice you because you’re cute and unusual. Women notice you because you’re competing with them

for available men, and your flamboyant dress makes you stand out. Nobody notices a conservatively dressed man. A gray suit is like an invisibility cloak.”

Carrie drew deeply, studied me for a couple of seconds, then exhaled into the night sky.

“Want to get high?” I asked. “You’re not giving up pot too, are you?”

“Yeah,” she smiled, then laughed. “I mean, yeah, we can get high, and no, I’m not giving up pot — at least not tonight.”

She pinched the empty cigarette pack between her fingers. “Let’s smoke half tonight, and save the other half for our last night in Venice? Maybe we can get high in front of St. Mark’s again? You know, the place where I dared you to kiss me? ... Remember?” she smiled.

I smiled, and we sat for a second. She knew I did. “I’ll never forget that,” I mumbled, looking down at the café. “That was one of the most exciting moments of my life.”

She shook her head and smiled, then removed the joint from the empty pack and crushed her cigarette out on the ledge. She placed the butt into the empty pack, then crushed the pack into a tiny ball. An empty dump truck was rumbling down the cobblestone street below, and she bit her lip and threw the crushed pack out the window like a baseball, into the passing dump body. We watched in silence as the truck disappeared around the corner.

We sat, enjoying the view, the smell of pizza, and the banter from the café. Carrie turned toward me. “Do you really think I’m beautiful?”

I laughed. “Why would you ask me that now? Of course I do.”

She turned back toward the street. "I don't know. ... I guess I'm just insecure."

I rubbed my foot over her toes on the ledge. "Can I give you a better compliment?"

She turned toward me smiling, closed her eyes, and hunched her shoulders. "Sure."

I looked seriously into her eyes and said, "After only seven days together, I'm certain you're the most attractive woman I've ever met."

Carrie smiled. "Thank you, but why is that better than saying I'm beautiful?"

"We've already had this conversation, Carrie. ... You probably don't remember because you were stoned."

"Refresh my memory."

"There are many beautiful women in the world; but very few I find truly attractive. I'm drawn to you. You know I am. You've caught me watching you many times and remarked of it. There's something intangible about you, beyond your beauty, ... that I find fascinating, ... something I don't think I want to live without."

We watched each other seriously for a couple of minutes, then Carrie slipped off the sill. She walked over and hugged me tightly, tighter than she ever had, then whispered in my ear, "I see you, Francis. You're not invisible to me. ... I see everything. ... I know exactly who you are."

I squeezed her and felt myself getting emotional. Tears rolled down my cheeks. That was it. That's what I loved about her. That's what drew me to her. She saw me. She appreciated me, and I felt it deeply.

She pushed back, looked into my eyes, and gently wiped the

tears on my cheek with her thumb, then whispered, “Come on, Mr. Corporate America. Let’s get high and fuck.”

THE EIGHTH DAY

Friday, November 1, 2002

CHAPTER 21 - THE HONEYMOON SUITE

“Attenzione! Questa è l’ultima chiamata per salire a bordo del treno 1013 per Venezia. I passeggeri devono recarsi al binario 7,” the station intercom announced, as we struggled to cross the threshold and board our train to Venice. We stored our suitcases in the luggage area just inside the door, then found our seats and collapsed.

It had been a relatively sleepless night. After sharing half of the remaining joint, we were both residually drunk, stoned, and tired. Carrie slipped off the window ledge.

“I’ve got to brush my teeth. I think you’re going to like my legs,” she said, looking back at me and smiling. “That razor did a pretty, pretty good job!” she sang playfully. When she returned, she slipped out of her panties and, with a flick of her toes, tossed them onto her suitcase. Her T-shirt followed, sailing casually on top.

I loved that she felt so comfortable naked. Nudity suited her — natural, effortless, and free. She had a beautiful, firm body. I assumed her relaxed attitude had something to do with her bartender lifestyle, but that didn’t bother me. In fact, it only added to her allure.

My ex, Jamie, had been the opposite. Conservative to the core — robes, pajamas, boundaries. Always in control. She insisted on sleeping in pajamas, claiming it kept the sheets clean, and

chastised me for occasionally doing otherwise.

Carrie's body was also very different from Jamie's. Jamie was tall, thin, and slightly flat-chested. She seldom exercised, so although she was lightweight, she was soft. Carrie, by contrast, was slightly shorter and curvier, with firm, medium breasts. Her legs and backside were solid and strong. She walked everywhere confidently, gracefully, with poise and purpose. Her nude body resembled a statue of a Roman goddess, and she was completely unaware of it.

How many times had we made love? The pot caused us to lose all inhibition. We held, kissed, and touched like teenagers. Carrie was like a playful little animal, happy, smiling, and insatiable. When we finally interlocked and drifted off, her soft, warm body calmed me like nothing I had ever known. Whatever the future held, it was a night I'd never forget.

"I'm tired," she said, settling into her seat. She turned toward me. "Did you want to go to the restaurant car to get coffee?"

"No. I think I'm going to try to sleep. We should be there in a little over three hours. Let's get some rest and have a nice evening tonight. I have a plan."

Carrie smiled, her voice soft and teasing. "I know you do."

The train limped away from the station, then sped up. Old buildings and railroad signs flashed by. Soon we were back in the country again, observing fields of grapevines, quaint hill towns, and rail crossings flanked by flashing red lights warning short lines of tiny cars that a train was passing. As we approached Florence, we could see the Apennine Mountains in the distance.

The gentle rocking of the train made for a relaxing ride. I looked over at Carrie. She was already asleep, her head turned sideways, toward me and against the seat cushion. I gently

slipped her glasses off and tucked them into her purse, then watched her angelic face for a couple of minutes. Even asleep, her face glowed with that impossible combination of warmth, mischief, and purity I thought I'd forgotten existed.

I wanted to sleep too, but my mind wouldn't settle.

I didn't want the week to end. I didn't want to go back to my old life, and it haunted me. It was hard to imagine the coming weeks without Carrie close by. I didn't realize how dead I was before I met her. She made me feel needed and alive. She excited me. With her around, my life had purpose.

As the Italian countryside flashed by, I reflected on the decisions I'd made, my previous marriage, and my divorce. I had designed my life on purpose. I based my decisions on what I thought a perfect life should be. I covered every contingency and logically selected a partner who checked all the boxes. My life was wrapped in beautiful paper with a bow on top. But after spending the week with Carrie, I realized it was just wrapping paper covering an empty box.

Carrie shifted in her seat and turned her head toward the window. She was sleeping soundly. I looked around the half-full railcar. The other passengers seemed benign, many well-dressed, some in suits. There was no danger in leaving Carrie for a few minutes. I decided to get a bottle of water and quietly left my seat, then headed to the restaurant car.

I pulled two bottles from a reach-in cooler, then waited in the short line to pay.

"Saranno 5 euro," said the cashier.

I opened my wallet and found only four. I laid it on the counter, then dug through my daypack looking for any loose euros that may have fallen to the bottom. "Do you speak English?"

I asked the cashier.

“S’, un po” the cashier responded.

“I’m a little short. I’m going to have to put one of these bottles back. Can you remove it from the bill?”

A man behind me reached forward and added another one-euro note to my stack. “Here,” he said. “I got it.”

I turned to see a tall, well-built man in his mid-fifties, neatly dressed in slacks and a sport shirt. His face was weathered, and his hair was neatly combed over the top. “Thank you so much. Are you American?”

“Yeah, my wife and I are from Texas,” he said with a slight Southern drawl. “We own a small ranch outside of Laredo.”

“I’m Francis. What’s your name?”

“Charles Grasley,” he said, offering his hand.

We shook hands. “Are you here on vacation?”

“Yeah. My wife is Italian, and she’s always wanted to visit Italy. Her grandfather was from here.”

“Wow, what a coincidence. That’s why I’m here — to visit my grandfather’s hometown. Where are you heading now?”

“We flew into Rome and stayed a couple of nights, saw some stuff. Now we’re heading to Florence for a day or two. Her grandfather was from just outside Florence.”

“We were just there a couple of days ago. You’ll love it. Make sure to see David. It’s magnificent.”

“Yeah, that’s on the list of stuff to do. Say, do you know of any nice places to eat or stay? We don’t have any reservations.”

I thought for a second, then said, “Hang on.” I opened my daypack and produced the travel guide I’d purchased before I

left and said, "Here, I don't need this anymore. There are several hotels listed here," I said, turning to the section on Florence. "This guide has been very reliable. Just pick one from this list, and I'm sure you'll be okay. Oh, ... and here, I said, digging the notecard from my jacket. Take this too. I don't need this either. These restaurants and hotels are good bets."

"Thank you," he said, flipping through the book and looking at my note card. "I'll let my wife pick one. She'll love this. Enjoy the rest of your trip."

As I made my way through the gangway, back to my car and my seat, I felt lighter. I slipped into my seat, stored the water in the seatback, and fell fast asleep.

I was awakened by a soft punch in the arm.

"Hey mister, where are my glasses?" Carrie whispered.

I rubbed my eyes. "Check your purse. They must have slipped to the bottom," I said. "Are we almost there?"

"We're about fifteen minutes out, ... I think. She rummaged through her purse and pulled them out. "Got 'em." She slipped them on, looked at me, raised her eyebrows, and smiled.

"Here, you'll probably need this," I mumbled, producing a bottle of water from the seat-back pocket. "It's still cold."

Her eyes lit up as she took the bottle. "That's exactly what I was thinking about. Thank you." She twisted off the cap and took a long drink. "Haaaaa," she said, expressing satisfaction. "I'm not used to somebody thinking about me all the time. Maybe I'll get tired of that?" she said flatly.

I studied her face. Then she grinned and said, "Naaaaaaaaa!"

We both laughed.

The lagoon was now visible. Boats peppered the waterways between the small islands, and ducks and other waterfowl filled the sky. The train slowed as we made the turn onto the causeway, connecting the mainland to the island. Several vaporetos ferried passengers to and from the magical city. The train pulled into the station at one o'clock.

"Let's see if Geno has a room with a bigger bed," I said.

We lugged our suitcases down the street, taking care not to bump into the myriad of pedestrians coming and going. It was November 1st, but the sun was shining and the temperature was mild. The cafes around the station were bustling; tourists were taking pictures, and the shops were abuzz.

When we entered the hotel lobby, Geno looked up and said, "Mr. Marino, ... good to see you again. Are you staying with us tonight?"

"Yes, do you have a room with a double bed?"

"I think so," he said, checking the pigeonholes behind him. "Ah, yes, he laughed, pulling a key with a giant blue fob. We call it the honeymoon suite, ... but it's just a slightly larger room with a double bed."

Carrie and I looked at each other and laughed. I handed Geno my credit card and said, "We'll take it. Which way?"

The room was at the very end of the alley. We opened the door and entered. It was about twice the size of the previous room. It had a shower and a proper bathtub, a desk, and a double bed. We dropped our stuff and got organized, then kicked off our shoes and flopped onto the bed. I looked at my watch. It was one-thirty. We both lay silent, staring at the ceiling.

"I hate to waste any time in this magical place, but I may need a nap," I said. "What do you think? A short nap, then an early dinner, say five o'clock?"

“Yeah, ... that’s fine.” A few moments passed, then she said, “Francis, what’s going to happen to us when we get back to Atlanta?”

I turned toward her and smiled. “Don’t worry, Pumpkin. I have a plan.”

Carrie laughed and said, “I know you do. I’m just wondering if it includes me?”

“What do you think?”

She looked at me with sad eyes. “I hope it does.”

“Of course it does.” I pulled her close. “Let the night play out. I have a plan.”

“You always have a plan,” she whispered. “You’re so organized. Where does that come from?”

“It’s just compensation. Discipline is all I have. I have to be organized, accurate, precise, and careful. I’m not smart — I just read the directions. It makes me seem smart, but it’s really just hard work. I don’t have natural talent like you. I have to study. It takes me time. I’m usually uncomfortable improvising. I have to follow the rules, read the directions, and adhere to procedures. The irony here is that you’re so talented and you don’t know it. Everyone thinks I’m talented, and I’m the only one who knows that I’m not.”

“But you are, Francis,” Carrie said, hugging me. “You’re so solid! I meet a lot of people. There aren’t many guys around like you. There aren’t many heroes out there. I wish I were more like you.”

“No, you don’t. I don’t want you to be like me. You’re perfect just the way you are. When I watch you dance, or draw, or when you kicked that soccer ball, it fills me with wonder, with

joy — with I don't know what, but I love being around you.”

I rolled over on her and kissed her. We undressed and made love, then pulled the covers over us and fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 22 - THE LAST DANCE

I woke at four-thirty and bumped Carrie. “Time to get up, Pumpkin.”

She stretched her arms above her head, then rubbed her eyes and smiled. “Are we on schedule?”

“Let’s get ready. I’ve got something special planned for our last night.”

Carrie showered and dressed. She put on a little eyeshadow, mascara, and lipstick. She wore her black jeans, black flat leather shoes, and her black leather jacket.

“Glasses or no glasses?” She asked, holding them up.

“I do love those glasses, especially with that bad-girl leather jacket,” I said. “I love you without them too, though. ... You decide.”

“I was sure you’d say: ‘no glasses’.”

“I love your little black glasses. It’s one of the things that I first noticed about you at the gate. At first, I thought they were quirky. I didn’t get it. But they’ve really grown on me. It’s like your personality encapsulated in one item. If you had a TV show, you could use them as your logo,” I laughed.

“Well ... I just put on eye makeup. I think it’s contact time.”

“Where are we eating?”

“It’s a surprise. ... I think you’ll like it.”

It was dusk, shortly after five o’clock. Amber street lamps bathed the Renaissance facades and narrow alleys in warm light. Again, the smell of Venetian geraniums and seawater filled the air. As we walked south, most of the walking traffic was heading north, toward the train station, and back to the mainland. Once again, it seemed Venice was becoming our private sanctuary.

As we crossed the Ponte de Laura Bergama bridge, a gondola carrying a young couple kissing and covered by a heavy blanket glided underneath.

“I know you think that’s cheesy, but I think it’s sweet,” Carrie said, watching the gondolier pole the boat down the narrow canal. “Look at those two kissing. They don’t even know we’re watching.”

We followed the signs on the corners of buildings, over tiny arched bridges, and through alleys so tight we had to walk single file to avoid bumping into oncoming tourists. We crossed another canal on the Ponte del Parucheta. As we reached the summit of the arched bridge, a barge passed underneath carrying planks, plywood, and other construction materials. Ahead, flickering candles from a small café glowed and warmed the alley, while diners laughed and contented themselves with fine food and wine.

“Where are you taking me?” Carrie laughed. “Are you going to give me any clue?”

“I told you. It’s a surprise.”

When we finally reached the Ruga dei Oresi, the alley leading to the Rialto Bridge, the street merchants were rolling back their awnings and packing up their souvenir and street food shops for the evening.

"I know where we are," Carrie said, glancing back with a smile. "You're taking me to the bridge. What do you have in mind?"

"It's a surprise!"

The street turned into broad stone steps, and we climbed to the first landing of the bridge. I took her hand and led her to the right. We left the bridge landing behind and started walking along Riva del Vin and the Grand Canal.

She stopped, turned, and smiled through misty eyes. "You're taking me to the café where you found me?"

I nodded. "Yes."

The restaurant was called Riva Rialto, and it featured a beautiful café adjacent to the Grand Canal, with a magnificence view of the Rialto Bridge. The canal was still very active. Delivery boats, vaporettos, pleasure boats, and scores of gondolas drifted in both directions. The café was large, sporting five deuces in each row, and ran about forty yards along the canal. A wine-red canvas awning covered the entire café, and small heaters warmed the dining area. Colored hand-blown glass lamps combined with flickering candles and amber street lamps created a festive glow. The smell of fresh seafood, fragrant garlic, and sweet basil, layered with boisterous conversation, created an exciting, romantic ambiance — a significant departure from the cold, rainy night Carrie was broke, homeless, cold, and alone.

The outdoor café looked almost full. As we approached the host, I covertly slipped him twenty euros and whispered, "It's a special night. Do what you can."

"Grazie, signore, il suo tavolo è pronto adesso. Ahhh, your table is ready now."

He led us to a small two-top next to the canal and pulled the

chair facing the bridge back for Carrie to sit. He grabbed a fresh candle from the server station and handed us menus and a wine list. It was perfect.

“Martinis or wine?” I asked Carrie.

“Oh ... wine ... I guess,” Carrie said. “This must be costing a fortune. I’ll try to go easy on you.”

I looked squarely into her eyes and mumbled, “If you only knew.”

“Two clean, Tanqueray martinis, with olives, and follow that with a bottle of the Amarone della Valpolicella, per favore,” I said without looking at the waiter.

Carrie looked around, her eyes wide. “This is so beautiful, so romantic; it’s like a storybook. Thank you for this wonderful week, Francis. It’s been the best week of my life.”

We sat in quiet awe, watching boats drift past. When our martinis arrived, I raised my glass and said, “To the woman who changed my life forever. There is no going back.”

As we looked at the menus, I said, “Carrie, order something good. It’s a special night. Try the grilled lobster.”

“I don’t know ... I really liked that risotto. Okay, lobster it is, with a side of mushroom risotto,” she laughed.

“I’ll have the cuttlefish with polenta, per favore.”

“Molto buono, signore.”

As the waiter left, Carrie swirled her drink and said, “When you saw me crying — over there,” she pointed to the chairs she once tried to sleep on, “it was my worst fear realized — all alone, cold, wet, no money, no place to stay. That may have been the lowest point in my life.” She looked across the canal. “And then... you came by and changed everything.” Her voice

cracked. She looked away and wiped her eyes with a napkin. "I'm sorry."

I reached for her hand, and we sat in silence, sipping our drinks and watching the evening unfold.

"Have you ever thought about having children — a family?" I asked. "Is family important to you?"

"I really don't know what a good family looks like. I'm an only child. My mother died when I was young. I don't know where my father is. What does family look like? What's it feel like?"

"It can be wonderful. When I was young, we'd go to my great aunt's for dinner on Sundays. At the time, I thought everybody did that. She would make great food. We'd eat. I'd listen to the elders talking. You always learned something. Adults taught children their 'place': to be seen and not heard, to listen and learn. After dinner, we'd race around the yard, picking apples and pears from the trees, playing tag, and bonding with our cousins. It was special."

"I want at least two children. I want to have Christmas dinner with them, celebrate their birthdays, and teach them to be responsible, productive adults — hopefully raise them to be better than me, more successful, happier. ... Is that something you might consider ... someday?"

Carrie teared up again and nodded. "With the right guy, sure, I would love that. ... Now stop it. You're making me cry, ... and I want to be happy tonight."

She looked beautiful, drying her tears in the flickering candlelight. She was the sum of everything I didn't know I wanted, and she gave the answer I was hoping for. My decision was that quick. I abruptly said, "Excuse me for a minute; I need to use the restroom."

She nodded, and I rushed past her down the aisle toward the furthest end of the cafe.

I looked back to make sure she didn't see. Then I went to the edge of the canal where several gondoliers were talking, their shiny black boats tied to piers in the canal.

"Excuse me," I said to the nearest gondolier. "What's your name?"

"Roberto, Roberto Gragario at your service, signore."

I handed him 100 euros and said, "Roberto, I'd like you to help me with something."

As I turned to head back to the table, a voice called out.

"Francis!"

I looked at the tables on the left side of the aisle, and there was Jenny, the Delta flight attendant, and two of her teammates.

"Hey Jenny. What are you doing here? I thought you lay over Saturdays?"

"I traded flights. My anniversary is on Sunday. I told you last weekend, silly. We're all working on your flight. ... Tomorrow? ... Right?"

"Yes, ... yes, I'm flying out tomorrow at ten."

"What are you doing here? Are you alone? Would you like to join us?" she asked.

"I'm actually here with Carrie McCall, the girl with the tattoos I sat next to on the plane? The one you said was adorable?"

"No kidding? So you two hooked up? Where is she?"

"It's a long story, but someone stole her suitcase at the train

station. I ran into her here, actually, in this cafe, just after we talked last Saturday at that little bacaro. Her money was in the suitcase; she was broke, and I offered her a place to stay. We ended up traveling together all week. She's over there," I said, pointing to the front of the cafe.

The girls looked at each other and smiled. "Wow. So, do you like her, or are you just helping her?" Jenny asked.

"Well, it started as helping, but this week has been ... incredible. We just came together. She's so much more than I gave her credit for on the plane. She's amazing. I think I'm in love. ... I am in love. ... I love her."

"Aww, the two other attendants whispered in unison.

"Are you kidding me?" Jenny exclaimed. "So fast?"

"It's been the best week of my life." I knelt beside Jenny's chair, staring off for a moment.

"What's wrong? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. ... Everything's great. I just ... I think I'm going to do something crazy tonight."

The girls looked at me in stunned silence. "How crazy?" Jenny asked.

"Pretty damn crazy," I said. "I've fallen hard for her. She makes me so happy, I said, tearing up. It's crazy, right?"

The women sat silently for a few moments, watching me, then Jenny smiled softly. "Love isn't logical." She looked off into the distance. "My husband and I met on a cruise ship. We were both with groups of friends, but alone in a crowd, ... lost really. We sat next to each other at dinner the first evening, then spent the rest of the week together. We eloped three weeks later." She looked at me. "Sunday will be our fourteenth anni-

versary, and we're still very much in love. I dated so many guys. But when I met him, I knew. ... He was the one. ... Are you sure?"

"I am. ... I really am."

"Then listen to your heart, Francis. I meet hundreds of people every day. Special ones are very hard to find. It doesn't happen often. But when you find one, ... you know. ... You know." One attendant looked off and dabbed her eyes with her napkin.

"Thank you. ... I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Good luck. Hopefully, we'll be celebrating in first class," she said with a wink.

I returned to the table and sat. "Did everything come out okay?" Carrie laughed. "Are you alright?"

"Yes. I ran into Jenny, the Delta flight attendant who upgraded me? Remember?"

"Oh, wow, is she here?" She said, turning around to look. Jenny and the other two attendants were looking in our direction. They smiled and waved.

"She's working our flight tomorrow, and I stopped to talk to her for a minute."

"I like her. She's nice. She helped me with my suitcase on the plane and asked me about my tattoo. She said she has one too."

I've always been terrible at keeping secrets, and on this night, it was hard to hide my excitement. My mind was clear, and everything was in place. We finished our martinis, and the waiter returned to open the wine. Soon after, the food came.

"Wow, what do I do with this?" Carrie laughed, eyeing the

lobster. "You have to help me here. I don't know what to do."

"Per favore, puoi aiutarla?" I asked the waiter. "Can you take it out of the shell?"

"Certainly, sir," the waiter responded. He took the dish away and returned a few minutes later with the lobster shelled and plated.

Carrie took a bite and laughed. "Thank God somebody reads the directions. This is incredible. I've never had it before. ... So good!"

The meal was delightful. The restaurant was a little touristy, but solid. The food was good, and the view was spectacular. We finished the wine and then ordered coffee and dessert.

"Have you ever had a good cannoli?" I asked.

"No, I'm not sure what that is."

"It's a Sicilian dessert. Let's split one."

We sipped our espresso and shared the cannoli. Carrie cut through the crispy tube with the side of her spoon and said, "Okay, so this is a cannoli." She slowly placed the spoon in her mouth, closed her lips around it, then pulled the clean utensil from her mouth. "Hmm, it's good. So that's what Clemenza was picking up for his wife in *The Godfather*?"

"Yeah, that's right!" I laughed. "Leave the gun; take the cannolis. I'm impressed you know that."

"I loved that movie. Why do you think I'm so infatuated with you, Mr. Marino? You know, I read that line was improvised. He just made it up and they kept it in the movie. It's perfect though; right?" She said, taking another bite.

We finished our espresso and ordered sambuca. We were getting a little drunk from the martinis, the wine, and now sam-

buca, but it felt good. When we finally paid the check, we were ready to move on. I looked at my watch: six-thirty. Hmm, I thought. Got to stay on schedule.

CHAPTER 23 - THAT'S AMORE

"So ... what's next?" Carrie said as we walked back toward the Rialto.

"Let's walk back to the Piazza San Marco and take one last look. We're close."

We ascended the Rialto to the top and looked back toward the restaurant. All along the canal, windows were glowing, café candles flickered, and the ubiquitous amber street lamps warmed cobblestone alleys and passages. We paused at the apex to enjoy the view. In silence, I looked down the Riva del Vin, the street on the right side of the canal. The bright amber street lamp that led me to Carrie was still glowing brightly. I said nothing.

"You're still wearing my bracelet," Carrie commented as she rubbed her fingers over it. "Does this mean we're going together? ... Or are you just safeguarding your collateral?"

"What do you think?"

"Tell me, Francis! I want to know."

"Just let the evening play out. You'll see."

"You're scaring me."

"It's good to be a little scared," I said, smiling.

We stood silently, watching each other's reaction. The moment

was too big for words. We were alone on the bridge. It was temporarily ours. I pushed Carrie against the stone rail, looked into her eyes, then gently kissed her full lips. She tipped her head to the side, placed her hands on the sides of my head and responded warmly. We broke in silence. There was nothing to be said. The moment was the perfect distillation of our adventure together.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go sit in the piazza again.”

We left the bridge and wound through the alleys, holding hands and laughing like children. In a few minutes, we once again entered the grand piazza in front of St. Mark’s and the grand Campanile. The ornate, spot-lit cathedral and giant bell tower loomed over the north end of the piazza, striking a bold silhouette against the dark blue November sky. Amber lamps lit the walkways and every window of the surrounding complex. The small stage was still set on the west end of the square, and two large cafes still bustled with activity. Pigeons rustled and took flight as we traversed. When we reached the back row of the vacant theater, I again turned two of the folding chairs around to view the piazza, and we sat.

Carrie reached into her purse and pulled out a bread roll wrapped in a napkin.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Are you still hungry?”

She unwrapped the roll and began pinching small pieces off it and tossing them into the piazza a few feet in front of us. Pigeons flew toward us from all directions and began eating the bread crumbs.

“Carrie! Those pigeons are nasty. They crap all over everything. We’ll be lucky if they don’t crap on us.”

“Oh, ... settle down. What would this place be without pi-

geons?" She laughed as she continued to toss them crumbs. "They're as much a part of Venice as that lion with wings."

I watched her in silent amusement as she seemed to toss each individual pigeon a bread crumb, taking care that each got its fair share.

"Come on. They're cute? Don't you think?" she said, smacking her hands together to knock off the residual crumbs.

I put my arm around her to warm her. The pigeons finished the crumbs and flew off in search of other fodder. The piazza went silent except for faint banter from conversations in the cafes.

Carrie again reached into her purse. "Are we getting high?"

"I think so."

Carrie snapped her lighter and drew deeply on the joint. We took turns passing it back and forth while taking in the dramatic vista. The pot was working, and small things were becoming quite funny.

"Crap all over everything?" Carrie laughed. "Just when I thought you were turning into a full-on romantic."

"I can't go totally freestyle," I said. "There has to be some order in the world. Right? ... Those little fuckers piss on the statues and artwork. The acid in their urine destroys them. They should start serving roasted pigeon at these cafes. That would clear them out in short order."

Carrie exhaled a stream of white smoke into the dark sky and laughed. "You don't mean that! Come on."

"I'm kind of serious," I laughed. "It's either them or us. Right? If fire ants ruled the world, do you think they'd show mercy?"

"Pigeons aren't fire ants!" she laughed. "They're cute little birds

that move their heads to and fro as they walk. They're beautiful! You talk like they're a pestilence."

"Pestilence? ... That's a big word. Where did you learn that one?"

"I know a lot of things you don't know," she laughed. "A lot of things!"

"I'm just teasing. ... You know that. You make me think things, ... that's one of the things I love about you."

Music began emanating from a café at the front of the piazza. It grew gradually louder until we spotted a roving accordion player taking requests and soliciting tips from diners in the café.

"Listen," Carrie said. "It's Mozart."

She stood and stepped a few feet in front of me and said, "Okay, Mr. Direction Reader. Know what an 'arabesque' is?"

"No," I smiled. "But I can't wait to find out."

Carrie stood still and balanced. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then extended her right arm toward the sky, arched her back, and extended her left leg high in the air behind her. Her left arm was parallel to the ground. She elongated her neck, and her hands assumed a graceful port de bras. The pose was strong, fluid, and magical. After holding the pose for a few seconds, she gracefully transitioned into another, and then another. Her beautiful movements to the music, against the backdrop of the spectacular vista, were like something out of a movie. It was beautiful to watch, and a young couple in the café closest to us lightly applauded.

She let her legs and arms drop to her sides. She exhaled and bowed her head, then looked up and reached out. "Dance with

me, Francis.”

“Carrie ... I told you in Florence. I don’t dance. I watch.”

“Yeah, ... and look where that got you. I think you’d better dance with me this time.”

“Bringing up the Florentine disco is not good salesmanship,” I laughed.

Just then, the accordion music transitioned from Mozart to the Dean Martin song ‘That’s Amore’.

Carrie grabbed my hand and said, “Come on, Francis. You can slow dance to this.”

“Right here? In the middle of the piazza? People are watching, Carrie, and I’m fucking stoned!”

“Just relax,” she said, pulling me close. “Put your hand here,” she said, clutching my right hand and wrapping my left hand around her back.

“Okay. I’m not a total idiot. ... I can ‘high school’ slow dance.”

“There you go,” she said. “Just feel the music and go with it. It’s romantic. Right?”

“My self-consciousness is distracting me from ‘going with it’. That’s not even an Italian song.”

“Okay, squat a little and bend your knee like this,” she said, posing me.

“What? ... What are you doing?”

“You’re going to dip me.”

“What? ... I don’t know how to do that!”

“Come on, Francis. You’re a big, strong guy. You can do it. ... Now I’m going to twirl this way. See? ... and you catch me

around the waist.

“Carrie? I’m stoned and drunk. What if I slip and drop you?”

She laughed. “Just don’t!”

With that, she spun outward and arched her back over my knee, reaching toward the ground. It never occurred to her I might drop her, and I didn’t. She knew I would never let her fall. She closed her eyes, elongated her neck, and stretched her arm over her head, gracefully toward the ground, her fingers again in a refined port de bras. After a moment, she opened her eyes and said, “Okay, Fred Astaire, pull me back.”

I pulled her close and exhaled a sigh of relief. We continued to sway to the music.

“See? That wasn’t hard? Right? You looked like a real dancer.”

“You trust too much.”

“No. . . . I just trust you. That move we just did is my favorite dance move. I’ve always thought it perfectly captures the essence of love. The man holds, supports, and protects his woman, while she surrenders to the moment, trusting him completely.”

“Look at me,” she whispered. “Do you love me?”

“Maybe just a little.”

“Come on, Francis. I need to hear it. Please say it.”

“You know I love you, Carrie.”

We danced for several minutes. It was romantic. She was right—it was another one of those perfect moments, like the bridge, a memory that would come to define the trip.

After a few turns, it felt as though we were the only two people in the piazza. As we danced, I buried my nose in her hair, and

a thought struck me: What else is there? What else could I possibly want besides being with the woman I love in the most beautiful place in the world?

My heart felt as though it might burst. Wasn't this what all the thinking, planning, and hard work had been about? Wasn't this the destination I had been chasing all along?

I glanced at my watch.

"Oh, ... we're late."

"What! ... Late?" Carrie said, startled. "Late for what?"

"I told you I had a surprise." I took her hand and tugged her toward the basilica.

"Wait — my purse!" she laughed, grabbing it from the chair. "Where are you taking me? I thought dinner was the surprise?"

"Trust me."

As we reached the north end of the piazza, I pulled her hand right toward the grand entrance of Venice. The Doge's Palace loomed large on our left, brightly up-lit with amber lighting. In front of us, the two pillars, topped with Theodore and his spear, and the Winged Lion of St. Mark, guarded the entrance. The landing was quiet now. Only a handful of couples strolled along the water — the serious Venetian enthusiasts staying on the isle overnight.

As we reached the edge of the lagoon, a voice called out, "Mr. Francis! Over here!"

Roberto Gragario, the gondolier, stood beside his sleek black gondola.

"Are you taking me on a gondola ride?" Carrie exclaimed,

bouncing on her toes. “I thought you said they were cheesy and touristy?”

I smiled at her. “I thought you said they were romantic?”

Roberto held the boat steady as we stepped in. It rocked gently beneath us. He handed us a thick wool blanket to cover our legs, then pushed off into the night.

“Wow, Francis, this is so exciting! Thank you!” Carrie whispered, squeezing me tightly. “I didn’t see this coming.”

“You know where we’re going, Roberto?” I asked.

“Si, signore. Conosco bene il posto. I know it well.”

Carrie looked at me. “Where are we going?”

“Just enjoy the ride. Trust me.”

She smiled and leaned into me under the blanket. The soft glimmer of lamplight danced on the rippling water. “I take it back,” she whispered. “You are becoming an insufferable romantic.”

We entered the mouth of the Grand Canal. Roberto paddled strongly, but at a relaxing pace. As we approached the Accademia Bridge, I said, “Do you remember this bridge?”

Carrie studied it. “Yes! We crossed it that first Sunday afternoon — when you took me out for cicchetti.”

“Yeah, remember, I got the phone call when we were crossing it, from Geno, saying your suitcase had arrived?”

She gave me a playful punch. “And you kept it a surprise. That was so sweet.”

“You know, when you asked me out to dinner that afternoon, I panicked.”

“Really? ... Why?”

"I had nothing to wear but the punky clothes I was traveling in, no make-up, contacts, shoes. You hardly knew me, and you invited me to a nice dinner. I was excited. I didn't want to embarrass you. ... I wanted to look nice."

"You wanted to look nice for me?" I grinned. "Did you have feelings for me then?"

"Well ... I thought you were cute on the plane. You were very polite and good-looking. ... I was interested."

"You were interested?"

She looked up at me and smiled. "Is that shocking?"

"I was actually nervous too."

"Really? ... Mr. Corporate America was nervous?"

"I was. ... I was becoming attracted to you, and I was anxious. I was afraid you didn't think I was cool, like your artistic friends in Five Points."

"Cool? Francis, my bar friends, are punks and drunks. ... It's a low bar."

"Seriously, I was a little nervous. You were charming, and I didn't want to come across as a 'stiff' guy trying to take advantage of a desperate woman."

"I had so much fun that afternoon," she said, staring off into the distance. "The whole day was like a surprise party. No expectations — just one amazing thing after another. That was one of the best days of my life." She said, pulling me close.

"When Geno pulled my suitcase out of that closet at the hotel, my heart melted. That's when I knew. You weren't just kind — you were solid. That was the moment I really started falling for you."

Our gondola gently rocked as a vaporetto passed by.

“You know. I don’t think you can really say you’ve seen Venice unless you take a ride down the Grand Canal like this. You just can’t appreciate the grandeur of these mansions from the back streets,” I said. “This is another thing I wouldn’t have done if I hadn’t met you.”

As we came around the bend, Carrie said, “Oh, there’s the Rialto. Is that where we’re going?”

“Sort of,” I said.

“You’re being very mysterious, Francis.”

The row of amber lights along the canal shimmered in the water. Fifty yards from the Rialto Bridge, I asked Roberto to stop. He brought us alongside a quiet pier across from Riva Rialto and tied off.

I looked up at the moon and hesitated. I was nervous, fearful, and my mind raced. This is crazy. I’ve only known this woman for a week. Do I want to believe in love so badly that I’m willing to fall for anything? Am I going to throw logic out the window for a feeling?

We sat in silence; listening to the water lapping against the boat, and the distant murmur from the restaurant where we had just eaten. Carrie, looked away, studying our surroundings.

As I watched her, the joyous moments of the previous week again rushed in, filling my heart to the bursting point with a playful, childlike sappiness I had almost forgotten existed. Carrie did that to me. The realization was overwhelming. I am the happiest I’ve ever been. How could that ever be a bad thing? If this is what it means to be a fool, ... I guess I am a fool. I do want this, ... and I want her.

She looked up at me and whispered, "Are we there yet, Francis?"

"Yes, ... we're there."

She tilted her head. "You brought me to see the restaurant and the bridge?"

"No. ... We came here so I could tell you a story."

I pointed across the canal. "Do you see the row of lamps lining the Riva del Vin?"

She nodded.

"Do you see that lamp right there — the one that flickers and seems brighter than the rest?"

"Yes."

"The night I found you in the rain, I had just come from a little bar over there, down that little alley, where I told you I saw Jenny and other attendants. I crossed the Rialto, right where we kissed tonight. When I reached the top of the bridge, that bright lamp caught my eye. It was flickering so brightly, I thought it might burn out."

"It fascinated me. I watched it for a few seconds, and I kept watching it as I came down the steps. Just before I entered the alley, I looked at the light one last time, and I saw you beneath it, sitting alone in the rain."

Carrie said nothing. Her eyes shimmered in the soft light.

"When we parted at the Spanish Steps in Rome, I said I had to buy souvenirs. I was lying. The truth is, I wanted to find something special for you, something that would forever remind you of this wonderful week we spent together, something that would let you know how much it meant to me. I checked out a handful of jewelry stores, but nothing felt right."

“Then I stumbled across this vintage shop. And there in the window was a ring. It reminded me of that bright amber light and the moment I saw you under it. I examined it. It felt ... perfect, and I wanted it for you.”

“I hesitated because it was expensive for a souvenir. I tried to negotiate, but the shop owner wouldn’t budge and put it back in the window. As I turned to leave, another young couple approached and looked through the glass. The woman pointed to the ring and started bouncing on her toes, ... the way you do when you’re excited. It reminded me of you, and I panicked. That was your ring; the ring that symbolized this magical week. So I bought it.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small box. I opened it and handed it to her.

Carrie’s eyes widened. “My God ... it’s beautiful.”

“Carrie, when I left for the airport last Friday, I was a broken man, and I didn’t even know it. But after spending this last week with you, I realize I was just looking in the wrong places for the wrong thing. I was trying to calculate something that should have been felt.” I laughed and looked away. “Just like the ‘child-like’ drawings you corrected, my mind was getting in the way. You taught me that.”

“The thought of you not being around next week is heart-breaking. I want to wake up with you every morning and go to bed with you every night. I know it won’t be a perfect ‘happily ever after’, but we can work things out. We’re a good team. We could build something special — a beautiful family, ... and a wonderful life together.”

“The point of my story is this: I walked into that jewelry store looking for a souvenir. I left with an engagement ring. I want your fire in our daughter and your strength in our son. I love

you, Carrie. Will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

She looked down at the ring and broke down sobbing. Tears ran down her cheeks and dripped into the box, washing over the ring. She fell into me, trembling.

"I know this is happening fast. We've only known each other for a little over a week, but I want you to know how deeply I feel about you and what my intentions are. You've changed me; you've changed my life. If you'd like, we can have a longer engagement—take our time and see where this leads. There's no rush. But as for how I feel about you, I'm certain. ... I'm certain right now."

She looked up; her eyes were bright and shining. She threw her arms around me and pushed her nose into my ear. "Francis, I want to have your children. I want to build a real family with you. I want to tell you every day that you're my hero. And more than anything ..." She pulled back just enough to look into my eyes. "I want to be your wife."

We held each other tightly and kissed.

I took the ring from the box and slipped it on her finger. "There. You'll never have to worry about us again. You will always be safe, loved, and wanted. You're mine forever — my little queen. ... That's the best I can do."

She held her hand up next to the bright light across the canal. The amber stone glimmered. "It's perfect," she sobbed, burying her face again in my chest. I felt her warm tears.

"Come on, Pumpkin," I said, smiling and holding her tight. "Don't cry. Where's my sassy girl — that girl who knew the way home? We're going to build a beautiful life together."

She sniffed and gently punched me in the arm, then looked up at me and whispered, "I've been yours for a while now."

We kissed, and I wiped the tears from her cheeks.

From the stern, Roberto sang, “Ora questo è amore ...”

We both smiled and burst into laughter.

“Roberto. Do you see many marriage proposals on this boat?” I asked.

“Many, many, signore,” he replied. “at least once a week. But this? This was the best. I cried, and I don’t even know you two.”

“Hey, ... the captain of a ship usually has the power to marry a couple. You’re the captain, can you marry us?”

“Unfortunately, no. I guess my boat is not big enough,” he laughed.

Carrie pushed her nose against my ear and whispered. “Let’s go back to the honeymoon suite. I have a plan.”

I wiped her tears, looked into her beautiful brown eyes, and whispered, “Let’s get the party started.”

The End

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