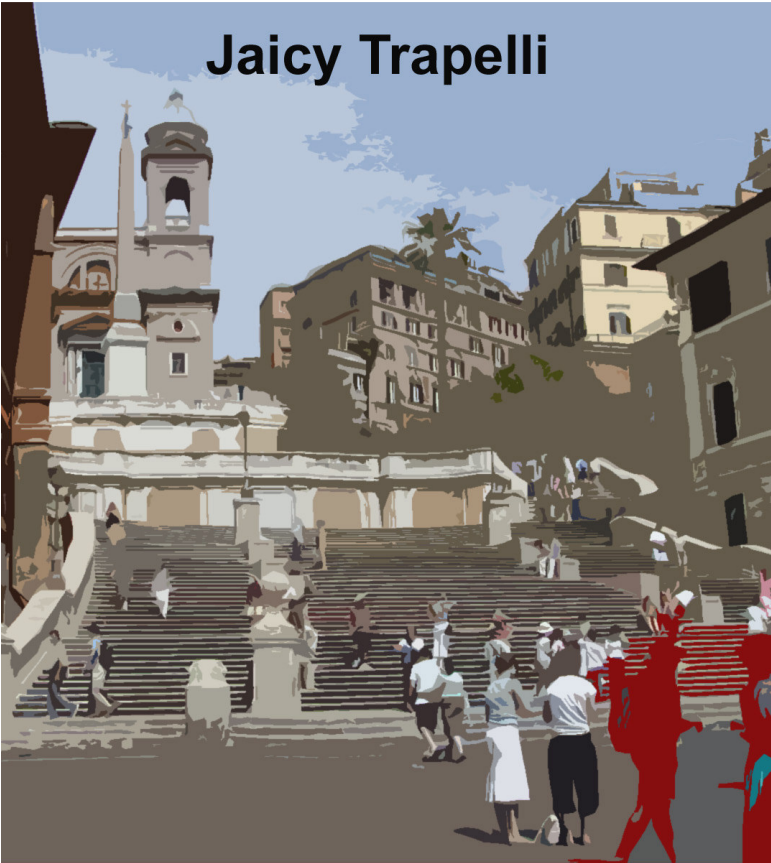


# The Sweet Taste Of Desire

**Jaicy Trapelli**



Copyright © 2007 by Jaicy Trapelli

## One

Marcel Guzman was only fifteen when he fell in love with his best friend Sergio Costa. He had been feeling something different every time they got together, but it was on that particular day that he realized his manners were betraying his thoughts.

They were waiting for the train that would take them to the library in Palermo, fifteen minutes from Bagheria, on a last attempt to finish the dreadful Science paper. And although Marcel had his Walkman in low volume, he still couldn't make out the words coming out of Sergio's mouth. *George Michael* was singing one of his favorite romantic songs and the words were getting mixed on the way. So Marcel turned the sound completely off and tried to focus on the gorgeous boy standing in front of him. He realized then and there he was in love.

Chiara Mancini and Cinzia Belucci were supposed to join them at the station and while Sergio and Marcel

waited patiently, Marcel couldn't help but notice how handsome the boy looked that day. Sergio was wearing a pair of new stone washed jeans and a plain white t-shirt. His fresh crew cut gave him a masculine air and the waft of old spice that he had probably stolen from his father made Marcel purse his lips, desperately trying to find something to say and get his mind off the sexual fantasies that were driving him crazy. But his mind was totally blank. That always happened when he stood next to Sergio who subconsciously seemed to put the boy in a state of shock. Marcel couldn't say whether Sergio noticed anything that was going on but he wasn't too worried about that.

He suddenly turned his mind on the day before because he was still angry about what had happened. He was having his tuna fish sandwich on lunch break when his best girlfriend Chiara joined him on his favorite bench. She was a beautiful girl with very white skin and basically the tallest one he had ever seen for her age. Her short and curly hair made her look older than she really was. But she also had the most beautiful hands Marcel had ever laid eyes on.

Marcel had just opened the book he was reading when Chiara excused herself for interrupting. She had always been extremely polite; something that Marcel still had to get used to. They had a short conversation, while Marcel kept his eyes fixed on a group of boys playing football. As much as he hated playing the game, he also hated watching it. But his target that day wasn't the ball, but the annoying handsome boy who had started the joke: they had been artfully insinuating that Marcel might like to join them after school hours on a wrestling game so they could measure his girlishness by how many seconds he could stand under a real man's body. Marcel couldn't help but feel a tinge of excitement at the thought of that, but

equally outraged by those comments. Chiara admonished him for even thinking of creating a situation, but he was certain that he had the right to despise their behavior and the stupid nickname the boys had been calling him lately: Guma. *Guma my ass!* According to Chiara, the fact that those boys tormented him wasn't enough reason to start a fight. She said he was too smart to be dragged into that nonsense and that he should know better. So Marcel smiled at her maternal instincts and promised he wouldn't do anything.

The truth is that even if he wanted, Marcel could never win them over. He was a very fragile and delicate boy and the idea of getting involved in a ruthless fight made him shiver. Marcel didn't appreciate the slightest notion of violence. His mother would probably get mad whereas his father might even enjoy knowing that his son had for once faced the enemy, taking it like a man. But unfortunately, that was a dream that he would never see realized.

Marcel was a very handsome boy who used to wear his dark straight hair combed backwards because his mother was convinced that it made his dark brown eyes easier to be spotted. He didn't smile much, which made him look a little sad and his delicate features made him the most androgynous student in the class. He was also very lonely, with the habit of taking long walks down Via Corso Butera all the way to the sea where he would sit and contemplate the vast space covered in water, dreaming of the day he would be able to leave that God forsaken place everyone else called home.

But one of the things that Marcel Guzman enjoyed most was sitting all alone at a pizzeria downtown on weekends where young couples parked their scooters and began the interminable ritual of canoodling. He envied

them so much that the thought of it brought tears to his eyes. He wanted to feel loved and desired as if he were the most important person in someone else's life. He saw them kissing and wished to be kissed. Sometimes he would bring his photo camera and pretend to shoot at random. But once the pictures were developed, they would show that the targets behind those lenses were nothing but the young fools in love. Marcel used to close his eyes and imagine himself being hugged by those strong and masculine arms. And for a short time, that made him happy.

His father, Mr. Guzman, used to complain about the money he spent on films and the boy had to promise the old man that the pictures were solely for school purposes. Marcel didn't know whether his father believed it or not, but since the man had no interest in the boy's personal life, that proved to be a perfect excuse. So Marcel managed to keep his hobby for as long as he wished.

Marcel Guzman loved Sergio, but Sergio didn't know it. Marcel believed that what he felt was really love because he couldn't do anything without thinking about those big green eyes staring at him. Sergio was seventeen years old, but was built like a grown man. Marcel supposed the boy had grown older faster because his father was always away and, being an only son, Sergio had to take care of his mother, who was visibly very fond of him. They seemed to be a happy family, until the day Sergio confessed to have a drunkard for a father. He was almost crying when he came clean and Marcel loved him even more.

They formed a very peculiar group: Sergio Costa tried to avoid talking about his alcoholic father; Chiara Mancini - whose parents were always arguing and in the verge of a divorce tried to pretend everything was all right and Cinzia Belucci had a sister named Elisabetta who had

been in jail several times for swindling, use of drugs and prostitution. And after being knocked up by her ex-boyfriend, the Beluccis unwillingly decided to support her through an illegal abortion and took her back. Cinzia didn't mind talking about it. She loved her sister and wanted to be there for her, no matter what. As for Marcel Guzman, he had a father who disliked him for being what he called *funny*. The boys at school called him a faggot. He, not surprisingly, preferred to think of himself as a sweet and harmless, sensitive kid.

Although he had felt different since his early age, Marcel still wasn't used to being the center of attention. He didn't know anybody who he could relate to. He had only one sister who got married very early and dragged away by a husband who didn't get along with anyone in the family and therefore the boy had no one to confide in. Mrs. Guzman was a seamstress and although the house was always full of women, Marcel still couldn't help but feel lonely. He was even ashamed of discussing his feelings with Chiara Mancini - his closest friend -, especially a particular incident that happened to him one day when he was coming back from school.

Marcel was walking very slowly, deep in thoughts, when a young man approached him from behind and started making conversation. The young man was very handsome and his beautiful smile made Marcel a little uncomfortable.

Mrs. Guzman had taught her son not to talk to strangers, but Marcel believed that at fifteen he was more than prepared to choose what might be good for him. He felt nervous at first, but also excited. Not many guys used to talk to him in public because he tended to be very effeminate and guys were probably ashamed to be seen

around in his company. Therefore, they avoided him whenever possible.

The young man gently pulled one of Marcel's arms, making him stop and, without any squeamishness, blatantly asked the boy if he would like to give him a blowjob in one of the alleys.

Marcel could swear his heart skipped more than one beat. Blushing and out of breath, he ran without looking back. Not from fear because he was too excited to be afraid and when he finally entered his bedroom he realized something that bothered him for a very long time: he had a boner.

Marcel locked the door of his bedroom and got undressed, standing in front of the mirror while admiring his naked body for the next half hour. He was very confused and shivering. He had never seen or touched another man's body. Not in person, at least. He had looked at them in the magazines and wished he could feel their roughness. But the thought of being discovered in bed with another man was too terrifying to imagine. The shame would hurt immensely and he would never be able to look his friends in the eye again. Why didn't they have that problem? But was it actually a problem? Marcel had never felt so bad and lonely in his life. And then, something struck him: how did that stranger know that he fancied him? Was it just because of the fact that he was very girlish? In that case, everyone knew that there was much more to just being girlish.

*Everyone knows that I like men!*

Marcel spent the whole night tossing and turning. He didn't want to be seen or treated like *Principessa*, an openly and flamboyant gay boy who lived two blocks away from his house. Everyone used to make fun of him on the streets but he seemed to enjoy all the attention. They didn't

talk to each other because Marcel always avoided him. And now, when he thought about it, he realized that many guys shunned him for the same reason. How pathetic could he be? Boys walked frequently hand in hand on the streets of Bagheria just because they could get away with it. But Marcel felt like he would never be able to do that. He was a very special case. He was nothing but a *Principessa* in the closet. No one would like to be seen hand in hand with him. He was the only one being lied to, so he thought he might as well go and befriend *Principessa*. At least he would have someone to talk to about things nobody else seemed to understand.

Marcel attempted his first contact two days later, cautiously trying to sound convincing. *Principessa* seemed a little skeptical at first but soon gave in for the simple fact that his life was only inhabited by those who occasionally and secretly came in search of fast love. He had always been alone and Marcel figured that the boy would appreciate some company.

They introduced themselves like two dogs sniffing each other to make sure they were in safe ground. They sat at a reclusive ice cream parlor - obviously picked out by Marcel - on a very hot Friday, just after school hours. But after a brief conversation Marcel realized that they had nothing in common. *Principessa* had only one thing in his mind: men. He started describing all the sexual escapades he'd had with some guys in the neighborhood, making Marcel uncomfortable and a little stunned to find out what was going on around him in those alleys. He had the feeling the whole city was in denial, hiding something disgraceful. But despite of the stimulating stories told by *Principessa*, Marcel managed to make him stop. He wasn't actually interested in hearing what he couldn't admit for himself.



He wanted to believe he needed something more profound and noticing that *Principessa* was not the right person for that, Marcel thought it would be wiser to pretend a little misunderstanding.

“Why are you telling me all this?” he asked naively, sucking on his ice cream.

*Principessa* shut up suddenly, confused. He frowned and smirked, as if he were having a brain freeze.

“What were you expecting? I thought you enjoyed this kinda stuff.” He cocked his head. “I love talking about sex and you probably do too. What’s wrong with getting some?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just . . . not my kind of thing... I happen to have a girlfriend, you know?”

Marcel didn’t understand how those words came out of his mouth. They just did and for a moment he was proud of it.

*Principessa*, on the other hand, thought he had misheard the boy.

“*Ma che cavolo?* Excuse-me? Are you seriously saying you’re not a *faggot*? Get outta here!”

It was more than clear to him that the boy sitting in front of him was gay too. Marcel hated every second of that conversation and had to leave as soon as possible before *Principessa* demanded some plausible explanation.

“I have to go, sorry. See you around.” Marcel said, blushing profusely and hoping he would never have to face the boy again.

*Principessa* didn’t bother stopping him. He didn’t have to. He knew Marcel was in denial and as far as he was concerned, that pseudo straight could rot in hell.

#

Marcel Guzman tried to forget his encounter with *Principessa* as quick as he could. Although he felt disgusted about the stories the boy told him, he still couldn't help but wonder how exciting they might have been, since the only sex he had enjoyed so far had been purely imaginary.

Sergio Costa had given him a porn magazine, which he used very often to spice up his lonely afternoons. It didn't matter to Marcel that the pictures were always of a heterosexual couple. He happened to find them very sexually enticing, despite the curiosity of seeing two men in action. He had no idea how to get hold of a gay magazine, so that would have to do for the time being.

The most curious thing is that Marcel began to fantasize about Sergio right after he got the publication. He would look at the pictures trying to replace the faces in his mind: Sergio became the man and Marcel became the woman. Nothing so imaginative, he presumed. It was then and there that he realized something was bothering him.

Would Sergio be able to take him in his arms and make love to him? Would Sergio be the very first man to show him the way? Marcel would blush a couple of times on his own, wishing fiercely that his dreams would come true. But then reality hit: *Sergio is not gay!* Why would he be willing to fulfill the boy's fantasies when he probably dreamt of girls every night? And what about that nameless stick figure who lived next door to him, who was always hanging around, trying to draw his attention to her? Marcel expected her to have more chances than him. He then realized he was not only in love. He was also very jealous!

Everyone had a sad story. Marcel's problems were unimportant in comparison to many others and for a while he felt ashamed. But he also decided that he was entitled to

some happiness and couldn't neglect his torments any longer. He was very insecure. And he wished there was something he could do to feel proud of himself.

#

Marcel's group of friends was determined to be the best in class. He'd had some bad experience with the Science teacher the year before because of no apparent reason. Marcel thought he was a dickhead. Nothing seemed good enough for the teacher, but the boy had the feeling that the man didn't like him. He had always been a good student, although *Mr. Dickhead* treated him as if he were a bad influence on the others.

"He hates me", he told Chiara one day.

"Don't be silly, Marcel. He hates everybody."

Marcel didn't believe her. He felt like it was more personal than it seemed, but tried to forget everything and concentrate in class.

Cinzia Belucci's sister, Elisabetta, had recovered from the abortion and was feeling much better. People could do all sorts of things, but Marcel believed they deserved another chance if willing to repent. Obviously, all the others felt the same and so Elisabetta started hanging out with them, becoming a new familiar face in the group.

Due to her exotic life, she happened to know a lot of people. Apparently, she knew someone who knew people related to the Science teacher, *Mr. Dickhead*. To their surprise, they learned that *Mr. Dickhead* found out two years before that his son was a female impersonator in one of the gay clubs in Rome and not actually studying as he had promised his father. The man got so mad that he disowned the boy and promised never to speak to him

again. The boy never came back home for his quarterly visits. Rumor has it that a year later *Mr. Dickhead* got wind of his son living in Milan. He worked on the streets as a prostitute, got involved with drug dealers and was killed. *Mr. Dickhead* never got over it, blaming himself for not being a good Catholic and insisting in keeping the boy under his supervision.

All the group members felt sorry for the old man and empathized with his past sufferings. Marcel too was sorry for him, although he felt like he had finally found out the reason why the teacher might hate him so much. Marcel was probably a reminder of the son he once used to have. Maybe he missed the boy so much that the sight of Marcel brought him the realization that he should have done better as a father.

Whatever it was, Marcel remembered thinking that he deserved a little more than just being a reminder of such a misfortune.

## TWO

One day Marcel's father hit his mother. The boy wasn't present at the time because of school, but he saw her trying to hide her tears when he came back home. She told him in the end that it had been an accident. Mr. Guzman was a little drunk and didn't mean to hit her on the face. Marcel was consumed with anger. He was also upset with his mother for letting something like that happen but his father could be very scary sometimes and Marcel wished there was something he could do about it.

Sergio too had problems with his old man but Marcel wondered if they were that bad. He knew that Sergio was older and much stronger than him and therefore didn't think the boy would allow his mother to be hit. And for a while Marcel felt powerless, even though they almost shared the same challenges.

Mr. Guzman owned a small grocery store downtown Bagheria, and whenever he was in a bad mood, he spent the

night over. Marcel's mother explained later that the man was becoming more irritable than ever and demanded Marcel to start working in the shop. She also showed some empathy in saying that she was totally against it at first but the man was scaring her. Marcel told her not to worry. He would go work in the shop if necessary and she wouldn't have to fear her beloved husband any longer. She hated his decision but the boy was very adamant and didn't want to talk about it.

Marcel couldn't remember when his father started acting so strange. He thought that maybe the man had always been that way and wondered what his mother had seen in him to put up with such a bad temperament. Could love be that blinding? Marcel guessed it could. And he would understand that better some time later.

Marcel Guzman loved his mother in a way that sometimes he believed her to be an angel. They would usually sit together in the kitchen while eating and he would look around, observing how everything was so spotless and organized. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of a man never appreciated what his wife did for him: all the cooking, the cleaning, and the errands. Not to mention the companionship that was so often taken for granted. No wonder she enjoyed being a seamstress. She didn't need to work. But she felt good about herself and the biggest reward was her motivation, always having something to look forward to. She didn't want her boy to get a job before finishing school since the grocery store was enough for the three of them. They had a very comfortable life and, although Mr. Guzman constantly said that a job would turn his son into a better man, Marcel's mother was totally against it. She used to say that her boy was a good man already and didn't need a headache from working at

something that he wasn't cut out for. It was very clear that if it were not for his mother Marcel would be going to school in the morning and working in the store in the afternoon. Mr. Guzman used to say that help was needed and it would be a shame to pay someone else when he could count on two strong extra hands for free.

"It's his shop too, you know?" he used to yell.

Mrs. Guzman would shake her head, whispering.

"Don't listen to him. Just go up to your room and play with your books."

Marcel would purse his lips and leave the room. He was a little old to be *playing* with his books and he guessed his mother constantly forgot that he was growing up, although he learned later that his father definitely blamed her for him being the way he was.

Mr. Guzman never spent any time with his son. The boy would still learn that the absence of a father figure in his life, although painful, could hardly define his sexual behavior. He did miss the company of a man during his early age and although his mother was a loving and caring person, Marcel wished his dad had been there for him as well. He still wondered if the man ever missed the son as much as the son missed the father.

During one of their several fights, Marcel overheard his father yelling at his wife, saying that she was responsible for making the boy a *sissy* so everyone would talk and laugh behind his back, and the shame of having such a boy for a son would never subside. Mrs. Guzman told him off immediately, begging him to stop shouting. It was too late, anyway. Marcel sat alone in his bedroom digesting those words in silence. But he never mentioned that incident to his mother. It was kind of a sticky subject for both of them.

There were very little things that Mr. Guzman considered important when raising a boy. Marcel still remembered his mother's acerbic laughter when the man told her one day during their arguments that at Marcel's age he was already dating, smoking, drinking beer and sneaking out of the house after being grounded for something he had done wrong. Mrs. Guzman replied with sarcasm that all that was quite an achievement for someone with such high intelligence and after asking him why he would be so proud of doing something of the sort, the man replied haughtily that he was a man in the making and *that* should serve the boy as an example.

Marcel never thought of himself as being less of a man just because he was well mannered. He also happened to be allergic to smoke and the only beer he could drink was the sweetened dark one, which his father considered a girl's drink. And, as for sneaking out, he had nowhere to go. So, why bother?

Better than roaming the city like a headless chicken, Marcel would rather spend time in the privacy of his own bedroom in the company of his favorite pastime, which he kept hidden under some shirts: the friendly magazine that sustained his everyday fantasies.

He would take it out, lock the door and sit on the bed. Sergio's image would come back to him; his smile, his eyes, his soft hands, his sinewy body and the thought of his natural perfume mixed with the rest of *Old Spice* filled Marcel up like helium fills a balloon. Seconds later he was floating in the air in a wave of self-induced pleasure. How he wished he knew Sergio more intimately; to touch his skin and taste what only his imagination would allow. How wonderful his life would be if only Sergio gave in to the love that Marcel felt.



He also wondered if Sergio was a virgin like him. Then all of a sudden he remembered the nameless stick figure that fancied his friend. Marcel had seen her coming out of Sergio's house quite a few times. He was almost sure they had already done it.

The boys were not sharing the bed, yet. But Sergio had become a very special person in Marcel's life. He used to enjoy the moments that Sergio stood up for him whenever those dim-witted boys called him Guma. He used to blush in the beginning, but got over it eventually. They became closer every time that happened and Marcel believed he sensed something different between them. It was hard to tell, but he felt many times like Sergio cared for him in a very special way.

Sergio's situation at home was not very appealing. His drunken father had been threatening him and his mother, saying he'd be better off without two lazy asses to feed. Marcel felt sorry for the boy, having to go through such humiliation, but there wasn't much he could do.

Marcel remembered the day Sergio's father came home extremely wasted and started destroying everything on his way. The boy ran outside, but his mother got trapped in the house. All the neighbors witnessed the incident with the Costas and tried to help by calling the police. Sergio confessed he was horrified when his mother begged him to defend his father.

"He didn't mean it, sweetheart. He'll be ok in the morning, I promise..."

Sergio was very disappointed with the whole situation and thanked the fact that, despite an unfortunate father in his life, he had someone else who brought him pleasure instead of pain. Marcel didn't quite understand what he meant, but he was also afraid of asking. That *he*

could be the one person in question - since he had been the confidant - was suddenly not so clear. But that observation would bother him until Marcel understood the meaning of those words. So he collected himself and asked:

“What do you mean?”

Sergio broke Marcel’s heart then and there. The nameless stick figure had come to life bearing not only flesh and blood, but also a fabulous name.

It was official: Sergio was dating Sofia Russo and Marcel’s head was spinning. He believed obsessive jealousy could make one do despicable things, but he was convinced that he could cope with it. Moreover, Marcel realized that all his dreams and fantasies could never mean anything serious. They only served to hurt and humiliate him, confirming the feeling that he had been having lately: his life was useless.

Marcel felt like running away; tear up the magazine that had brought life to his imagination and lock himself in the bedroom so that nobody would ever see him again; or take a run down Via Corso Butera and ignore the end of it, jumping straight into the cold and dark waters. Nothing was more important to him than Sergio’s constant presence and friendship. But as long as he was promised to someone else, Marcel might as well kill himself or reclaim the innocence he had once possessed. And so he cried.

#

Some days later Marcel was coming back from school when he decided to do something he’d been trying since he learned Sergio was no longer available. He left one of the shopping streets and entered an alleyway leading to a very quiet part of the city. He came to a stop in front of a

magazine stand, checking both sides to make sure nobody was looking and started flipping through the latest National Geographic. The man behind the counter didn't pay attention at first, but minutes later, after helping a woman who had just bought a newspaper, he turned to the boy with a helping smile.

Marcel's heart pounded in his ears and he blushed. All he wanted to do was to purchase one of the gay magazines that were hanging in the back, but somehow his tongue got caught in his throat. The man kept looking at him, worried.

"Are you alright?"

Marcel tried to smile but his mouth twitched and he froze on the spot, his eyes jumping right and left. The man pursed his lips, grinning.

"Are you looking for something... special?"

Was it that obvious? It was now or never. Marcel looked at the magazines in the back and forced another smile. The man turned, picked one up with certain discretion and stuck it into a big envelope.

"You'll be careful with this, ok? Don't you let anybody catch you reading it"

The boy nodded thankfully, paid it and hid the envelope inside his satchel. He was happy as he could be.

When he arrived home, Marcel went straight to his room, opened the envelope carefully and laid the magazine on the bed. It was still wrapped in plastic with a black stripe covering the genitals of a gorgeous hunk on the cover. He was finally going to see what only his imagination had allowed.

He locked the door to make sure that his mother wouldn't come in unexpectedly and stripped off his clothes slowly, sitting on the bed. He had such a boner that it hurt.

He took the magazine in his hands and ripped off the plastic. His heart was beating so fast that he could almost hear it. He knew that he should calm down. If he were so nervous just by opening a simple magazine, what could possibly happen if there was a real man inside the room? So he counted to ten and breathed deeply.

The first page showed a big black man jerking off. The sight of his penis made Marcel gasp. It was huge. How could that be possible? He looked at it for almost ten minutes while all kinds of ideas crossed his mind.

He turned the next page and the pictures were as revealing as the first one. The only difference was that two men were jerking each other off. Marcel thought of touching himself, but it proved unnecessary. He couldn't take it any longer. Two x-rated pictures and his fertile imagination gave him his very first spontaneous orgasm. He was in heaven.

Five minutes later Marcel opened the magazine again, his small member throbbing. Each page was full of surprises, showing a little more than the previous one and when he got to the centerfold, he saw one man penetrating the other. That was his first sight of two men making love. And he thought of Sergio again with a pain in my heart.

He closed his eyes and Sergio took him from behind. He rolled in bed, trying hard to muffle the sound of his gasping, while his imagination let him be taken by the only man he loved. He was perfect and domineering. He said the perfect things in Marcel's ears and made him beg for more. The boy exploded so many times that he fell asleep before dinner.

Marcel dreamed he was walking down a quiet street and Sergio appeared from one of the alleys and invited him for ice cream. He accepted it with a smile and when Sergio

pulled him close to him, Marcel felt the bulge on his trousers. He asked the boy what that was and Sergio erotically licked his upper lip. *I invited you for ice cream, didn't I?* Marcel feasted on his gorgeous member when Sofia Russo came out of her hiding place and interrupted their act as if it was the most natural thing in the world. She gently pulled Sergio away and kissed him passionately on the lips. *He's mine now.* They left Marcel alone in the alley and he started crying.

Marcel woke with a start and remained in bed for a while. His mother came knocking on the door saying dinner was ready. He had tears on his face and his mother thought that he had been crying because of his father's intolerance. She told him not to worry and that everything would be all right.

Marcel did cry for a while, but not because of his father - he was the last person in his mind. Marcel cried because he realized how unhappy he had become.

### THREE

Marcel started working in the grocery store the day after his mother talked to him. He was determined to do whatever was necessary to keep her from further suffering. His father didn't show any sympathy, but regarded him as any other employee. The most difficult part was to share the same space with him for the remaining four to five hours of the day, but they soon realized that the less they talked, the quicker the time went by.

The work was not a bit interesting. It was sometimes dirty, heavy and boring. People came in with their lists and Marcel had to help them fetch whatever they needed. Once in a while a familiar face would engage him in a nice short conversation. But whenever that happened Marcel could see his father's disapproving looks that meant he should dispatch the customer as soon as possible and get back to work. And since Marcel didn't intend to make matters

worse, he'd just smile and deliver the *Thank you for your preference* message.

Marcel used to come back home very tired from standing the whole afternoon lifting heavy boxes and cleaning up after unloading them. He did his homework until about eleven and by the moment his head touched the pillow he was already sleeping.

He could see that his mother was hurting. She wanted to get in the way of things, but he assured her that he was ok. Marcel was willing to keep the peace between them no matter what.

One day *Principessa* walked into the store and was surprised by seeing the pseudo straight boy behind the counter. Marcel froze on the spot, praying that the boy would not mention anything about the conversation they'd once had. He was all alone that day, but his embarrassment was very visible.

"It's ok, I won't bite", *Principessa* said mockingly.

Marcel gave him a bashful smile but didn't reply. The boy paid for the two apples and left. Marcel felt very bad afterwards because he had the feeling he was reacting to *Principessa* the same way others reacted to him. Marcel wished he had the courage to stand for himself, and the fact that he disapproved of *Principessa* meant he was still not on terms with his own sexuality. People were different and if he wanted to be accepted he had to stop being so prejudiced and self-conscious about others.

The only time Mr. Guzman spoke to him was out of reproach for something he assumed was wrong. Sometimes he believed that Marcel's *Walkman* was too loud and the boy couldn't hear the customers. Yes, he actually could, but it was no use to argue with the man, so Marcel started leaving *George Michael* - his favorite singer - at home.

Other days the man would complain about the time the boy arrived at work. *I was held in class for a presentation* was usually his excuse and Mr. Guzman would wrinkle his nose, saying *Call me next time so I don't have to wait!* In fact there was never a good enough answer for him so Marcel tried to ignore it as much as he could.

#

Two months later - more like a whole year - a blessing came his way. Marcel walked to the store, gathering the strength for another tedious afternoon, but as soon as he entered the place, his father said his help was no longer needed. Marcel couldn't believe his ears and although he felt like asking why, he was so thankful that he had to fight to keep from laughing while Mr. Guzman gave him the news. So the boy feigned a little disappointment and left. Both of them were visibly relieved. Things were definitely looking up.

Marcel's mother was smiling when he arrived home. She knew already that his father had dismissed him and he didn't bother to ask her what she had done. She had that satisfied look upon her face, meaning another battle had been won.

Half hour later he was lying in bed when his mother called him from downstairs saying that Sergio was on the phone. Marcel ran to the mirror and looked at himself. There was a glow all over his face and he felt a wave of excitement as if every single problem had been resolved. How amazingly happy he felt. It was just a phone call, but it certainly was a very special one.

Marcel ran downstairs, counted to three, took a deep breath and tried to sound casual.



“Sergio, hi!”

“Hi Marcel. Are you busy?”

“No, not really. I just came back from the store. I was going to study for the History test, but I’m not in the mood, you know, it’s so hot. I just can’t sit around with those stupid books...”

He was so nervous that he couldn’t keep track of what he was saying. He heard a sudden silence and thought that Sergio was gone.

“Are you there?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah, I’m here. I don’t know what to say, I mean, I was going to ask you if you’d like to come over so that we could do some homework together. But...”

“No, wait!” Marcel interrupted him and froze. How stupid he had been. He felt like he had just blown a great opportunity of getting together. He had to fix it immediately. “I mean, I don’t mind to go to you. It’s certainly more fun to do it together, not alone, I mean. Yes, if you want it, I’d love to...”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to be a pain.”

“Oh, please, Sergio! You could never be a pain. I’m actually glad that you called. Now I have to study which is something I was supposed to do, anyway.”

Sergio laughed. Marcel had him finally convinced.

“Great, then. Could you come now?”

“Yeah, of course I could. I’ll just go get my books. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes tops!”

“Ok. Listen, just get in through the back door. I’ll be in the shower. It’s too damn hot.”

“You got it. See you, then.”

“Bye”

Marcel hung up, feeling numb, his breathing heavy. Several ideas suddenly crossed his mind.

None of them included books.

After a quick shower he left the house, walking on air. Nothing could take away the ecstatic feeling that he had. Anything that could bring him close to Sergio was worth the try. He had no idea where his expectations would end. He just felt like he deserved every minute of it.

He opened the gate and walked around the house. The backdoor was not locked. Even though, he knocked.

“Sergio, are you in there?”

He heard the shower and realized the boy hadn’t finished yet.

“Sergio...”

“Hi! Come on in. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Marcel pushed the door open and crossed the large kitchen. Everything was spotless, as always. He took the corridor and walked to the living room where he sat on one of the huge comfortable sofas they had. The smell of leather was impregnating and the metallic soundtrack of *Blade Runner* came from the brand new CD-player Sergio had gotten for Christmas. Marcel still didn’t have one because his father thought it was a waste of money.

“Are you alone?” he shouted from the living room.

Sergio opened the bathroom door and his voice became clearer.

“Yeah, my mother had an appointment this afternoon. She won’t be back till evening. We got the whole house for ourselves.”

*How exciting! What else?* Marcel couldn’t make out what the boy meant. But, coming from him, it was probably nothing, unfortunately. So Marcel tried to ease his anxiety.

“What a nice smell...” and then he felt stupid. Why in the world would he say something like that?

“What?” Sergio shouted, while drying himself.

“Nothing. I said nothing!”, the boy barked back.

He looked around the room, searching for something to catch his attention. Suddenly, Sergio emerged like a prince, dressed in a beautiful blue terrycloth robe, half open on his chest. Marcel blushed, although the boy never seemed to notice.

“Thanks for coming, Marcel. I hate when I have to go through these books alone. I really appreciate this...”

Marcel tried to smile.

“Well, that’s what friends are for.” It was a corny thing to say, but rather appropriate.

Sergio sat next to him. Marcel could swear his heart stopped for a short while. Sergio’s perfume invaded his senses and immediately gave him an erection. He felt embarrassed and hid it under the books. He was scared, but had to play along.

“Nice smell...” Again, he left out the wrong words. But, this time, Sergio heard them. *If only I could keep my mouth shut*, Marcel thought.

Sergio smiled, showing his beautiful and perfect teeth. Marcel wondered how that could be possible and thought that maybe everything looks perfect on the person that you really love.

“It’s musk, one of my favorites.” Sergio continued smiling.

Marcel almost said *it’s amazing*, but his self-control came back and he held his tongue on time. He couldn’t put himself through another embarrassing moment.

For the very first time, Marcel felt close to Sergio. He figured that his expectations were growing stronger every day. So he sighed deeply.

“What was that?” Sergio said, smiling. “Sounds like you’re not in the mood for this...”

“Oh, no! It’s just... you know, it’s a beautiful day. And we have to be here, studying...”

“I’m sorry, Marcel. We can call it off, if you want.”

“No, please, don’t! It was just a stupid thing to say...” And he smiled spontaneously. “I’m just relieved that I don’t have to go work with my father anymore.

“What did you do wrong? Was he upset?”

“No, nothing like that. I believe my mother managed to talk some sense into his head. Anyway, here I am, free from that horrible job. I feel like doing something crazy to celebrate.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I’m just so happy...”

Sergio stood up and went to the kitchen.

“Well, I’m happy for you. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Yes, thanks. Anything cold is fine...”

Sergio came back with two cans of coke. Marcel laid the books on the side table and opened his drink.

“I haven’t seen your father, lately.” he tried to make conversation, given that studying was not on his agenda. He just wanted to be around Sergio.

“He’s traveling. He does that a lot. It’s good, though. I don’t quite enjoy having him around the house. He’s always so moody.”

“Is he still drinking that much?”

“Yes and no. He has his days. I don’t really get him. My mother even stopped bothering him so he won’t get violent. You know, he can be pretty nasty. Sometimes I feel like going away, forever.”

Marcel almost choked on the coke. He was the one who used to sit for hours contemplating the sea, wishing

there was a way of escaping his life, but hearing Sergio wishing the same was something he wasn't prepared for.

"Sorry!" he brushed his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Where would you like to go?"

"Anywhere far from here, a big city where nobody cares about what you do. Rome, for instance. It seems like an interesting place."

"What's the fun in that? I mean it's nice to have people who care about you."

"That's not exactly what I meant, Marcel. People do care, but they don't make your life miserable."

Marcel shook his head. He knew Sergio was talking about his father and Marcel wondered why they were so different and still seemed to face the same problems.

"I don't think I understand..." And he really didn't. The idea of losing Sergio to a city was not very appealing to him. He was suddenly worried sick.

Sergio immediately saw the sadness in his eyes. He put one of his hands on Marcel's shoulder and smiled.

"Hey, I didn't say I'm leaving. It was just an idea. Besides, I couldn't go now. I have my school to finish, my mother to look after and, specially, Sofia.

Had he been taking a sip of his drink, Marcel would certainly choke to death. The stick figure with a name had been mentioned again. It was funny how threatened he felt at the sound of her name. He didn't even know her and yet she was so intimidating.

"You mean... your girlfriend?"

"Yeah, she's great. She helps me get through my mood swings when my father is around. She's really something."

"I don't think I met her", he said coldly.

"Well, I'm sure you've seen her. She's beautiful, smart and caring. I'll introduce you next time, if you want."

"Sure..." Marcel still sounded cold. "Is it serious? The relationship, I mean."

"We've been together for five months now. I've never been with a girl that long . . ."

*...and I've never been with a girl, period!* The thought was very pleasant and Marcel just wished that he could say it out loud.

"She said I'm the best lover she's ever had. Do you believe that?" Sergio went on.

*I wish I could!* "If she says so. How about her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is she a good lover?" Marcel couldn't understand why he was even paying attention to that conversation. His playing along was almost killing him. But he couldn't give it away that fast and the only thing he could do was pretend it didn't affect him.

"She's ok..."

*Well, that is not exactly the compliment a woman would like to hear from her boyfriend.* Marcel's mind was now racing and he would cherish that remark forever.

"How about you?" Sergio woke him up from his reverie.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't you feel like having a girlfriend?"

Marcel's world turned upside down. He couldn't believe his ears. Sergio was the last person he would expect to ask him that question. Wasn't it obvious that he didn't enjoy the company of girls? Or was Sergio just trying to make him say the words that would confirm what everybody had already probably said? Whatever the answer,

Marcel felt very uncomfortable. But then he thought that Sergio deserved the truth. He couldn't believe the boy had the intention of hurting his feelings.

"I don't think much about that..."

Sergio probably noticed his embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, Marcel! Is it ok to talk about that? I mean ... we can change..."

Marcel interrupted him:

"No, it's ok!" If he was looking for the right moment to bring up the subject of his homosexuality, there it was, on a silver platter. He had to take advantage of it. "It's ok", he repeated. "You're obviously in love with her. And it is nice to be able to talk openly about the one you love, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think I love her. It's a good feeling."

Sergio sat next to him again in silence. He was now looking at the CD Player, enthralled by the music. "Have you ever been in love, Marcel?"

Marcel thought that if he were a girl, he would then probably reveal his innermost feelings for the man in front of him. Even if Sergio rejected him, there wouldn't be room for a joke. Boys loved girls and girls loved boys. That was the lesson that he had learned so far. So he shook his head.

"Never?" Sergio insisted. "Not even platonic?"

Marcel felt like Sergio was trying subconsciously to dig out his deepest secrets. He pondered for a while and thought about how many chances he would have to be able to open his heart and say out loud the words that were screaming to come out. He couldn't take it anymore.

"Maybe, but it doesn't matter."

Sergio sounded excited.

"Of course it does. Come on, Marcel, tell me. Is it someone I know?"

“I don’t think I wanna talk about it...”

“Why not? You’re ashamed?”

He put his arm around Marcel who started shaking, feeling a little out of breath.

“Hey, buddy, you can tell me. I’ll keep it a secret, I swear.”

Sergio was pushing him to the limit and he was about to make a mistake. For the first time Marcel regretted accepting his friend’s invitation to come over. Sergio insisted.

“So... You wanna tell me or not?”

Marcel was looking down. So, Sergio pulled up his chin and his smile faded. Marcel had tears rolling down his face. He was very emotional and the whole scenario had a bittersweet taste to it. He felt like a fool but Sergio behaved like a gentleman.

He squatted in front of the boy, worried.

“Oh, Marcel, what happened? Was it something I said? I’m so sorry...”

“No, it’s not you, Sergio. It’s me. I’m just a stupid person...”

“You wanna talk about it?”

“I don’t know.” He was very confused and scared. He didn’t want to loose Sergio’s friendship, but he also wanted to share a little with someone he felt safe with. And Sergio seemed to be that person. So he took Sergio’s hands and looked him in the eyes.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“Of course!” The boy seemed relieved that Marcel had decided to open up. “You can trust me.”

“I know that what I’m going to tell you is obvious. But I’ve never had the courage to speak up. Sometimes I feel like I’m gonna go crazy. It’s not enough that people



assume things. Sometimes you feel like confirming it to yourself. I need to hear my own voice saying it out loud.”

“Say what, Marcel? You’re scaring me...”

“It scares me too. But I think it’s time I shared my pain with someone. And I’m glad it’s gonna be you.”

“Ok, now you’re freaking me out.” Sergio stood up “What the hell is it? Are you sick or something?”

Marcel took a deep breath and prayed silently.

“I’m in love with a man!”

He didn’t know for sure if the music had stopped at the same time he finished the sentence. He just remembered that silence fell like a veil over his head.

He couldn’t begin to explain how good it felt the moment those words came out of his mouth, although he could hardly recognize his own voice. He thought about *Principessa* and his freedom Marcel sometimes envied but not understood. That boy did cross some borders that Marcel considered sacred. But he couldn’t also deny that *Principessa* was for him a living example of what freedom should represent.

He looked at Sergio Costa and saw his freedom, too. Sergio would always be the man who made him speak up and he would be forever grateful. But Sergio would also be the man who made his truth so powerful that nothing else mattered. He was suddenly the girl in love who, though discarded, would fear no mockery. Because girls loved boys and boys loved girls. That is what they did.

Marcel didn’t know what to expect after that. Sergio was looking at him as if he had said something the boy already knew. His behavior was no different than the one Marcel had so anxiously expected. Marcel wanted to be accepted by the man he loved regardless of his preferences.

He wanted to be seen and never again ignored. He wanted to hear Sergio say something. And so he did.

"I think it's cool..." Sergio murmured, apparently a little uncomfortable. He didn't feel like asking who the man was. Marcel wondered if he feared that the answer would somehow involve him. He hoped not. He had pushed Marcel into telling him something personal and it was too late to avoid hearing it. So after a short silence Sergio smiled and took Marcel's hands. "You have nothing to be ashamed of", he said.

"I am not" the boy managed to reply, somehow relieved that his confession hadn't raised other questions. "I just wish people would stop bullying me because of that."

Sergio's mind was probably racing. He sensed he had so many things he wanted to say, but none was the right one. He certainly didn't want to hurt Marcel, but at the same time, he surely wished he had the courage to explore a little more the situation. He pursed his lips trying to find something encouraging that might help.

"They don't do that because you're gay. They do it because that's what they're good at."

"What do you mean?"

"They will pick on anyone who doesn't belong with them. It could be a fatty, a baldy or a four-eyed nerd. It doesn't matter. They think they're too good for anyone."

"They don't pick on you..."

Marcel knew Sergio was just trying to ease his pain. But he had to show his real feelings.

"I'm just tired of being defended all the time by you and Chiara. Like you, she's always standing up for me, even when I want to face them."

"That's because she likes you, Marcel. I do, too. What's the big deal?"

“People might think I’m not able to take care of myself . . .”

“You know what?” Sergio was getting annoyed. “I think you’re being too much of a victim here. You’re a nice guy, you’re intelligent and you’re my friend. And you happen to be gay, so what?”

Marcel wanted to hug him and kiss him. But he was still afraid of scaring his friend away.

“I was afraid I might lose your friendship,” he finally said.

“You don’t have to worry about that. We’re good. And I’ll keep the secret, if you wish.”

“Well, I don’t intend to march the streets carrying a banner. I guess I have a confidant now.”

“Good” Sergio said smiling. “Now, let’s go out and celebrate. I’m not in the mood for History, either. I’ll go change.”

“You got it!”

Sergio went to his bedroom while Marcel tried to compose himself. He had finally confided in his beloved friend. He was feeling happy and secure, until he heard Sergio calling his name.

“Hey, Marcel, would you come here a second?”

Marcel was still thinking about what had just happened in the living room when he entered Sergio’s bedroom. The boy was standing beside the bed, holding two t-shirts.

“Which one should I put on?” he asked.

Marcel never got to make his choice. His eyes fell on Sergio’s naked body, almost knocking him out. His heart was racing and his breathing became heavy.

Sergio dropped the t-shirts and approached Marcel, a little anxious.

“It’s ok, just between you and me.”

Marcel’s voice failed and all he could do was smile.

## FOUR

Sergio skipped a whole week of school after that afternoon. Marcel was a little anxious and after several unanswered phone calls he decided to knock on the boy's door. There was nobody home and a day later Marcel saw Sergio entering the classroom as if nothing had happened.

"Where the hell were you?" Marcel was put out by his friend's conduct.

"Who wants to know?" Sergio replied coldly.

Marcel was smacked by the brisk answer and before he knew they were engaged in an argument. Marcel overheard something about Sergio spending some time in Palermo with his aunt and although Marcel didn't have the right to barge into his friend's personal life, he felt like he deserved a better explanation.

“I was worried about you.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. I’m fine, don’t you see?”

Sergio’s behavior had changed completely after what happened in that particular afternoon in his house. In the beginning Marcel pretended it to be a misunderstanding, but the pain of theoretical rejection started bothering him. Sergio became aloof, although their friendship officially continued. But Marcel had the feeling that something was not right. They bickered more often than before and both felt a little uncomfortable when trying to make conversation as if they were strangers to each other. Sergio insisted everything was fine, but Marcel believed that his friend started behaving suspiciously when he was around. He thought of all the things he had said in confidence and the outcome of such exposure. He could still feel the taste in his mouth and the pride of being trusted. But something was definitely missing. Sergio had been the one to take the plunge and now Marcel felt like he was paying the price for going along with it.

Marcel wondered if his friend would ever share his secret with some stupid boy so they both could have a laugh whenever Marcel was around. That was a possibility that filled him with horror. But, then, if Sergio had the courage to do such a thing, he would definitely be admitting that he had been having close encounters with a faggot and that might jeopardize his *integrity*. But something was still missing. And Marcel couldn’t make it out.

He considered discussing it with Chiara, but he knew he had to be careful because he didn’t want to put at risk the rest of the friendship he still had hanging by a thread. One moment Marcel was happy to have a confidant and the other he was angry for being so thick. How could he ever imagine that such a great guy like Sergio could turn out

to be a total jerk? His head was spinning and he never felt so alone. He took his favorite long walk to the sea and sat there for hours mulling things over.

The next few weeks were no different. Every time they met, Sergio would excuse himself and leave. Marcel saw Chiara looking at him a couple of times and wondered if she had noticed anything. She was very discreet though and never broached the subject.

Marcel didn't know what to do. Sergio's detachment was hurting him and he started regretting what they had done in that afternoon. Marcel believed his friend was feeling the same and the only solution was pretending nothing had ever happened. Easier said than done.

Another two weeks went by and Sergio met his colleagues during lunch break to announce he was changing groups and they would not be working together in future assignments. Chiara gave Marcel one of those looks again and he blushed profusely before leaving for the toilet. All the others took the news without any comments, but he was in hell. Whatever happened between Sergio and him on that cheerful afternoon had put an end to the perfect relationship they once had.

#

One month later Sergio surprised Marcel with an invitation to spend a weekend at his friend's house in Palermo. Marcel was a little skeptical at first but since he was looking for a chance of regurgitating the old friendship, he accepted it contentedly. He still kept his hopes up.

They met at the station on a Friday after school and it reminded Marcel of the day he had realized he was deeply in love with his friend. This time they were not expecting

anyone and the thrill of spending a weekend with the man he felt so attracted to was the best feeling Marcel had had since that wonderful but heartbreaking afternoon. Sergio looked handsome as always and their trip was quite cheerful. He spoke all the time about his friend Massimo, making Marcel curious to meet such a lovely and interesting man.

“You seem to like him a lot”

Sergio just smiled and shrugged.

Massimo Correale was extremely handsome: olive skin and green eyes just like Sergio's. They were both the same height. He was wearing a pair of tight trousers that defined his muscular legs and a tank top revealing his beautiful arms and shoulders. He was also a very polite young man whose parents--who were out that weekend--seemed to have lots of money. They lived in a fabulous house. Sergio had been there several times so after Marcel was properly introduced, Massimo took the time to give him a private tour. Marcel was amazed by the size of the property and once they were done, the host showed him to his room and let him unpack, making it clear that he should make himself at home. Massimo also pointed out that Sergio and he would be waiting for Marcel downstairs where they were supposed to have lunch.

They spent a wonderful afternoon playing games, swimming and watching movies until late. They ate in the garden and around midnight Marcel went up to his room, leaving the boys chitchatting. He was rather tired and before he fell asleep he started feeling comfortable enough to realize that all his neurotic behavior was unfounded. Sergio, although friendlier, still gave him the impression of being suspicious; but the atmosphere had become much better than before.



The next day Marcel woke up early and Massimo and Sergio were already outside having breakfast by the pool.

“My goodness, you guys are the last ones to go to bed and the first ones to get up. You make me feel old!”

They laughed at his observation and Massimo poured him a cup of steamy coffee. Sergio made him a sandwich and Marcel felt a pang across his heart. He still couldn’t understand why his life had to be so complicated but he was certainly having the best of times. Everything was so tasteful and the food was delicious, not to mention the wonderful company. And Marcel wished he could stay there forever.

Saturday went by very relaxed and uneventful.

After taking a nap on their last day, Marcel woke up looking for the boys. He checked the bedrooms but they were empty. He could hear the beautiful music of *Midnight Express* coming from downstairs and he thought they would be watching the movie again.

Marcel called out their names, but no one answered. So he passed by the kitchen, took a can of coke from the fridge and checked the game room where he remembered leaving the boys right after they finished lunch. They were not there either. The day was extremely hot and Marcel thought it might be a good idea to go for a swim. So he stepped onto the veranda and stretched his arms, looking at the beautiful blue sky. *Where the hell are they?* He looked towards the swimming pool hoping to see their heads in the water, but the pool was empty. So Marcel went for a walk around the house, thinking how wonderful it would be to live in such a big place with a pool when he turned one corner of the huge garden and surprisingly witnessed what would change his feelings for Sergio forever: the boy was

lying on the trimmed grass looking at Massimo who was sitting next to him stroking his hair. They could not see Marcel so he stopped and hid behind one of the shrubs. His legs were shaky and his breathing a little heavy. He wanted to believe that everything was not what it seemed, but his suspicions were suddenly confirmed when he saw Massimo lower his head and French kiss the one and only man Marcel had ever touched.

Marcel Guzman felt suddenly dizzy. He was perplexed and the more he looked the more confused he became. Nothing made sense anymore and he didn't know whether he should interrupt that disgusting scene or leave silently and get back in the house. He felt queasy.

What caused him more pain and uncertainty was the fact that all the freedom he had experienced by confiding in Sergio had suddenly vanished, no matter what the boy might say or do. Marcel felt alone and betrayed and the thought of the perfect weekend had been completely ruined.

He decided that no amount of courage should overcome his pride, so he stepped back slowly and walked to his room. He locked the door and felt the tears coming down his face.

Marcel cried in silence because Sergio should never know what he had seen. He didn't know Massimo but everything started making sense. Sergio didn't skip a week's school to stay with his aunt. He and Massimo had probably spent the time together and Marcel had just been his catalyst. Marcel felt used and ashamed. If only he could turn back the time and take control over his emotions he wouldn't be in that situation. But it was too late now. There was only one thing to do: he should keep his head up high with the certainty that whatever had happened between Sergio and him was definitely over.

Marcel needed to talk to someone and the idea of going to Chiara and share his feelings was more than he could bear. So he never revealed what he saw during that weekend. He traveled back home in silence and Sergio never bothered to ask him what was wrong. Marcel was back in his emotional hell.

#

Chiara Mancini started noticing something was not right with her best friend and no matter how hard she tried, Marcel always managed to change the subject so he didn't have to confront his disillusion. Part of what he had once dreamt had come true but somehow he didn't seem to enjoy it. Sergio had touched him emotionally and physically making him feel like a powerful secret had been invested in him, but at the same time, there was no way he could profit from such power. Marcel realized that all that trust had a price and though his rage hardly seemed to subside, his self-esteem prevailed and kept him from going public. He decided to ignore his beloved friend and foe and carry on with his pathetic life.

His days at school were nothing but frustration. Marcel hated seeing Sergio everyday and ironically the boy started looking for ways of making conversation. Marcel limited his answers to yes or no hoping the boy would catch his drift, but somehow he never did.

No other man seemed to draw Marcel's attention from the day Sergio let him down. He developed certain distrust in the same sex and vowed to never fall in love again. And he thought of his father and his contentment should he ever find out that his once gay son had suddenly given up man altogether.

#

Mr. Guzman never stayed long enough to learn the truth. He grew more violent and the fights became louder and more aggressive. Marcel was growing up but never enough to confront him. The man spent more time at the grocery store and his presence at home became lesser each day. Mrs. Guzman stopped working because her husband was making a scene every time there were women in the house. So one day he left and never came back.

It took Marcel a whole week to realize that his father had indeed deserted them. His mother called the police but they could never trace him. The business had been sold without Mrs. Guzman knowledge and closed down to be reopened later by another family.

Mrs. Guzman would have expected anything from her husband, but the reality of being left alone was an end that she had never seen coming. She suffered a stroke two months later and got the right side of her entire body paralyzed. Marcel had a very tough time trying to digest all that misfortune and if it wasn't for Chiara, he didn't think he would be able to cope.

During the time his mother spent in hospital Marcel didn't know what to expect. It hurt so much to see such a vigorous woman lying in bed like a vegetable, unable to move and totally out of it due to the strong medication. She could hardly open her eyes and the sight of her son standing next to her didn't make any difference. The boy was utterly shattered.

Every time something terrible happened in his life Marcel tended to think of Sergio. He couldn't say whether it was love or hate. He felt like the boy had brought out some

feelings in him that he wasn't aware he possessed. And in those difficult moments he felt feeble and desperate for attention.

When his mother came out of the hospital she started doing rehabilitation sessions, which some doctors promised would improve her condition, but Marcel sensed that his mother was falling into a rut. She didn't show any enthusiasm for life and he could only suppose that the loss of her beloved husband would haunt her forever. She was so much in love with that man that the idea of his never coming back was too hard for her to accept.

Marcel's first decision afterwards was to hire some help to take care of his mother twenty for seven while he went about the other important things in his life. His sister Tiziana never showed any real interest in landing a hand, although she started coming by once in a while.

Marcel was a little surprised and thankful to discover later that his father had showed some strength of character by depositing an amount of money in their family account. Nevertheless, Marcel realized that the money should go to his mother's medical expenses and he would start taking care of himself by finding a job. And by considering that, he also believed more in his sister's nude interest in the money lying in the bank than in the recovery of their suffering mother. But he was not the one to judge. His mother needed attention and even the presence of such an insensitive creature like his sister could do the woman some good.

Marcel walked one day to the Convent for an appointment with sister Lina. He was very distressed with everything that was happening in his life and he thought the nun might be able to say something that made him believe that all was not lost.

She was a very pleasant woman who took pride in helping the needy. She was also very well connected with people from various organizations, which proved to be of help if one was searching for a job.

Sister Lina was very happy to see Marcel again. First she reproached him for not coming to visit her more often and after offering him a glass of cold lemonade she smiled and promised him that she would do her best to find him some respectable work.

#

Two weeks after their appointment Marcel started working in a restaurant as a cook assistant. He had no experience but the family who ran the place was so supportive and understanding that he felt at home from the very first day. And since the business opened in the evening he was able to conciliate the work with the school.

During the holidays Marcel spent most of the time with his mother. Her rehab sessions were not helping her as much as he expected and her mood swing was a little hard to deal with. Chiara was always present and Marcel had so much to do that Sergio was hardly in his thoughts until the day he learned that the boy had requested a transfer because his father had decided to move the family to Palermo. Sofia was going with him and Marcel was consumed with jealousy.

He was still angry, but the thought of hardly seeing the boy again was too painful and he couldn't hide his emotions any longer. He finally cried to Chiara the loss of a close friend, although he never mentioned how close they had once been. Chiara never seemed to understand his grief and since he had been going through so much, she chose not

to ask questions. She just comforted him until he felt whole again.

#

One day Marcel had an interesting surprise at his work. He was in the kitchen, preparing squids for a recipe when the cook asked him to get a bottle of wine from the bar. As he walked into the restaurant he saw Roberto Puginni, an old acquaintance of his father sitting at a table in the corner. So he quickly fetched the wine and took it back to the kitchen, explaining that he had to see one of the customers. The cook was extremely friendly and since the restaurant was not so busy he insisted the boy take a break.

Marcel walked back into the restaurant, approached the young man and started making conversation. Roberto was very pleased to see him and explained that he was visiting his parents in the city. They talked for a while and after knowing everything that had happened, Roberto thought it might be a good idea to go and pay a visit to Mrs. Guzman.

During the conversation Roberto also let out that his relationship with Marcel's father had gone sour quite a while ago but his wife had never gotten to know it. It appeared that the old man had developed a gambling problem and in order to pay some debts he ended up borrowing money from the few people he knew. Roberto had been one of the victims who never saw his money again. Marcel was surprised to know in the end that his father didn't actually sell the grocery store as he had been told before. Apparently the local mafia had threatened the man, forcing him to give away the business for payment. As for the money in the bank, Marcel thought he should never ask. And so he kept the secret to himself.

Roberto Puginni had just become twenty-eight years old and was living in Rome where he managed a hotel near Piazza di Spagna. Marcel listened to him talking so proudly about the beauty of the big city and for one moment he thought of Sergio and the day they sat together in the living room trying to avoid History homework. Sergio had mentioned that he felt like going away to a place like that and Marcel remembered the touch of his hands and the perfume that drove him crazy. And so he realized he missed the boy who took his pride and love away, making him feel like going away too.

Roberto was extremely friendly and before he left, he gave Marcel his address. He made it clear that if ever the boy showed up in Rome, they should definitely get together. Marcel smiled and suddenly felt his heart filling up with hope. Hope of one day making it up for everything he had been through; hope of one day being able to love again.

#

Marcel's life among the group had become pointless. The Mancinis were still deciding whether to file for divorce or keep the endless fights which forced Chiara to wish she were orphan. The Beluccis believed that their daughter Elisabetta was about to run away again since a second abortion. She had been seeing some of her old friends who were not accepted in her family and Cinzia Belucci was losing her strength in holding on to her sister.

"I can't take it anymore." She told Marcel one day and that was the end of it. Elisabetta disappeared overnight. Cinzia cried for two days and after that promised never to speak about it again.



Marcel's sister, Tiziana, started increasing her number of visits. His mother was not well and Tiziana realized that he appreciated her presence regardless. Her husband came in once in a while and one day they sat altogether for dinner when Marcel suggested they move in. The couple didn't have a house of their own and thought it might be a good idea. Besides, he didn't need all the space and was very happy when they accepted his proposal. So he dismissed the assistant in order to save money and life in the house took another turn.

## FIVE

The first year after Mrs. Guzman's stroke was very difficult. Her health was deteriorating and she started suffering from depression. Marcel was feeling miserable and the work in the restaurant was beginning to drive him crazy. But he knew that he had to hold on to it because the medical expenses were draining the money in the Bank and although Tiziana's husband had decided to help, Marcel was convinced that a day would come when they would be short of cash.

Chiara was his closest friend and therefore the only one he could sit and talk too. Eventually they became closer than before and Marcel finally found the courage to open his heart to her. He told her everything that happened between Sergio and him and she listened with a smile. She confessed that it wasn't so hard to believe in his pain and Marcel then realized that he could have confided in her a

long time ago. She was amazing and he could feel like a weight had been removed from his shoulders.

#

At the end of that same year Mrs. Guzman died.

Marcel didn't cry at first because the shock of losing his mother was too big. He wanted to believe that everything was just a bad dream and he would wake up the next day and kiss her good morning. Chiara Mancini was there for him and couldn't hold back her tears. She wanted to be strong but the sight of his fragility was too painful for her to resist.

The people who attended the wake were most Mrs. Guzman's old customers. Those women were touched by the fact that the boy had been left alone and many hugged him in turns, offering their services, should he ever need any help. Marcel found it very moving and for one moment he felt like one of them. No place for mockery or reproach, as if he were the most regular person in the neighborhood.

Two days after the funeral Marcel went back to the restaurant where he worked, believing that keeping his mind busy was the best way to cope with his recent loss. His mother's last days had nearly drained him of all his energy but he couldn't surrender. He knew that he would need all the strength one could muster in order to go on with his life. Marcel and his sister were getting along much better than in the beginning and although he missed his parents terribly, Tiziana and her husband became his only and closest family. They often had lunch together since Marcel used to eat dinner at work. Tiziana's husband even attempted an occasional smile and Marcel pretended to smile back, although he wasn't really interested in gaining the man's

friendship. He was getting past the old habit of trying to impress people who despised him.

The school term was almost in the end and Marcel didn't know exactly what he wanted to do next. Some of his friends were getting busier with part-time jobs that took most of their time and they hardly saw each other outside school, except for Chiara who frequently called him for a little chat.

Mrs. Guzman's death pushed Marcel into considering a change of life outside Bagheria. There was not much he could expect from that place since the two people he loved most had already left his life and although Chiara had a special place in his heart, the boy felt like it was time for a new direction. Chiara agreed with him that something much better was waiting outside that island and she would understand it if he decided to move. She would do the same eventually, but he was to go first.

One evening Marcel came back from work and locked himself in his bedroom. He opened his agenda and found Roberto Puginni's address in Rome and began to write a short and friendly letter, explaining the turn of events and his will to one day be able to experience a different life.

Roberto wrote back two weeks later apologizing for the delay. He had been very busy in the hotel and was very sad to read about Mrs. Guzman's passing. So they became pen pals, writing every other month and telling the news about each other's life. And whenever Roberto came over to visit his parents he would drop by the restaurant where Marcel worked and they would talk for hours. Marcel felt like he had found a new friend who apparently didn't have a problem with his being gay, although they never discussed the subject. But it was very comforting to know that some

people were different and in some way capable of showing a little respect towards others.

Roberto always seemed to have more interesting things to say, increasing the boy's curiosity about the big city and their correspondence went on for two long years, during which Marcel managed to save quite a reasonable amount of money to make him feel like he was ready to go.

Tiziana had changed completely. They got along very well now, although Marcel felt like her husband still had some reservations about him. He shared with his sister his plans of leaving Bagheria and she was very supportive. She admitted to being a little worried but was also convinced that her brother deserved another chance of doing something with his life.

#

Marcel had already turned nineteen when he called Chiara one day and broke the news: he was packing to leave. So he took her out for Dinner and they had a fantastic time. She was so sweet and couldn't hide her tears, confessing that she would miss him very much. Marcel promised he was going to keep in touch and tell her all the good things that were happening to him because he was very optimistic about the trip and couldn't wait to get things moving. He thanked her for all her encouragement and good moments they had so far spent together. He couldn't believe that he would finally leave Bagheria behind, along with so many painful memories.

Sergio was officially part of a past Marcel was eager to forget; Tiziana had become his one and only favorite sister and saying goodbye was awfully difficult. Her husband tried to show some sympathy, but the boy didn't

believe his encouraging words. He thought that maybe the man was just happy to get rid of that faggot and finally have the house all for himself and his wife. *What the hell!*

#

Before leaving, Marcel packed very little because he didn't know what to expect. He just made sure he had enough change of clothes for a week, always remembering to wash them in between days. He also carried a small photo album with pictures of his mom and dad, his sister Tiziana and his best friend Chiara. He decided to leave all the others behind, including the ones taken at school because they always showed Sergio who Marcel was willing to keep only in his memory.

The trip was the longest one he had ever had so far but it was definitely an adventure. He took a train to Caltanissetta and from there to Messina. And as he got on the ferry and crossed the Strait, Marcel waved goodbye to the island that had brought him so much pain and suffering and wondered if he would ever get back one day. There was so much he wanted to see and do and Roberto had promised him some excitement that should keep his mind busy for a while. And he believed it with all his heart.

#

After almost eleven hours the trip had taken its toll on him, so he decided to stop over in Napoli where he booked an overnight in a very simple hotel. Marcel was so tired that as soon as he checked in and opened the door to his room, he lay in bed and fell asleep immediately.

The next day Marcel woke up late and after a long and relaxing bath he checked out of the hotel and sat in a

nearby café for some breakfast. He was feeling a little lost in that strange city and a sense of loneliness came over him. He was far from home and for the first time he wasn't sure of what he was doing. Marcel thought of all the years he had spent in Bagheria, surrounded by his closest friends and felt a pang across his heart. He missed them already and although he remembered how much suffering he had endured in that place, he couldn't help but wonder why he felt so miserable by escaping it.

He thought of Sergio again and wished he could talk to him; he wished he could show the boy who had broken his heart that he - Marcel Guzman - was going to make it. But somehow the feeling was not entirely satisfying. So he sat there at that beautiful place and looked around at the passersby. And he realized it was too late. He had taken a decision and nothing would make him change his mind. He would keep on going because he had a destination.

Marcel could have spent some more time walking around Napoli, but he was so anxious to get to Rome that he walked to the station as soon as he finished eating.

The trip to Rome took about two hours and the boy arrived safe and sound. He felt rested and could already appreciate the first views of the big city. He had agreed with Roberto that he should take a taxi in the central station and give the address of the hotel where his friend worked. Roberto had insisted that Marcel stay with him for a couple of days before finding a small place of his own.

It was mid November and the days were sunny and cold. The city was busy with tourists and Marcel was overwhelmed by the diversity of cultures moving around him.

The first days were sensational. He would walk alone during the day visiting fantastic places like the

Coliseum and Vatican City and Roberto would join him in the evening for a meal over which they would talk about different things. And for the first time in years Marcel felt like he was living again. He thought of his mother and cried alone in the dark, wishing she would be there with him, enjoying those marvelous moments. He also thought of his father and surprisingly missed him too. Marcel realized that he could never really hate the man who always mistreated him for being different, even after abandoning his mother and causing her to die a long and suffering death. That man was still his father and although he didn't want to see him again, he missed the man's presence.

Marcel thought of Chiara Mancini, his beloved girlfriend who had always been there for him and missed her, wishing she could see all the beautiful things he was seeing. He wanted to call her, but decided that a postcard would do the trick. Moreover, he was convinced that if he were to change the course of his life he should do it without carrying the past in his luggage. Chiara had been an amazing friend, but she was also a reminder of a life that had caused him so much pain and suffering. Marcel believed her big chance was still to come. She would fall in love with the perfect man and have the perfect children. But most of all, she would be the perfect parent. So he sent one postcard to her and another to Tiziana as a second goodbye.

#

Roberto Puginni was dating a beautiful French girl from Nice who had come to Rome six months before on a working schedule. She was a modern dancer and they had met during the month she spent performing in the city.



They fell in love immediately and spent every free moment together. Soon after her shows were finished she went back to France with a promise of coming back. Four weeks later she landed in Rome with an international credit card in her hand luggage and a naughty smile on her beautiful face: she had decided to stay. Her father was not very happy with her decision and neither was her group director. But apparently she was done with Nice and ready to experience a new life. Besides, she had been thinking of giving up dancing for a while and Roberto had been the perfect excuse.

Her name was Zelia Lambert. She was only twenty-three years old but behaved as an older woman. Marcel didn't find her very affable at first although Roberto assured him that she was just a little shy. She also happened to be the most beautiful girl Marcel had ever seen. She was quite tall with shoulder length hair that looked like a satin shawl. Her big brown eyes were enigmatic and she had a peculiar smile that caused Marcel to blush every time they looked at each other. It was very clear that Roberto was deeply smitten and for one second, the boy felt jealous.

He remembered the days he would sit at the pizzeria and observe the couples in love, wishing he could be one of them. At that time Sergio Costa was the only one in Marcel's mind, populating his wildest dreams and fantasies. But running into him French-kissing another man had brought down a curtain over Marcel's desires, turning them into bitter memories. He didn't wish that feeling of betrayal to anyone. And certainly not to Roberto Puginni, who had been such a wonderful friend since they met at the restaurant in Bagheria.

He found himself observing Zelia more often than necessary as if she was a magnet and the way she moved

about was kind of exciting. He wondered if Roberto would be the jealous kind because she probably turned heads everywhere she went. But that was none of Marcel's business. He thought he might just be curious, although he felt uncomfortable and confused.

## SIX

Zelia Lambert was an only child. She was also motherless and the picture she carried inside her *Burberry* wallet was sufficient to explain how much she missed her mother who died of a fulminating heart attack at the young age of thirty five when Zelia was only seven.

Her father was a retired French investment banker whose love for his daughter was the most important thing in the world. He never remarried after losing his wife because he believed no other woman could ever live up to be such a wonderful companion as the one he had ever had. And that was a subject he'd never liked to discuss with anyone. He also couldn't comprehend why his daughter would give up such a comfortable life in Nice to move to a horrible city like Rome just because she believed to be in love with a loser. He hated the fact that Roberto wasn't French, although both of them spoke English fluently.

Monsieur Lambert might not be very happy with Zelia's decision, but he was also very careful not to

jeopardize his relationship with the daughter. She had been a fragile girl since the loss of the mother and therefore Monsieur Lambert vowed never to disappoint her, no matter how much she disappointed him. Nevertheless he demanded she bring the boyfriend home for a visit, hoping to change his mind when he got to shake hands with the man who was about to change his daughter's life. But Roberto Puginni wasn't ready to face the angry man, yet.

Zelia was a very talkative girl but every time Marcel was around her she became quite reticent. Marcel didn't know whether her behavior was due to the fact that they were still strangers to each other or just hostility. He liked Roberto very much and the thought of not getting along with his girlfriend was not a very pleasant thing. There was a crowd and he dreaded the feeling of being a burden.

Roberto, however, would never consider Marcel a problem; also, he believed jealousy would never play a part in his love relationship since Marcel was clearly gay, although reserved. And Zelia had even made some sarcastic comments while they were in bed, suggesting that Marcel would love to be lying in the middle. Roberto laughed because he thought it was funny. And that made him realize that he never thought one day he would be able to enjoy the company of a gay man like he enjoyed Marcel's. He felt free around the young man who seemed sincere in every word, but Zelia, though condescending, had mixed feelings about it.

She had experienced some frustrating situations back in Nice when she started dancing with her Company where the girls and boys spent their free time together talking about men. She wasn't comfortable listening to their sexual escapades, especially when the narrator happened to be one of the gay dancers. They seemed to be shameless and

bragged about every single dirty but exciting detail. They teased her for not being more open with her sexuality and found it offensive and almost prejudice that she never introduced them to the man she was dating at that time. So she decided to prove them wrong and brought the American she had been seeing for the last three months to an organized party celebrating the Company's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. They had a lot of fun until Zelia found out later that one of the male dancers had done the American in one of the bathrooms. Zelia went berserk and ended the relationship without giving too much thought and the dancer left the group because of the bad atmosphere that aroused between them.

The next summer she had a similar situation when another male dancer talked the guy she was seeing into going to a movie Zelia was not interested in watching. She was very fond of the dancer and did not oppose to the appointment. Unfortunately, her French boyfriend couldn't keep the secret and confessed having had sex with the boy. Zelia was devastated and cried to one of her girlfriends who instructed her to stop seeing the guy who, according to her, was probably in the closet. The dancer didn't follow the steps of the first one and remained in the Company. Zelia was the one who saw her future shrinking to the point of making plans to leave the group. She avoided the dancer as much she could but the environment became intolerable. She hated being around him and realized she had lost some confidence in the gay world. Her girlfriends assured her that not all gay guys were the same, but losing some boyfriends to them had made Zelia skeptical to the friendliness of those *queens*. Of course she later recognized that it wasn't their total fault because to her no real straight guy would succumb to the flirting of a *faggot*.

“You shouldn’t use that word”, one of the girls told her. “It’s demeaning and rude.”

“Faggot, faggot, faggot...” and she felt better. She was angry and the last thing she wanted to acknowledge was that she had actually dated closeted homosexuals.

“How am I supposed to know that they like men?”

“You aren’t...” and the girls laughed out loud. “They’re the ones with a problem, not you.”

Zelia nodded and agreed that her friends might be right. And now she was back in the situation where her beloved Italian boyfriend happened to be friends with an emasculate but handsome young man. She didn’t believe that Roberto would ever give in to someone like Marcel because Roberto was straight. Or so she considered him. But for the very first time she couldn’t deny her curiosity and fascination she was having about someone like Marcel. She found him extremely sexy in a way she had never experienced. He was physically fit and his androgynous appearance had a certain *jais ne sais quoi*.

All her past worries had suddenly vanished like magic and she was surprised by her reaction. She wasn’t really concerned whether Marcel liked Roberto or not. She didn’t even care what happened between them as long as she didn’t know about it. The only thing that bothered her was the fact that Marcel made her feel uncomfortable whenever he was around.

Roberto had assured Marcel that he could stay in the apartment as long as he needed. There was enough space for both of them because Zelia didn’t live there. She had her own place, although she spent most of the time with him. Marcel didn’t think it was appropriate and promised to leave as soon as possible.

As the weeks went by he started noticing that Zelia avoided his eyes as if she were afraid of him. They were now doing things together, especially because it became more and more difficult for him to spend time alone with Roberto. At first Zelia came by just for the night, but her visits became more frequent. Roberto even joked about her renting the apartment to Marcel since she hardly used it. She didn't like the joke and they had their first fight since the day Marcel arrived.

Roberto never mentioned the subject again. He knew that something was bothering Zelia but he preferred to let her decide when to talk about it.

Zelia never did and her bitching about increased everyday. The snide comments and short answers made Roberto believe that she was becoming a little jealous of his friendship with Marcel, which caused the boy to hurry up in search of a place he could move in to. Roberto tried to understand Zelia's behavior, but the only thing that made sense to him was the fact that he and Marcel were Italians and she was French; difference in language and culture. Marcel only spoke English to Roberto whenever Zelia was around, but she had surprised them more than once in long conversations in their own language and although she was not participating, she felt left out and hated every sound of it. It was a little hard to avoid those confrontations and she demanded they speak English only, no matter what. Roberto just nodded.

The truth is that Zelia couldn't bear the intimacy that breathed from the conversations in Italian between the two men. Marcel seemed closer to Roberto than she had ever been. No matter how much she tried, Zelia felt like she would never be able to make a way into that world that belonged to those two Italians in her life.

A feeling of annoyance took over Marcel. He didn't understand what made an intelligent man like Roberto Puginni abide to the egotistical rules from a spoiled brat like Zelia Maugham. She was getting on his nerves and there was nothing he could do about it because he remembered he was nothing but a visitor and if anyone should leave, it had to be him. But finding an affordable place to rent in a city like Rome was not an easy task. So he swallowed his pride and kept his judgment to himself.

It was obvious to Marcel that Roberto was madly in love with Zelia in order to put up with her many attitudes. And so he thought of his mother who was probably more in love than in fear to accept his father's despicable behavior until the end. And he was sure that she loved that man. And so did he. But everything was finished now and he had the feeling he was thrown back into a situation where his opinion, if ever given, would not be appreciated.

#

Marcel realized that his life was not taking the course he had planned. He had moved to a beautiful city with lots of opportunities, waiting for a break in his troubled existence, but the people surrounding it were not only not helping, but also dragging him into their problems. And he resented that. He felt such a fulfilling sense of freedom when he crossed the Strait of Messina, leaving the island behind. And that freedom was suddenly being compromised after just a couple of weeks in his own Promised Land. He believed he could make a change and supposed he had the strength for it. But there was something deep inside that was hassling him. And it was not his failure in finding a place



or the increasing arguments in his presence. It was something he just couldn't figure out.

He started pushing himself a little harder in order to find a place as soon as possible. He became less demanding and more anxious. Zelia made him feel like he was on the way of everything and even though that feeling annoyed him, Marcel couldn't help but feel excited being around her. He knew they tried to avoid each other but there was something about that dance that kept them picking on each other. And it wasn't until another week later that Marcel ran into a very attractive young man whom out of the blue offered him a place to stay. His name was Paolo.

"...no need for surnames now..." he added with a friendly smile.

He was a student from Genova who had been living in Rome for two years. His brother had finished school and decided to go back home. Paolo stayed behind, desperately searching for someone to split the high rent. Marcel, who on that lucky Saturday sat next to him in a café near Trevi Fountain, while flipping through the classifieds on *Secondamano*, looked so desperate for rescue that he said *yes* in a glimpse. And part of his problems had been suddenly resolved.

That afternoon he went back to Roberto's apartment and happily broke the news. He brought with him an exquisite bouquet of white roses surrounded by scented and colorful stocks and a bottle of French Merlot. Roberto was very excited for his friend while Zelia couldn't hide her surprise and disappointment. She took the roses with a coy smile and arranged them in a beautiful vase.

Marcel Guzman carried his things to Paolo's apartment the very next day, feeling immediate relief. Being far from the fighting couple brought him some new

hope for a change. He found a job in a very trendy clothing shop and life became bearable again.

#

Paolo Ricci turned out to be a very pleasant companion and little by little they developed a healthy closeness and both went out for dinners, theater and cinema. He later explained that what made him offer the room to Marcel was the fact that after his brother had left, he couldn't see himself sharing with another straight guy: they were disorganized and self-centered. Marcel blushed and then laughed. He was suddenly happy to find a gay buddy who didn't resemble Principessa and decided he'd made the right choice.

Marcel's friendship with Roberto and Zelia improved miraculously. He checked once in a while on Roberto who enjoyed knowing that his Sicilian friend had finally found his way. They met occasionally for dinner and surprisingly, Zelia behaved beautifully. They ate and drank and talked about life. Zelia smiled warmly and Marcel could feel he might like her better. She even attempted a little joke and they also laughed at her mimic of Monsieur Lambert when talking about Roberto: *I need to see the man who turned my lovely French daughter into a helpless Romana...*

And for the very first time Marcel looked at Zelia with endearing eyes.

## SEVEN

Curiously Zelia and Marcel struck a very special friendship. Roberto couldn't believe it in the beginning but everything seemed to go so well that he never worried about finding what wrong made it so right. The two of them spent time together talking about anything that came to mind, not worrying whether it made sense or not and Zelia even became a frequent customer at the shop where Marcel worked.

The hotel was keeping Roberto busier than ever and there were occasions when Zelia felt a little lonely in the apartment. So she would ring Marcel and both of them would have dinner that Marcel insisted in cooking for her. And that became a routine that was both pleasant and strangely stimulating.

Their friendship reached a level where certain intimacy was very common. Sometimes Zelia would come to his apartment and quickly get under the shower. She was

not ashamed of changing in front of Marcel, although he felt a little uncomfortable in the beginning. But that feeling didn't last long. He soon got accustomed to her ritual and for the first time he paid attention to a woman's body.

Zelia had a beautiful figure, thanks to the years of dancing. She was gracious and docile in his presence and that gave him a sense of power. It was a strange but pleasant feeling that he soon became aware of.

Marcel started picturing Zelia in different places other than the table where she ate or the sofa where she sat. He didn't like his newfound obsession and tried to shake his thoughts away. But he couldn't deny that he felt strangely drawn to her presence and at some point that feeling bothered him greatly. What he didn't know was that Zelia was having the same kind of experience.

She found out that Marcel was not only an emasculated guy who probably enjoyed the company of other men, but also a very attractive male in ways that she never had imagined. He was considerate, kind, sensitive and always willing to listen. And she appreciated all that. She wondered if it was due to the fact that Marcel was gay. But then she remembered the dozens of gay dancers she had worked with and decided there was something special about him.

Marcel accepted Zelia as a special woman in his life; different from every other he had ever known. She looked different, her sensitiveness almost overwhelming; her kind smile and inquisitive eyes confused him. He felt good beside her to the point of missing her company whenever she went home. And *that* bothered him even more. But after some thinking, he decided that his worries were unfounded: they were just two different people who found friendship in one another.

And yet, he still wasn't totally convinced.

#

Monsieur Lambert called his daughter on a Wednesday morning to say that he needed to see her. Zelia pursed her lips and started thinking what might be the reason for such invitation and only one kept coming back to her: he was definitely going to change his mind about accepting her stubbornness and demand she go back home. So she went to Roberto and begged him to come along. It was about time her father met the man she had chosen to live with, although lately she wasn't so sure about it. Roberto, on one hand was almost convinced he had waited enough; on the other, his job was getting in the way and taking such a trip on a crucial time could be dangerous for his career. So he implored that Zelia be a darling and take the trip alone. She asked his opinion about inviting Marcel to accompany her. And she was still explaining why such idea had come up when Roberto closed the book he was reading and interrupted her sarcastically:

“Yeah, right. You take him with you and your dad will have a stroke when he thinks Marcel is me...”

Zelia froze on the spot. And for the first time she felt offended. The joke that she'd usually make herself some time ago had suddenly made so much sense to her; it was hurtful and demeaning. And she wondered why she never had thought it that way. At the same time, she was surprised by the way she felt. Something had shifted inside her and woken her up to a reality she had never experienced. She felt bullied, even though the joke wasn't meant for her.

“You shouldn't talk like that... I thought you were his friend”. And as she left, Roberto shrugged. He couldn't

help but wonder what had just happened. Zelia had been the one who was more than willing to be sardonic on a moment like that and Roberto had suddenly reversed the roles. He also wondered why Marcel had unexpectedly started to bother him since Zelia decided to change her ways. It couldn't be jealousy because that didn't make any sense. They were just friends and nothing else would ever happen.

So why did he feel so annoyed? He shrugged again and went back to his reading.

#

Marcel was under the shower when the telephone rang. He came out of the bathroom, dripping on the carpet, picked the phone up and was surprised to hear Zelia's voice. He didn't understand why she would bother to call him to say that she was leaving for Nice to visit her father. He appreciated her attention and dedication. She had become a nicer person in the last few months and the realization of that just brought him a sense of happiness. He didn't ask whether Roberto would go with her. But, then, he wasn't interested. He wished her a good trip and said he was looking forward to her return. And he meant every word.

During the time Zelia was away Marcel met Roberto for a drink at Piazza Navona. They both had dark beer and Marcel was happy to find out that his father had just been prejudiced about the drink.

Roberto was less talkative than usual and Marcel wondered if that had to do with the fact that Zelia was gone for a while. He never imagined his behavior being the reason that kept Roberto deep in his thoughts.

"What do you see in Zelia?" Roberto asked in a pensive way.

Marcel took a sip of his beer and smiled.

“She’s a nice friend. What *do you* see in her?”

“She’s the woman I love.”

Marcel grinned. “Then we’re good...” and he meant it.

And they sat there for another half hour without uttering a word to each other.

Marcel’s mind was racing and for the first time he realized that his friend Roberto was feeling a little jealous.

#

Four days later Zelia called again. She was crying on the phone and Marcel didn’t understand a word she was saying. Her sobbing accentuated her French accent and made her words unintelligible, jumbling his thoughts. She mumbled for almost five minutes during what it seemed to be an eternity. Marcel’s desperation to understand what was going on increased his anxiety and before he gave up, she repeated the dreadful words:

“My dad is gone, Marcel! Forever...”

Marcel was hurting. He could feel the pain she was going through because he knew how terrible it was to lose a parent. He had been through that experience before and the only thing he could say to comfort her was that she needed to feel the pain because that was the only way to get over it. And then he remembered that Zelia had already lost her mother when she was little and he felt even worse. He wanted to be there for her, like Chiara had been there for him when Mrs. Guzman passed. But Nice was far away and he wondered why Roberto wasn’t there. And he was surprised to hear that Roberto still didn’t know it.

In her despair, Zelia had dialed the first number that came to mind. Surprisingly, the number happened to be Marcel's. She needed to talk to someone who was sensitive and understanding and though her boyfriend was supposed to be that person, the only one she thought of was Marcel. He was flattered.

Roberto didn't take the news very well. He was clearly upset about Zelia's father, but what annoyed him most was the fact that his girlfriend had contacted Marcel and not him. He was really busy at work and couldn't forgive himself for not being able to comfort Zelia when she needed him most. And that was not the right moment to demand any explanation. The girl was suffering and the only thing he could do was to remain by her side. As a result of that, he arranged with his colleagues and took the first flight he could find to Nice.

For a whole week Marcel found himself immersed in his work. The shop was always full of tourists in search of the latest accessories and his selling was bringing him a wonderful commission. Paolo Ricci, his roommate, would invite him occasionally to go to a movie and Marcel accepted happily. But all the time his mind was fixed in something else than what he was doing at one particular moment: he was thinking of Zelia and how she might be coping with the loss of her dear father. And then he would remember that Roberto was by her side and a sudden disappointment would invade him.

Marcel didn't understand what was going on. There were times he would think of Sergio Costa, the man he once loved so deeply. He was over his past infatuation, but the memories were still there. Sergio had been his first and only love and the fear of going through such loss again terrified him. Roberto was so much in love with Zelia Lambert and it



was beautiful to see the passion in his eyes. He wanted to feel that passion all over again, but wondered if it would be worth it. But he couldn't control his feelings and if ever someone new came into his life, he would probably succumb to the power of love.

Sitting in his room he would mull over his life in Bagheria and *Principessa* unexpectedly would flaunt his beautiful and decadent smile in front of his face. Marcel couldn't help but wonder how lovely it would have been to be such a free spirit like *Principessa*. The boy probably paid a high price for living as an outcast, but he probably didn't know another way. Marcel believed that life was like an expensive show: whoever bade the highest price got the most comfortable seat. And if that were true, *Principessa* would probably be enjoying the show from a very special place on the stage, laughing at the poor souls who didn't have the guts to fight for their own desires. *Boo as much as you want...* he would be saying *...but I get to see the actors naked in the end...*

And Marcel smiled at his own thoughts. *Literally, my friend. Literally...*

## EIGHT

The next day Marcel did something he would regret for a long time. He called his beloved friend Chiara Mancini because he was feeling lonely due to the situations he had been facing lately.

Chiara was angry at first because it had been such a long time since she received the post card Marcel sent her soon after he arrived in Rome. He tried to apologize, but no amount of excuses made her understand it. But in the end she forgave him and became radiant from hearing his voice. She explained that her parents had come to an agreement and things were looking better. They came to realize that a divorce would not be the solution for their problems and decided to give marriage another chance. They loved each other and if they managed to put aside their selfishness, they wouldn't need to sacrifice their happiness. Chiara was more relaxed and happier.

"I even started working", she said enthusiastically.

Marcel got very emotional when talking to his friend on the phone and a sudden urge to call his sister Tiziana invaded him. He knew that all his bitterness for the Island shouldn't keep him apart from the people he loved. Tiziana was his only family and he promised himself he would give her a call later.

Chiara was going on about the good things that were happening to her when she stopped and took a long breath.

"One more thing..." she announced

"What?" Marcel said nonchalantly, simply enjoying the conversation.

"Sergio moved back. And he wants to know where you are."

Marcel's legs became weak to the weight of his own body. His heart was racing and his breathing became a little heavy. He froze for an instant while Chiara kept calling his name.

"Marcel, are you still there?"

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked with an upset stomach.

Chiara explained that Sergio had been stalking her and making inquiries about Marcel. She remembered how much her friend had suffered and was not willing to give anything away. But the boy was becoming outrageously insistent and she didn't know what to do.

"Thank God you called me because I had no idea what to say anymore. He keeps coming to me all the time and since I didn't have a way of contacting you, I kept lying."

"What does he want from me?"

"How should I know? Maybe you should call him. Can I tell him you're in Rome?"

“No, I’m not gonna call him and, no, you cannot tell him I’m here. Just tell him to go fuck himself...”

Marcel finished his conversation then and there. He promised Chiara he would call her more often and said he loved her very much. They said goodbye and he kept staring at the phone after hanging up. Sergio Costa was miles away and still seemed to be so close.

And Marcel thought the call hadn’t been such a good idea.

#

Two weeks after Zelia and Roberto returned from Nice, Zelia asked Marcel to meet her for coffee in a small café near Piazza Navona where she confided in him that after all that happened she had discovered that she was in love with someone else, although Roberto remained in her heart.

Marcel was confused about her story and felt uncomfortable to be the one to hear it. His friend Roberto was clearly in a relationship that was doomed for disaster and Marcel didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t interested in getting more details of that confession because the less he knew the better. The last thing he wanted was to be confronted by his friend when things got rough between the two.

Zelia didn’t seem to bother whether Marcel was interested or not in what she had to say. She just kept going on until he felt like he was getting too involved.

“Shouldn’t you be telling this to Roberto?”

“Why? I’m not even sure the person loves me back”, she said, looking down. “Now that my father is dead I feel like I need to think more about myself...”

*And does that include using people to get through life?* Marcel's mind was racing. He was suddenly upset that the woman in front of him had made him feel things he didn't even know he was capable of. He suddenly realized he was in love with her, although it didn't make sense. He knew he was gay and the short liaison he'd had in the past with Sergio had proved he was not only attracted to men but also true to himself. He believed in respect more than anything and because of that belief he had suffered so much. Most of the people he loved had abandoned him in one way or the other. And now he was being confronted with a new challenge where his past emotions were coming back to him in disarray.

Marcel felt like he didn't know the woman in front of him. He wondered what made Zelia behave in the way she was doing and felt sorry for Roberto. And then he thought that maybe he didn't really know her. The woman who disliked him in the beginning suddenly became his friend. And sooner than he expected she was telling him things that he'd rather not know. And what about the one she said she was in love with? Who could it be? As far as he was concerned Zelia hardly saw different people other than Roberto and himself. She had given up dancing right after her tour was over and all her friends had left for France. She hardly went out alone just because she wanted to spend most of the time with Roberto. And when she realized he was so busy, her relationship with Marcel started taking shape until they became close. So, who could it be that she suddenly fell in love with? Marcel's head was spinning.

So they had another cup and left the place. Whatever happened after that was none of Marcel's business. And he was glad to feel that way, although a pang of jealousy invaded him.

#

Three months later Paolo Ricci invited Marcel for lunch to break some terrible news: he had flunked the final exams and decided to go back home. Marcel was half way swallowing a piece of chicken that almost got stuck. He quickly washed it down with some water and looked outside the restaurant, deep in thoughts. As if trying to get rid of the feelings he was having for Zelia wasn't enough, now he would need to concentrate in another problem. He didn't know what to say. Paolo was very upset with the whole situation and refused to think it over.

"I'm done with this stupid city."

Marcel tried to understand what the city had to do with the boy's failure, but no good answer would come out of it. So he just shrugged:

"I'm very sorry..."

What else was he supposed to say? That he hated Paolo for pushing him into a possible financial *cul de sac*? He didn't have enough money to pay the rent alone and although his commission wasn't so bad, he couldn't count on it. He didn't like the idea of losing the apartment, either. He had been living there for almost a year and was used to the neighborhood. Finding another place was just a nightmare.

The idea of going back to Roberto's apartment wasn't an option he was willing to consider. Things had changed since he moved out and the situation was utterly different.

#

Next day was a Saturday and he met Roberto and Zelia for dinner. Zelia looked stunning in a pink jacket and black skirt. Her high heels enhanced her good posture, giving it a seductive touch. Marcel kissed her gently on the cheek and gave Roberto his usual friendly hug. Roberto was very talkative that evening although Marcel couldn't seem to pay attention to his stories. The conversation he'd had with Zelia a while ago still bothered him, but she behaved as if Roberto were the love of her life.

They drank champagne, they ate and they drank again. Life seemed more bearable after a couple of drinks and so they laughed throughout the evening and pushed it into the night. They went to Gilda, a very elegant and sophisticated club near Piazza di Spagna and Marcel danced his worries away until the early hours. He wasn't used to drinking and the alcohol took its toll on him. He was numb to the point of talking to anyone who crossed his way. Zelia laughed like a child and led him back to the dance floor where they held each other, moving to the rhythm of a romantic song. And then it happened, just like magic: they both stared into each other's eyes and while Roberto watched curiously from afar, they kissed passionately, without any squeamishness.

## NINE

Marcel woke up the next day with his first hangover. His head felt like it would explode and although eating was the last thing in his mind he thought it might be a good idea to put something in his stomach. So he prepared two slices of toast and washed them down with a cup of tea. He lay on the sofa and turned on the television on mute.

Paolo Ricci had decided to leave the apartment the following month which gave Marcel some time to think what he was going to do. He also had spoken to the landlord who agreed to change the contract to Marcel's name in case he wanted to stay, but that was something yet to be discussed.

Marcel thought about the night before and wondered what had gotten into him. Or was it Zelia? He retraced his steps on his mind and tried to remember exactly what happened. He had never been under the influence before because alcohol made him uncomfortable due to his father's drinking problem. On the other hand he saw no reason for



not relaxing after a hard day's work and the presence of the two only friends he had in Rome proved to be a good excuse for a little celebration on the edge. And so he gave in to the temptation and exquisite taste of the *Moët & Chandon* Roberto had ordered.

He didn't remember who started the kissing, but that was not important. He was more worried trying to remember where Roberto might have been at that moment. What would he say in case he had seen the two of them on the dance floor? And what about Zelia? What would she be thinking?

#

Zelia was actually feeling slightly uncomfortable. Not because she regretted her actions but for the reason that she was still seeing Roberto on a steady basis. The man apparently believed in her and their relationship was almost going to the next level. But at that very moment she had her head on top of Roberto's six-pack, trying to think a way out of that situation. She remembered being the one who started the whole thing, maybe taking advantage of the fact that Marcel was a little drunk. He looked so handsome and full of life with a childish smile on his face, moving graciously to the music. She didn't hesitate since she was under the influence, too. And then she wondered whether Roberto had seen them.

Roberto just lay there, stroking her hair with one hand and holding a cigarette with the other. He had been drinking as well, but not that much. He knew exactly what he saw: a flamboyant faggot that happened to be his friend French-kissing his girlfriend. And she definitely let him kiss her because there were no signs of resistance. But the thing that

bothered him most was the question whether or not they both knew that he was watching them. It was hard for him to believe that everything happened by mistake. And yet, he wished he wasn't so damn jealous.

#

Two days later Marcel showed up at Roberto's apartment to finally inform them of Paolo Ricci's decision to go back home. Roberto was no longer interested in Marcel's private life, although in the beginning he almost believed that his pseudo friend had no recollection of what happened at the club. But the fact that Zelia never mentioned the kiss made him think they were both playing a trick on him. He had seen Zelia drunk before and she always seemed to remember everything that she did under the influence. That was definitely a sticky subject and unless he had the courage to tackle it, he would never know the truth.

Zelia listened silently to Marcel's short story about the apartment and when he was finished she stood up and approached him. She took his hands in hers and said in a very welcoming way:

"Don't worry about that, Marcel. You can stay at my place as long as you wish. Besides, I am always here at Roberto's."

Roberto pursed his lips. He didn't say a word, but Marcel could understand his behaviour completely. Something was not right and Marcel sensed the tension in the room. Zelia suddenly seemed very comfortable with the situation, but something was definitely wrong. So he did what seemed to be the right thing to do. He stood up and forced a smile.

“That’s ok, Zelia, you don’t have to do that.”

“But I insist.” And she turned to Roberto. “Honey, please tell him he should take the apartment. Don’t you think it’s a great idea?”

Roberto looked at both of them standing in the middle of the room. His mind was racing, trying to understand what was happening. Would Zelia be doing that on purpose so she could stay close to Marcel? Would Marcel be playing the victim so to turn the situation in his favour? There were so many questions and not enough answers to convince him that he was not being framed.

“Marcel should do what he’d think is best for him.” He said coldly.

Marcel’s lips twitched. It was clear to him that Roberto knew what happened in the club. As for Zelia, she didn’t seem to care. She was probably upset that her plans, whatever they were, weren’t working as supposed to. He prayed that she would stop insisting so he could get out of there as soon as possible. He had stained his friendship forever because of something he still couldn’t understand.

He left the apartment feeling worse than ever. He wandered the streets in a trance, looking for signs of a reasonable solution. He no longer worried about the apartment. He worried about Roberto Puginni, a long time companion who once became a friend, giving him the opportunity to change his life. And all he had gotten back was a slap in the face.

Marcel Guzman felt ashamed. His mind went back to Bagheria; back to when he was a good friend and not a filthy lover. He thought back at his behaviour after he and Sergio had sex for the first and only time. He became possessive and Sergio probably felt insecure around him. No wonder the boy started avoiding his presence, unaware

of the fact that the more distant he became, the more desperate Marcel behaved, trying to save what he had so long desired and apparently conquered. His jealousy was overwhelming and he realized that he was being jealous again. He had lost Sergio and he was about to lose Roberto because of a strange attraction he couldn't control. Zelia was the only woman in his life he had ever kissed and his curiosity didn't stop there. He suddenly hated Roberto for not supporting him in the decision of taking her apartment. Of course things would be easier for them, but Roberto was no fool. He sensed something was wrong and Zelia could sense it too, although she didn't seem to care.

Her exuberance was intoxicating and the moment she held his hands in the room he felt safe, as if she were his rescuer. Roberto would never mention the kiss because that would make it easier to explain it. He would probably play the psychological game with them until they finally gave in. And how long could Marcel keep a cool head? He didn't have much time to think. The clock was ticking and he was running out of time. Paolo Ricci would be leaving soon and unless Marcel had decided what to do with his life, things would only get worse.

He remembered his favourite place at the end of Via Corso Butera and wished he could be whisked away for a while so he could sit there and keep his eyes closed, trying to see the life he had always imagined for himself. But the image was no longer there. He had always felt the strong arms of a handsome man hugging him and saying everything was going to be all right. But now, the only image that came to him was that of Zelia in a beautiful nightgown, waiting for him at the end of a flowered field, throwing her arms around him and saying *What the hell were you thinking?*

And so he thought.

*Yes, what the hell was I thinking?*

## TEN

Marcel wished he could talk to someone. Ironically Roberto would be the first one closer enough to listen to him and that wasn't an option. Zelia would come in second, but that wasn't an option either because it involved her directly. So the last person he could turn to was Paolo, before the boy headed home.

They had grown a bit closer the last months they spent together but Marcel didn't know how to broach the subject he needed to discuss. He was afraid Paolo would make fun of him, although he'd been used to that kind of abuse. But most of all, he was ashamed to admit he was having all those feelings because he couldn't understand them. Years ago he would just suffocate them in the pillow and pray that next day they'd be gone. But now things had changed. He couldn't keep it a secret any longer.

He remembered Chiara and missed her terribly. She was the kind of girl who would listen to everything he had to say without asking any questions, although it had taken a

long time for him to get the courage to confide in her. He thought of giving her a call again and decided not to do it because Sergio's image suddenly came back to him. Chiara had been very clear about Sergio's insistency in knowing his whereabouts and that confrontation was the last thing Marcel wanted to deal with. So he followed his heart and made up his mind about considering Paolo as his only alternative.

They started talking about their day and Paolo seemed very cheerful. He was no longer upset about school and going back home after such a long time brought him certain excitement. He mentioned that he had learned a lot after living in Rome and was ready to face his greatest fear: to open his heart to the man he'd always had a crush on, back in Genova.

If Marcel had second thoughts about ventilating, that conversation made it clear now that Paolo was not exactly the person he should be talking to. But he had no other choice and before it got worse, he broke the news:

"I'm in love with someone."

"That is so cool!" Paolo was genuinely interested. "Who is the lucky hunk?"

Marcel was suddenly thrown back in Bagheria, talking to Principessa who immediately had spotted his gayness. His heart was racing and what had been just a get-away situation in the past was now his passport to desperation. It was a one-way highway and unless he was willing to turn back and be hit violently by his own destiny, he should keep on going.

"I don't know how to say this and I don't have a good answer why this is happening to me. And I'm freaking out."

Paolo looked at him seriously and defensive.

“You’re not in love with me, are you?”

Marcel smiled, relieved for one second.

“Believe me, I’d rather be in love with you. Things would have been easier.”

Paolo was still looking at him.

“No, they wouldn’t. You’re a nice guy, but you’re not my type. You’re too... feminine, sorry!”

Marcel blushed every time someone mentioned his effeminacy. It had always been a motive for jokes and although Paolo didn’t mean it that way, Marcel felt slightly hurt.

He was trying to choose his words so he wouldn’t choke on them. How was he supposed to tell a gay guy he was in love with a woman when it was very clear that he was gay too? Riddles had never been his favorite game, but his life was suddenly throwing him a very difficult one.

“You’re sure it isn’t me?” Paolo was getting anxious, somehow disappointed in Marcel’s lack of interest or good taste.

“No, don’t worry. And believe me, you’re kinda cute, but not my type, either.” And suddenly Marcel felt more relaxed. He thought about his life and the opportunities he’d had of speaking openly about his feelings. Not many, he supposed. Sergio and Chiara had actually been the only ones he had once confided in. So he took pride in himself for being once brave and opened his heart, taking comfort in the thought that he would probably never see Paolo Ricci again.

“I am in love with Zelia Lambert. Can you believe it?”

Paolo was looking at him, confused. He knew very well who Zelia was and took it as a joke, although Marcel sounded serious.



"I don't think I heard you."

"Yes, you heard me loud and clear. I'm in love with a woman. And as if that wasn't enough, she happens to be my best friend's girlfriend. I don't know what to do."

"Does Roberto know about it?"

"Is *that* what you're worried about? I said I'm in love with a *woman*. And I thought I was gay..."

Paolo walked around the room.

"So did I. And apparently a very confused one." And then he sat next to Marcel. "This is serious, Marcel. Are you sure you're not just going through a bad moment?"

"Well, yes, *I* am going through a bad moment: you're leaving the apartment and I'll probably have no place to stay cause I can't afford the rent on my own. Zelia has offered me to stay in her place, but I can't accept that either because Roberto is acting strange since we kissed in the club."

"You kissed Roberto?" Paolo was surprised.

"No, I kissed Zelia. Or she kissed me, I don't remember. The point is, I think Roberto saw us together and our friendship has gone sour. He's a bit cold and I don't know what to do."

"Have you spoken to Zelia about this?"

"No, I haven't. But I'll have to, although I think she'll laugh to my face. How could she believe that I, the dancing drunk queen, am in love with her? Besides, she already told me she's in love with someone else."

"What do you mean?"

Marcel smiled and sat next to him. He explained the encounter he'd had with Zelia sometime ago when she revealed she no longer had feelings for Roberto. Paolo just listened in silence while Marcel wriggled in his misery.

“Please tell me this is just a bad dream... I am so fucked up! What the hell is going on with me?”

Paolo grinned and pulled him closer. He didn't know what to answer. He wrinkled his nose and thought that that was the craziest thing he had ever heard and prayed silently that he never found himself in such a ridiculous situation.

## ELEVEN

The next day Marcel went to work but didn't stay long. He couldn't keep his mind focused on what he was doing and so he took the rest of the day off. He didn't feel relieved after talking to Paolo Ricci because no good solution had come out of it. He knew he had to talk to Zelia as soon as possible and get it over with. But the fear of embarrassment was too much to bear, especially if she regarded it all as a silly joke and shared it with Roberto later.

He wandered the streets of Rome, dodging the numerous tourists in bewilderment with their cameras flashing incessantly. *It is a beautiful and interesting city*, he thought, but not enough to fill the void he was feeling.

Marcel stopped at Trevi Fountain and sat nearby, watching as the people deposited their coins in the water, wondering what their wishes were. He, as far as he knew,

had only one: to be with Zelia Lambert far away from that entire crowd.

#

Roberto Puginni never thought he would feel so much anger towards Marcel Guzman. At least not the kind he would feel towards another man for stealing his girlfriend. And that was one of the things that bothered him. He knew that Marcel was secretly gay, although they'd never had the chance to talk about it. But how could he deny it? Marcel was a flamboyant homosexual who could be easily spotted in a crowd and the thought of Zelia falling for him was nothing but a cruel joke. Of course he wasn't sure of Zelia's feelings because he didn't have the courage to confront her. She would probably deny the whole thing, saying that Marcel was drunk and unaware of what he was doing.

Whatever excuses he thought of, nothing seemed to cheer him up. He was definitely against the idea of having Marcel live in Zelia's apartment and he had made sure she knew exactly how he felt about it. He didn't mention that the reason was his fear of getting the two close together, but Zelia was not stupid and sensed a twinge of jealousy right away. She didn't oppose to Roberto's decision and didn't get to see Marcel for two whole weeks.

#

On a Sunday night Marcel went alone to the cinema to watch a new movie called *The Adventures of Pricilla, Queen of the Desert*. It was a beautiful comedy/drama that made Marcel laugh and cry, thinking about the choices he had made in his life so far. The few friends he had made in

Bagheria, the love of his considerate mother and the hatred of the strangers in the streets; the overwhelming and obsessive passion he felt for Sergio Costa and the one and only chance of tasting the forbidden; the disappointment of being betrayed even though there had never been a change of vows; the loss of one of the most important persons in his life and the pain of knowing that the other might still be living, but remained unreachable. He thought of the times he spent locked in his room trying to understand all the confusing feelings he constantly had. And he wanted to run away like he used to do in the beginning, not knowing that he was just prolonging his sufferings. And finally life had thrown him another chance of making something he might be proud of; something he wouldn't be ashamed of remembering when he grew old and wrinkled; something he might want to share with others without any fear or shame because as far as he could remember, his life in Bagheria had been locked in a chest which he refused to open in front of strangers. He wanted to start life again and forget his past, but somehow he had mixed everything on the way making it difficult to separate.

Marcel Guzman suddenly realized that he would never be able to live a fulfilling future without dragging the past in his pocket. It was like an emotional return ticket to everything he had experienced before and no matter how hurtful it felt, he knew that his happiness depended on his being true to himself. No need to dwell in the past as long as he kept his mind in the future. The past would be his foundation and no matter what people said, he would keep marching in search of his happiness. Zelia had happened in his life and he was determined to find out the meaning of her presence. He was no longer sure whether his love for her was physical or not. How could he? He'd never given

himself the chance to experience it because he feared he would be betraying his nature. He believed he was gay because he felt attracted to men, but Zelia was special. There was something about her that he couldn't put his finger on and the more he thought about it, the more he felt like putting his desires to the test. He was feeling that the whole thing was not about sex: it was all about the person.

He sat in a small café near Piazza del Popolo when he heard a familiar voice asking for a pack of cigarettes. He turned to look and saw Zelia standing near the bar.

"I didn't know you were a smoker..." Marcel tried to sound casual.

Zelia turned her head and gave him a big smile.

"Well, if it isn't the good old boy! It's great to see you. What are you doing here at this time?" She approached him and pulled up a chair.

"Thinking about my life... And I assure you, it ain't that good."

"What happened? It's been more than two weeks? Where have you been?"

Marcel reflected for a while and realized that he'd been working and nothing else. He explained he didn't look for her and neither Roberto because he needed to be alone to organize his thoughts. He also mentioned that Roberto seemed a little strange during their last conversation and although Zelia didn't seem like she wanted to talk about it, he went on.

"Why would he be upset?" He knew exactly why Roberto was displeased, but he needed to hear it from Zelia. She had probably discussed the whole thing after he left the apartment on that crucial day and he needed to know the outcome of it.

What he didn't know was that Zelia was also avoiding the subject as much as she could and Roberto was no way near bringing it up. In fact all three of them were in pure denial. And how long could Marcel tolerate that situation? He was surprised to find out that his patience had run out at that very moment.

"Who kissed who, Zelia? I've been trying to remember but I can't. And I'm sure Roberto saw us doing it. You gotta help me here."

Zelia blushed and lit a cigarette. She knew that conversation would come up sooner or later.

"We both did." She lied.

"Why? I mean, it was nice, but why did we do it? Especially you, I thought you were in love with Roberto. And besides I'm... you know..." Marcel couldn't say it. He felt suddenly embarrassed.

"You're what, Marcel? Gay?" She took another drag and looked annoyed. "So what? You still have a *dick* and I'm sure it works fine. You got hard in the club, just so you know."

Marcel didn't understand Zelia's behavior. She was so beautiful and so untamed. And he couldn't read her ever since the day she had confessed to be in love with someone else. He wondered now if that person would be him and he felt the air slowly escape his lungs.

"Do you love Roberto?" he asked.

Zelia put out the other half of the cigarette.

"Why does it matter to you?"

"Roberto is my *friend*. And I think that if you're in love with someone else you should leave him alone. You're just hurting him."

Zelia stood up and looked him straight in the eye.

“I can’t. I’ve just accepted his proposal.” And as she reached the door, she said: “I do love him, Marcel. But something unexpected happened and I don’t think I can deal with it. I think we shouldn’t see each other anymore.”

Marcel sat there in a wave of confusion. Zelia had unexpectedly left his life without any explanation. Something happened to her and he would never know what it was because he had the guts to start a conversation that she was probably willing to forget for the sake of her fake relationship. She was in love with him and he could feel it. But she couldn’t deal with it because he was not the man for her. He felt the anger inside pushing up the tears he had so long kept for himself. He wanted to scream and ask her forgiveness for being such an idiot. Why did he have to push her into a corner like a stray cat, forcing her to make the wrong decision? He was sure she was not thinking right because he could feel the love in her eyes, although she tried to hide it at all costs.

Marcel left the café and walked straight home. He could feel the tears rolling down his face. His heart had become a little smaller in the last hour and a sense of despair took over him. Zelia was getting married and he would never see her smile again.

#

The next few days were very difficult for Marcel Guzman. Paolo finished packing and one morning he saw himself hugging the man that had been one of his best roommates. They had spent some quality time together and both would miss those moments. Marcel took him to the airport and although there weren’t any tears when saying



goodbye, they were both sure that they would never see each other again.

Marcel had promised himself that no matter what happened from then on he would never go back to Bagheria. There was nothing left from the mediocre life he had once lived there and as long as he felt some hope of better life waiting to be discovered he was sure to keep on going.

During the course of a month Marcel decided to set things in motion again. He resigned from his job, realizing that whatever life had in store for him, was not to be found in Rome. He missed Zelia but she had gone from his life for good, refusing to give any explanation. And so was Roberto, his once best friend. He couldn't believe how things had turned out. He asked himself where things started to go wrong and wondered if there had been any possibility of setting things straight that he might have missed along the way. But everything seemed clear: he had screwed everything up.

Marcel delivered the keys to the apartment three days after resigning. He didn't see any reason for prolonging his stay in Rome since the possibilities had been closed around him. For one brief moment he felt like he was running again from his problems like he used to do back in Bagheria. And then he remembered what Forrest Gump had said about life being like a box of chocolate, though realizing that sometimes he did know what he was going to get. But he got it anyway. He probably knew where everything was going to lead, but the longing was stronger than him. And so he thought he shouldn't blame himself for all the things that had gone wrong in his life. He had some pleasure after all. Nothing lasts forever and there was no point in dueling on matters that had a short life span. Love was one of them and as far as he was concerned, he should

enjoy every single moment without expecting too much. That was what happened with Sergio. Marcel couldn't deny the fact that such a short relationship had meant so much to him. Why couldn't he remember the good moments he'd had and stop battling on the things he should have done differently in order to save his affair? It suddenly dawned on him that maybe it wasn't supposed to last. And so was the same with Zelia and Roberto.

Marcel felt alone, but curiously strong enough to continue his journey in search of the only thing he'd been looking for all those years: the chance to love and be loved. But now he was willing to see his life with different eyes. He felt suddenly relieved and happy, although he couldn't deny the pain of loss still remained deep inside. He would learn later that pain and pleasure walked together, for there wasn't one without the other. And if that was the price to pay, he was more than willing to make his bid. After all, he realized he would never trade those memories for anything in the world. Once his, they became priceless and the only way to gain more was keeping his head up high and walking forward.

## TWELVE

Three years later Marcel Guzman was standing in front of his living room window looking at the Eiffel Tower while sipping a glass of champagne. He couldn't help but wonder how life was full of surprises.

Although France didn't seem like a good idea at first, Marcel considered it a different approach in dealing with his fears. He had flown Bagheria once believing that luck would welcome him anywhere that didn't remind him of the life he had lived before. But reality proved him wrong, showing that his happiness did not depend on the place he was, but on the way he looked for it. And though Zelia had been the last person he had fallen in love with, he supposed he should take her memory with him instead of turning her into a bad experience. So he embraced France as his newfound retreat.

Learning the language was quite an adventure and he was surprised by how fast he managed to master it. Soon he could express himself and understand everyone that walked up to him. He tried to be a little more open, making friends with his colleagues at school and even finding a job as a cook assistant, like he did when he was younger.

The French seemed a little friendlier than his compatriots and Marcel found himself at home from the very first time. He took his language course seriously and in a matter of months he was getting compliments from everyone he conversed with. He shared a room with a heterosexual psychology student called Sebastien who didn't seem to have a problem with the fact that Marcel was gay. They didn't have anything in common and Marcel was very surprised when Sebastien invited him for a party in celebration of a friend's wedding.

Marcel thought of saying no at first, but later remembered his own promise of never letting an opportunity go by again. So he accepted the invitation happily and the two of them rented a tuxedo in order to be presentable.

That was the evening when Marcel met Jean-Pierre Biagi, an extremely handsome young man who happened to be at the party drinking a non-alcoholic cocktail, all alone in one corner of the room. His father was a wealthy man who owned a couple of clothing stores around the city and Jean-Pierre was an aspiring young designer.

Marcel was stunned by his beauty and Jean-Pierre didn't hesitate in making conversation right away. They both spent the evening talking as if they knew each other for a long time. And they soon changed telephone numbers, becoming inseparable.

They fell in love with each other in no time and moved in together. Marcel left the restaurant and became a window dresser in one of the shops, causing great impression on Jean-Pierre's father. And one year later Marcel took over the management, gaining a place in the happy family.

Jean-Pierre's promising career skyrocketed suddenly after one of the fashion weeks and invitations came from all parts of Europe. Marcel's life was unexpectedly filled with appointments for parties and fashion shows where he proudly accompanied his beloved Jean-Pierre. Nothing could make him happier and Marcel thanked his mother in silence for making him a strong and persistent human being. He missed her so much and would give anything in the world to see the satisfied look on her face saying that he had made it in the end.

Marcel Guzman took another sip of his champagne and smiled. Three years had passed and his life had changed completely. He was still very much in love with Jean-Pierre and couldn't imagine his future life without him. Marcel was happy to finally realize that everything he had been through had a meaning after all. He felt more self confident than before and his thoughts of never seeing Bagheria again had changed a bit. They traveled quite a lot together throughout Europe and their new apartment facing the Eiffel Tower was just like a dream. What else could he ever want? He had a man who loved him, a professional status and a life that many would envy.

Chiara Mancini had written to Marcel saying she was coming to Paris for the very first time. She was dating a gorgeous lawyer and everything led to the idea of marriage. She mentioned that Paris had been his birthday gift to her, but she sensed he was about to propose. So Marcel insisted

they stay with them since the apartment was spacious enough and very well located.

“Your sister wants to know when you’re coming to visit her. I think you should.” Chiara sounded a little mysterious, though determined to not spill any other detail.

Marcel thought about Sergio and the possibility of running into him by mistake. Bagheria was a very small place and the odds of seeing his first love were very high. And he didn’t enjoy the idea very much. But nothing bad could come out of such an unpleasant encounter. Marcel was sure that triumph was the only feeling he would ever have.

Jean-Pierre would stay behind because his agenda was full for the rest of the year and a vacation didn’t have a place on it. Besides, Marcel thought it might be a good idea to be with his only family without the need for translation.

#

Bagheria hadn’t changed much since the day Marcel left, almost five years ago. He still recognized some neighbors who came gladly to bid him a homecoming. The house was just the same, although Tiziana had made sure everything looked spotless. She was so happy with his arrival that Marcel could hardly recognize her. He remembered the bad relationship they had with each other before his mother died and how they grew closer every step of the way. He came to love her as the sister he always wanted to have and even her husband seemed more respectful.

They were planning to have a baby, although pregnancy seemed to be a little challenge for her.

“But we’ll keep on trying...”

They talked freely about everything, but Marcel never seemed to mention Jean-Pierre as being his boyfriend. He always referred to the designer as his working partner in order to avoid any uncomfortable feelings. He realized he wasn't ashamed of being openly gay, but the idea of bringing his simple-minded sister and husband into the subject of homosexuality wasn't such a good idea. He was happy the way he was and there was no need to bother Tiziana with things she never seemed to be willing to understand. So they laughed and drank and ate.

Marcel spent just one week in Bagheria, which seemed to be forever. He realized that the only reason that had brought him back was to see his sister. He promised he would do that whenever work allowed and she was more than happy. He gave her some financial help, which made him feel proud of himself. But it was on the last day before he left that Tiziana called him aside to share the secret Chiara seemed to be hiding when she visited him in Paris.

"It's about our father..." Tiziana was twisting her fingers in a kind of sad way.

Marcel felt the air leaving his lungs and suddenly breathing seemed a little difficult. His heart pounded a little faster and he felt his legs falter.

The idea of his father was not very appealing. At the same time, he couldn't believe that the man was still a part of his life. He had been responsible for Mrs. Guzman's fading health that led to her death and the unhappiness of a young boy who never sought comfort in his father because the man had never been present. Years passed without any signs of him being alive and Marcel felt like he had been fatherless all of his life.

“What about him? I thought he was dead or something.” Marcel said coldly, although his voice trembled a bit.

Tiziana looked at him with sad eyes.

“He’s in the hospital. He’s been there for two months and the doctors don’t have any hope. He’s got cancer, Marcel. And he’s asking for you. He talks about you all the time”

Marcel’s eyes welled up and he couldn’t keep a straight face. He bit his lips, but the tears rolled down without any resistance. Tiziana hugged him tightly and cried too.

Life was full of surprises. And Marcel wished Jean-Pierre were there with him. His father wanted to see him before he died and Marcel wondered why. He was not ready for any reconciliation. He believed he hated his father but the tears on his face contradicted his thoughts. There was emotion there and no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t deny that the man was still his blood. Marcel wondered if the man could talk or at least recognize him. Images of his dying mother flashed in front of him and he couldn’t bear the pain. He cried alone in the bedroom because he needed to grieve. The man was not gone yet, but he knew it was just a matter of time.

There was so much Marcel wanted to say to his father, but didn’t know if that was the right moment. He would never be able to say how much he hated being an unwanted kid just because he was different; how much he missed his old man’s companionship when every other boy at school seemed to have the perfect father. And so he thought of Sergio and missed him too. He had been almost as fatherless as Marcel and for the first time after being back in Bagheria, Marcel felt the need to see his first love.



They met at a café downtown and shook hands like barely acquainted.

“So, how are things? I was done looking for you. Chiara didn’t seem to be of much help.” Sergio sipped his beer slowly, while gazing into Marcel’s eyes.

Marcel looked back at him.

“She’s my best friend. And she probably knew what was good for me.”

“Look, Marcel, I’m sorry about the whole thing . . .”

Marcel interrupted him.

“Please, Sergio, I’m not here to talk about us. That was a long time ago, I’m fine now. I have a great boyfriend who loves me for what I am. But things happen for a reason and I believe you found your way as well as I have found mine. I’m happy, I really am.”

“Well, I still think about you.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. I moved on and so should you. Grab life by its balls and stop thinking about things that you should have done in the past because it’s never coming back.” He stopped for a moment. “How’s your father, by the way?”

Sergio seemed annoyed.

“Did you call me here to talk about my father? What is this, family reunion?”, he said with certain sarcasm.

“My father is dying, Sergio. And I feel like this is my last chance of ever getting to look into his eyes and say everything I ever wanted to say. But I am not sure I can do it.”

“And what does my father have to do with this?”, Sergio said coldly.

Marcel had felt like Sergio was the only person who could relate to what he was feeling and a sense of loss came over him. Sergio was not that person anymore. They both

felt like strangers to each other and whatever Marcel had in his mind, he decided to leave it there. He stood up and threw some coins on the table.”

“Never mind. It was good seeing you, though.”

Marcel left the café without looking back. Sergio sat there, looking at the coins on the table as a sign of a friendship that had died forever.

Marcel went to see his father at the hospital. He knew it was the right thing to do and although unsure of what he could say, he remembered he might never have another chance.

Mr. Guzman looked pale and fragile. He seemed to be asleep and Marcel just sat there looking at the man who once had been so strong willed and sometimes violent. *How things change when you're taken by a fatal disease, leaving you lifeless and dependent, regardless of the strength you used to have*, Marcel thought by himself. He also felt sorry for the man lying in front of him. There was still love in his heart and he realized it wouldn't make any difference to say how unhappy he felt for not having a father when he needed him most; how deprived of love and attention he had felt throughout his adolescence, hanging only from the endless affection his mother filled him with. She had been an angel who had been taken too soon. And now, when he thought that the reason of his unhappiness had given him the chance to rebel, his heart couldn't allow him to utter a single word of unkindness because he knew that, no matter how much the man had faltered, Marcel still hung from the last remnants of parental guidance. And after he was gone, there would be no turning back. He would be an official orphan.

Marcel ran his finger through his father's hair and smiled.

“Where did you go, father? We missed you so much. We never understood why you did all the things you did, but you must have had some reasons. I don’t wanna judge you because who am I to judge? I just wish I had known you better. I wish you had known me better too so we could have had the chance to laugh at the same jokes and do something nice together. And now you’re here, all alone, probably in another place. I just want you to know that I am glad to be here with you. I hated you so many times, but I guess all children do that sometimes. We all think we know everything and the parents are just like principals punishing us because we’re breaking the rules. Maybe we *do* wanna be punished. Maybe it’s our way of getting the attention. But with you it was different. I never got your attention, no matter what I did. You just ignored me and I always had the hope that one day you would come into my room and say that everything was just a joke. We would then laugh and make another one. But that never happened, did it?”

“Well, here we are. I don’t know if you can hear me, but I just wanna say that I do love you. I never stopped loving you, even when you hated me. I guess you made me strong in some sort of way and I’m thankful for that. I guess we’ll never see each other again, but you will always be in my thoughts.”

Marcel brushed away his tears and stood up, kissing his father’s forehead. And as he turned to leave, Mr. Guzman opened his eyes, slowly moving his lips.

“I never... hated you, son!”

Marcel’s heart skipped a bit and his tears came back stronger than ever. He looked at his father and bit his lips.

“I never... hated you!” Mr. Guzman repeated. “I hated myself... for not having the strength... to love you as you... should be loved.”

Marcel took his father's hand and smiled.

"Where you listening to me?"

"Parts of it..."

"I'm sorry, father. I didn't mean to..."

"Please, Marcel. Don't be silly. I'm the one. . . who should apologize. You were always... a great son. I wasn't.... much of a father. I love you! I've always loved you. And forgive me!"

Marcel couldn't hold back his tears. That was the saddest and happiest day of his whole ironic life. He felt like his hatred towards the life he'd always been willing to forget had been finally broken. There were no reasons left to blame the city from reminding him of his lousy past. He had come into terms with himself and although his father would not be present in his future life, Marcel felt as if a new beginning was just around the corner.

#

Mr. Guzman passed away three days after Marcel's visit. Tiziana sent him a card and made him promise he would come visit her as often as he could. Marcel would grieve for quite sometime. His last moments with his father had been very special to him and Jean-Pierre made sure he was there whenever he needed support.

Chiara got married six months later and spent her honeymoon in the Bahamas. Her parents were still together and apparently happy. Tiziana finally got pregnant and Marcel promised to be there for the birth of the baby. He was proud to be an uncle.

#

Six months later Marcel Guzman and Jean-Pierre Biagi attended an after party celebration to a very successful musical that was supposed to take Paris by a storm.

The place was full of beautiful people and at one moment Jean-Pierre pulled Marcel by the hand and took him to the dance floor against his will.

“No, I can’t dance, sweetie. Don’t...”

They both laughed and kissed when a soft and familiar voice interrupted them.

“Isn’t this place amazing? Could I get you some champagne?” the woman said with a smile.

Marcel’s lips twitched. Zelia Lambert was standing in front of him, more beautiful than ever. Jean-Pierre smiled back, looking at the two of them.

“Do you guys know each other?”

Marcel finally nodded.

“Yes, we do. It’s a very long story...”

“So we should celebrate”, said Jean-Pierre in a very good mood. I’ll get the champagne.”

Marcel stopped him.

“Not for me, honey. Not for me...”