



A Romance in Bellagio

by Marty Sturino

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--from Chapter 2 The Reunion

Contents

Chapter	Title	Page
1.	<u>The Admirals Club - Chicago</u>	4
2.	<u>Boarding Call</u>	5
3.	<u>Street Lights</u>	6
4.	<u>The Reunion</u>	6
5.	<u>Dinner and Drinks</u>	8
6.	<u>An Unexpected Call</u>	9
7.	<u>Breakfast</u>	9
8.	<u>Lake Como</u>	10
9.	<u>A Confession</u>	12

One:

The Admirals Club - Chicago

John and Joy were long time friends. They worked for the same firm, but never in the same office, or even on assignment together. John only wished it were so. How he would love to have her to himself for just one night away from the office. Ironically, in a few hours, they would each be heading to opposite continents. Only chance and their airline schedules brought them together here in the Admirals frequent-flyer lounge. The conversation was typical of colleagues and Joy was describing a new piece of software she was trying out. "I'm getting stuck half way through the install" she said. "*I'd like to do that!*", thought John who was immediately ashamed of the vulgarity of his thought. "But isn't getting stuck half the fun?" he replied. They laughed together. "*All right! Some banter*" thought John.

Of all the women he knew, Joy was one that lit his flame. She was attractive, intelligent, charming and witty ...everything he desired in a woman. He had never asked her out or made an advance. Somehow, she seemed out of his league. There was rumor of some guy in her life, and she had always been just aloof enough to keep him and others at a distance. "*Besides, she is intimidating enough over dinner,*" thought John... "*I can only imagine what a relationship or sex would be like with her.*" Joy seemed equally pleased with their chance meeting, and the two talked animatedly and laughed easily at each other's light humor. As she spoke, John was doing his best to absorb and savor the moment. "*She really is something,*" he thought to himself.

They crossed paths because of work occasionally, and had even shared a dinner table once while attending a business meeting in the past, which John now recalled fondly, but theirs was a corporate relationship. This evening, he was en-route from a morning sales meeting in Atlanta to Milan and Joy was heading for Tokyo after completing a few days of client service work in New York. Both lived in the Chicago area, but because of their flight connections neither had time to get home or into the Chicago office. His Admin, Sylvia who managed his travel reservations suggested that he use the Club facilities. While watching and listening to Joy as she ordered dinner he wished that tonight would be different. He regretted the fact that they would soon be heading to opposite continents.

Joy was following the company's unwritten rules of engagement and keeping the discussion casual. Talk of politics or religion was taboo. Any reference to personal life or family was always positive and focused on accomplishments and the high quality of the family life. "*Everything is wonderful and life is beautiful*" "*Even the musicians are beautiful!*"... John's mind drifted to a scene from the musical Cabaret and he pictured the female trombone player in sequined dance costume, black fishnet stockings and derby cap winking at the audience. John often did that... mixed the event at hand with his private thoughts, memories of the past, or scenes from movies or shows. He needed the intellectual stimulation even if he had to supply it himself. "*Walter Mitty has nothing on me,*" he said silently. Just then, Joy stood and walked to the beverage counter for a glass of water, while John did his best to memorize her figure and walk.

A Romance in Bellagio

Joy was recounting her trip to New York and the fact that the client had been given two presentation decks with data that didn't agree. "Can you imagine what I'm up against?" asked Joy. "...*wish it was me.*" "Well, I can only imagine" he replied. Joy was now ready for desert. "Would you like some?" she asked, while lifting and extending her left hand to point towards the tray of sweets. He blurted, "You bet I would" while his thoughts were of holding her in his arms. Joy laughed at his response, and seemed pleased. "*I'd better be careful here,*" thought John. "*I might get myself fired!*" He couldn't help but play this risky game of hers. He thought that she was verbally baiting him, so all he had to do was fill in the blanks, or twist the phrase just a little to change its meaning. They both could be quick with words, and their game of wits drew him to her. "*These are exquisite little fantasies that she is orchestrating,*" he thought... "*I love it!*"

Two:

Boarding Call

They looked at each other for a long while without speaking while a woman's voice over the intercom announced the flights departing in the next 30 minutes. "American Airlines flight 106 to Tokyo Narita now boarding all passengers Gate 6"... "That would be mine said Joy. "And ladies and gentlemen, American Airlines flight 603 to Milan Malpenza is now boarding at Gate 10. "And that would be mine repeated John" "Time to go already?" she showed her disappointment by extending her bottom lip ever so provocatively. John was now seriously thinking of asking her for a date when they got back, in spite of the fact that if his secret job-search in Milan was successful, it might be a long time off, when Joy spoke up. "Well, I enjoyed that chocolate cake, how about you?" She was being cheerful to the end "*How does she stay so upbeat?*" John asked himself. The two parted company with few words. He reached out his hand, held hers in a cordial handshake, and looked into her eyes as he spoke. "Be safe," said John softly. "Be a Success!" said Joy brightly. With that, she turned her head slightly to the side to offer her cheek. John held his grasp and now extended his left hand to her back to pull her ever so softly to him. He gave her an innocent peck on the cheek, while savoring the closeness to her face and inhaling her breadth. "Let's stay in touch. "Email me and we will set something up" They then turned away from each other towards their respective departure gates. "Sayonara!" "Ciao."

Three:

Street Lights

It was after ten the following Thursday evening when John walked out onto the balcony of his hotel in Bellagio for a cigar. He had been working on a business plan throughout the day that he would be presenting tomorrow, and he needed the break. The cigar was his reward for shutting himself indoors and putting his proposal together instead of going down to Lake Como or the hotel's pool for a swim, as he would have liked. The evening was cool, and fewer moths than usual were drawn to the single light illuminating the parking lot. Only two bats were working it tonight. Earlier, in the warm summer nights the same light brought on a feeding frenzy of moths, insects and bats. Tonight there were only enough morsels for two bats. They carefully timed their sorties to allow sufficient time for enough insects to gather, then one would swoop and grab the largest moth or insect, scattering the prey for a few seconds, then as the insects returned, the other would swoop in for another catch. John wondered if the bats knew of their clever strategy, or if he was giving them more credit than they deserved. In any event, they were efficient.

Turning away from the parking area towards the street side of the hotel, he was immediately aware of the stars! The road outside of the hotel was as dark as pitch! Now it made sense! The streetlights that had been on through the daylight hours were now off, and the cars making their way up the mountain did so without benefit of the yellow glow from the lights that should have been illuminating their way! *"Doesn't anybody notice these things? Doesn't somebody that works for the utility, or knows somebody there call in and tell them that the damn lights are out of sync? Apparently not! But it is Italy after all, and these things will happen from time to time."* John thought to himself that it might be weeks before the lights would again defend against the darkness instead of wasting energy in the daylight again. *"Piano, Piano..."* *"Everything here takes time, so why rush? Enjoy the stars, free for the viewing! Maybe you will see a comet! Enough for tonight"...* Tomorrow he must be fresh for his last interview.

Four:

The Reunion

John finished up at the office in Milan early on Friday. He felt that the Senior Marketing VP liked his business plan and that he might be offered the position. He and the management selection team he had been meeting with were anxious to get out of the city for a long end-of-summer weekend. It had been an intense week for him, full of interviews, working lunches and networking. He made a quick call to Sylvia and confirmed his earlier plans to remain in town until next week Monday, just in case the client had some follow-up questions that might be too

A Romance in Bellagio

hard to handle efficiently once he was back in the states. This was only a half-truth, as unbeknownst to Sylvia he was secretly mixing legitimate business and the interview. He really wanted to be there in case they were going to make him an offer. He left the office as quickly as he could to do some clothes shopping in Milan. His “European” wardrobe must be the latest Italian cut!

It was important for him to get out of the city and on the road north early as to arrive in Bellagio by sunset. The drive to Bellagio is difficult enough in daylight, and dangerous in the dark. The roads are narrow after you leave the main highway. In places, a cliff runs along one side of the road with a sheer drop to Lake Como on the other. Oncoming traffic and bicyclists only add flavor to the experience. Tonight he just wanted to relax over a leisurely dinner and enjoy his success immersed in the sights, sounds and smells of Bellagio.

After a shower back at his hotel, he put on a pair of new slacks, shirt and belt from his shopping. He walked instinctively to the entrance of the Belvedere’s restaurant where he had eaten the two previous nights, then realizing his mistake turned away and headed for the “Grande Terrazzo” an outdoor restaurant in the center of town that he had seen the day before. It was perched up on a second floor terrace overlooking the shopping street below and was itself situated under a canopy of grapes and hibiscus lit with Christmas lights for effect. He convinced the host to seat him where he had an excellent view, and ordered a carafe of red wine, with specific intent not to hurry the experience. He would take his time ordering an antipasto, a meat and perhaps even the fish entrée tonight. John reached into his coat for a cigarette. “*When in Rome*” he thought to himself. Even though many in Italy still smoke with a passion, he didn’t want to give the impression he was hooked on them, so he hadn’t had many lately.

It was then that he saw her. Was this wishful thinking or could it actually be her? It was Joy! “*What is she doing here in Bellagio? Lake Como may be popular with Italians who need to get out of Milan, but not for a mid-western girl on her own, unless she is being interviewed for a position in Milan too!*” “*Oh shit! Not mine I hope!*” John’s heart was beating fast now, but he wasn’t sure why. Should he be glad to see her, or was this angel competing for his job? “*Perhaps the trip to Asia was just a ruse to throw me off?*” He was full of nervous excitement when he approached her. “Joy! What on earth are you doing here?” Joy looked flushed herself, even out of breath, and laughed a little sheepishly as she spoke. “Oh, I’m taking advantage of a change in plans and meeting an old friend from the Rome office, tomorrow.” “What about you?” John thought for just a second and resurrected his story to Sylvia. “I’m staying on here until Monday or so, in case my last clients need me.” “Great! We can have dinner together then!” There was a hint of nervous excitement in her voice.

Five:

Dinner and Drinks

The restaurant was bustling with activity. Almost as if choreographed, the waiters and servers managed to navigate effortlessly through the maze of tables carrying food, glasses and bottles of wine, while the patrons basked in the soft lights of the terrace and surrounding buildings lit by the moonlight. The tables were decorated with beige linen tablecloths, deep red napkins folded in the shape of an elegant swan, fine silver and each had large, glowing soft white candles in thick glass sleeves.

By the time the antipasto had arrived, John was thinking the dinner was becoming a bit too much like previous meals they had shared. The table talk was revolving around events, bosses, or prior trips and they were once again the plastic corporate twosome – Light hearted, and politically correct. He was happy to be with her, but wanted more from this encounter and tried to show it without being obvious. “You know, this place is the Niagara Falls of Italy. I might come here for my honeymoon.” Joy let the remark drop and John was disappointed. *“Why didn’t she do something with an opening like that?”* Dinner was almost behind them now, and the wine was beginning to take effect on John. He was feeling amorous, but was doing his best to be attentive. “So, what will you do tomorrow?” asked John. “Oh, I saw a great pair of shoes in that shop across the way.” ...”Really just sandals with fancy tops.” “I’d need to get a pedicure to wear them.” That was it. She had baited him for sure. *“Her toes... Maybe I’ll start there”. With her lying on her back, I’ll massage her foot while holding it in the air, pushing it and her leg toward her with the slightest pressure... Next, I’ll slip my hands down to her ankles and calves, massaging them while staring into her eyes”*. There was a pause, as Joy waited for his response. John noticed the waiter nearby and answered. “Coffee?” “Oh, yes, I’ll have coffee, black, decaf please”. “John, I’m talking about shoes here” “Oh, yes you were... lovely I’m sure”. “Don’t they sound just perfect?” And shouldn’t she buy them tomorrow?

The talk over coffee was disappointingly sobering for him. John sensed he had struck out. Now, he could only fall in line with the appropriate remark. “Joy, I can’t believe our paths have crossed like this and we were able to share dinner together! If it works for you, let’s do it again” *“And again, and again... until we can’t do it anymore.”* It was more that the buzz from the wine. It was the glow of Joy’s face. God, she is beautiful he thought, “There is some very lucky guy out there... the rotten bastard!”

The walk back to their respective hotels was dismal. John was the perfect gentleman making small talk, while escorting Joy to her hotel. Bellagio isn’t that big and they were staying within a few doors of each other. Once again, she offered John her cheek, but this time rising up slightly on her toes to meet him. His heart sank as he bent forward towards her. *“Ok, so this is it.” “Keep it “comfortable” for her. She isn’t interested, and you can’t pressure her”*. “Besides, she is meeting someone here tomorrow.” *“Of course there wasn’t going to be any other outcome! No embrace no passionate kiss on the lips, just “hit the bricks buddy” “Well, that’s it.” “Goodnight” “See you”*

Six:

An Unexpected Call

John headed straight for the bar at the hotel where he ordered a drink, lit a cigarette and wondered where he had failed... “An opportunity like this lost,” he thought. Back in his hotel room he turned on the TV to divert his attention. Thinking about the way they separated was too depressing. He decided to catch up on golf and baseball scores, then found himself channel surfing... It took hours to relax, but even then, John didn’t sleep well. He was suffering the effects of being aroused by Joy during dinner and having his bubble burst on their parting. It wasn’t until sometime around five when completely exhausted, he fell into a deep sleep.

In what seemed like ten minutes or so, he was roused from his sleep by the alarm. Instinctively pushing the snooze on the alarm clock had no effect. “Must be the phone” Then, after knocking the hotel phone to the floor as he reached for it, he realized that the ringing continued. “Gees,” thought John “*what is it?*” “*It must be my international cell phone!*” He hadn’t used it on the trip, but it was surely somewhere in a jacket or pants pocket he thought. In his sleepy state, he couldn’t connect with where it was. “I hope this isn’t a wrong number, or my boss.” “Where the hell is that thing?” John was groggy as he stood and ripped his pants and coat off of the chair near the TV where he had placed them neatly the night before. Holding the pants by the cuffs partly over the bed to drain the pockets didn’t help. “Not in the pants”. His wallet and keys were now on the floor. “It must be in the coat”. “How many pockets does this thing have?” Ok, here it is... John was still half-asleep, and fumbling, but tried to be professional...just in case it was the Milan interview team.

Ok... deep breath...“Hi, this is John” struggling to speak clearly, as if he was in the office instead of being roused out of a deep sleep. “John, its Joy”... After a slight pregnant pause, she continued “My friend is delayed and... Hey, how about some breakfast? Maybe I can interest you in a walk around the town after? I just love it here, and it is too beautiful to experience alone. Please? “*She must have a business card of mine to have this number,*” he thought. “*Besides, I’m not sure I’m up to another let down*”. “Sure, where should we meet? Ok, the restaurant here at the Belvedere in 30 minutes... ok, I’ll be there!

Seven:

Breakfast

John sat on the veranda drinking his first coffee of the day and waited anxiously for Joy. She was late. Clit, clit, clit, clit, the tone was nearly inaudible as he held the watch to his ear. “*Probably made to sound like that so the owner of the watch could think that it had some internal spring*

A Romance in Bellagio

mechanism. It is a poor excuse for a tic. ...or do all quartz watches make that sound?" he wondered while the seconds progressed. *"What ever happened to the old watches that ticked? And where is she?"*

Joy seemed amused as she approached the table. "Are we having a problem with our watch this morning or just grumpy?" she asked. He knew why he just might be the slightest bit grumpy but let it pass. Then he looked up and saw her coming towards him. She was radiant! Dressed in a form-fitting long white silky dress with a matching belt and sandals laced in gold filigree, her strawberry blond hair was cropped in a pixy style close to her face. She had a silk scarf wrapped loosely around her neck. "This must have been some friend she was going to meet!" thought John, now feeling like a pinch-hitter.

Surprisingly for John, breakfast was lighthearted and casual. They looked to be the perfect couple on holiday. Their good-natured exuberance contrasted with more than a few families at breakfast who, for unknown reasons were not really engaged. The English couple nearby seemed especially distant, he, reading the paper while she corralled the kids. "My god!" *"How could you not be happy together in a place as beautiful as this?"* The waiter attentively kept the coffee hot as the two Americans ate. They chose to eat from the buffet in the dining room and carry their plates to the balcony, but it was worth the effort for the views from the terrace overlooking the pool, Lake Como and the surrounding mountains. Who could be inside on a perfectly beautiful day like this? Just as their waiter began to clear the table, Joy suggested that they pack a bag with swimsuits and towels and walk down to the lake. There they could find a lido area where they could spend part of the day sunning themselves. John's mind flashed back to the bottle of champagne that was mistakenly left in his room. "This might come in handy if we picnic," he thought to himself. Upon arriving at the water's edge, it became evident that things wouldn't work out as planned. The lido was overcrowded, so staying there wasn't such a good idea.

Eight:

Lake Como

At just that moment, adversity turned into a grand opportunity! John recalled seeing a boat rental sign along the harbor and nearly ran for the boathouse out on the pier to inquire. "This just might be my lucky day! I'll have her all to myself he thought. Yes!" Within 30 minutes they were heading out of the harbor and out on to the open water the lake. "This is magnificent!" He thought. The mountains towering around them on all sides, the huge billowing clouds, a brilliant blue sky and Joy all to himself made the small fortune John paid to rent the boat for the day seem insignificant. The two colleagues passed the time exploring the coastline and taking in

A Romance in Bellagio

the villas, palazzos and nature parks that dotted the landscape. The scenery was almost as breathtaking as Joy. She giggled with delight as he opened the bottle of champagne and they relaxed completely chatting animatedly about what they would each do if they had a summer place on the lake. Joy was dreaming aloud. "I'd have a formal garden with a gazebo... just like in the Sound of Music! ...and a bench overlooking the lake for sitting in the evenings and watching the boats pass by... John was thinking more along the lines of a red Porsche like one he saw earlier, for taking on the back roads. As the sun warmed the day, Joy laid out a large hotel towel and sunned herself on the bow while John busied himself piloting the boat. He was soon thinking back on his childhood memories of boating on the Chain of Lakes in Wisconsin as a kid. Maybe someday he would take Joy there.

Around three, John anchored the boat in a secluded bay protected from the wind. He was completely content as he watched her catnap in the afternoon sun, enjoying the fact that they were getting on so well and he like being her protector. Skipper of her ship... her man! He was beginning to wonder if by some stroke of fate they could possibly live the daydreams they shared earlier in a place like this. The tranquility of the moment ended just briefly when Joy was roused from her nap by a pesky fly, and turned to lie on her side, while brushing the insect away.

John now knew that he had to initiate the next phase of their relationship, even if his actions ended in disaster. He moved forward to the edge of the bow deck and was about to place his towel over her to keep the chill off, when he noticed Joy was shivering ever so slightly. He instinctively bent forward and gently kissed her exposed arm. Joy responded with the softest moan of pleasure and John immediately wished for more exposed flesh to kiss! There was no turning back now for John. In a gentle but firm move, using his hand now on her shoulder, he rolled Joy towards him and onto her back. He leaned over her to the full extent possible, supporting his weight with his arms, and looked into her eyes. She was clearly waiting for him to kiss her, and as gently as he could, he did. The moment had finally arrived! He knew now that she was even more desirable than he imagined! In minutes, the new lovers retreated to the covered canopy of the boat and together experienced the pleasures each had only dreamed of before.

Sometime later, John relaxed his embrace to ponder. Had he manifested their destiny? Did his wanting her so much cause each of them to behave in a way as to change the course of their lives? Joy wasn't quite so analytical at this point. She playfully leaned back with her head to one side and pointed with her index finger to a point at the base of her neck. "Will you kiss me, right here?" then moving her finger up to a spot just below her chin... "And then here?" John being dutiful did as requested, and within seconds they were once again lost in their lovemaking.

The evening sun retreated behind the mountaintops and dusk settled on the harbor where their rented boat now lay at anchor. The calm of evening tide reduced the chop generated earlier by the mid-day winds to slow undulating swells now mirroring their soft caresses as they held each other closely. Now they were tranquil, but unwilling to separate, for fear that the moment would be lost. They simply needed to embrace and did so with intensity that matched their physical passion earlier. Nothing was going to stand in the way of their enjoyment of the moment.

Nine:

A Confession

As the now declared lovers recomposed themselves to the day that was waning, John's desire to know if Joy was competing for the position in Milan was brewing. He suddenly had the feeling that this roller coaster ride of theirs was about to go over the top, and he was holding his breath. The expression on his face must have exposed his anxiety. Before he could say anything, Joy spoke. "Ok, I confess" "Fate, my darling, had nothing to do it." "Sylvia mentioned your trip to me and that coincidentally we would both have layovers in Chicago... and that you would be in Milan on business and staying the weekend, but she wasn't sure why." "Sylvia and I go way back and she knows that I have been not so secretly interested in you for some time. With her help, I re-routed my flight back to Chicago through Malpenza!" "Then when she called me to say you were leaving Milan early for the Belvedere I made sure I was there too. I was going to show up at your restaurant, until you walked out the door! And well, ok, I followed... more like ran after you!" "And that champagne... no mistake..." Joy's face was aglow with a bright smug expression normally reserved for a cat on a silk pillow.

John had to ask, "Well, what took you so long? You realize that I lost sleep over you last night!" "Oh, I am sorry about that." She replied, "I was holding back because you were staying the weekend, and I wasn't sure if perhaps you actually were meeting someone, and, well, I didn't want to confuse things." "Will you ever forgive me?"

John fell silent. Then after a long pause, he said, "Let's discuss this after a late dinner, but first let's send Sylvia some roses!"