

DUE LAGHI

In a town just north of Rome, The Due Laghi Relais manager nervously switched his slight weight from foot to foot as he watched his guest approach on horseback. The guest's steed was a glorious chestnut stallion, born and raised right on the Due Laghi ranch, and the man riding him had taken a liking to the beast since he had arrived a fortnight ago.

"Signor Banks, was the stallone satisfactory today?" the manager asked the man, taking the reins from his guest as the man slid his long legs to the ground and dismounted.

Banks — the guest — gave a tight smile. "Quite good, thanks. I've decided to rename him," he said as he stroked the horse's sweaty neck. The tall English man wiped similar sweat from his own brow. He seemed to have even more admiration for the horse after realizing how worked up both man and beast were after their romp.

"Re-rename him, sir?" the manager asked, stammering despite himself.

"Yes," Banks said, lazily flicking a fly away from his steed, unfazed by the manager's reaction. "Forza — his new name. Much better than the other one. What was it you called him?" The guest called Banks gave Forza one last pat before slipping a coin into the hand of the manager. "Never mind."

At the first feel of cold copper in palm, the manager changed his tune. "Magnifico! I much approve. Per favore, signor, I will take care of him." The manager was already turning Forza back toward the ranch quarters.

"Oh, signor! Dinner, at seven." He looked over his shoulder and beamed at his guest.

Banks dipped his head in acknowledgement and walked up the hill to the southern path towards the hotel. He passed corrals of horses and goats, then the landscape turned to lush grass and wildflowers as he scaled the incline. At the top, he stopped to admire Lake Bracciano to the west with its black beaches and sparkling water. He had sunned himself there just yesterday and his skin shown with the evidence of the sun's ferocity.

He heard children laughing from the pool on the other side of the estate and it brought a smile to his lips. This was a magical place. He couldn't stop marveling at its beauty and charm, not since he had driven up the long gravel drive and caught his first glimpses of the Due Laghi a fortnight ago. Banks didn't know how long he'd stay at the Italian ranch; it could be for quite a while, or at least until the winter waned in London.

Banks' hot, booted feet had taken him to the row of skinny pines — the entrance to the hotel. The doors to the hotel were heavy and ornate, rich with Italian history, leading into a wide entryway of shiny wooden floors and plush, carpeted hallways. The Englishman walked the familiar route to his lodgings, turning the heavy room key around in his hands.

Once he had showered and dressed, Banks went to the bar in the Posta de' Cavalieri on the other side of the hotel. He sipped a scotch and took in the decor. The stuffed heads of various animals hunted and killed on the property adorned the walls. The walls themselves were a robust wine-colored tone. An orange cat lay on the pool table, but no one took any notice; it was still early for billiards.

She had come in the side door without him noticing. Banks watched her back as she laughed with the stable boy cleaning tack in the corner. He took in her tan skin made richer by the white flowing dress she wore, from her ankles to her elegant neck, admiring the jewels

shimmering beside her long and dark locks. He sipped his drink as he stared at her, waiting patiently for her to acknowledge him.

And she did come to him, in a proud, lazy saunter. Slow and seductively, she crossed the low-lighted room with her gaze locked on him. Just as she came within arms reach, he stood quite suddenly, drink in hand. He left the bar for the patio terrace, eager to watch the late summer sun set, feigning indifference to the woman who had approached.

He didn't check to see if she had followed him. He knew she would come. He swirled his drink with a slight shift of the hand, ice cubes clanking against the glass, and leaned along the low wall lining the western edge of the terrace. He admired the vineyards in the distance and took another sip of his scotch. He heard the tap of her heels on the stone, and then he felt her beside him. She smelled of leather and roses. He drank it up along with the view.

"I have seen you around," she said in accented English.

"And I have seen you," he replied.

"So long you have been here, mister...?"

"Banks."

"Mr. Banks," she practiced, watching him closely. "Do you enjoy the Due Laghi Relais?"

"Very much."

"Do you ride?"

"I have ridden every day since I arrived here."

"I have seen you," she admitted.

He studied her. "Do you do any riding, or just watching, Anna Maria?"

Her eyes widened as he said her name. "How do you know me?"

"I do not know you, Anna Maria." He looked at his drink, smiling. "I know your name, and your father."

"You are a friend of my father's?"

"New friend."

"New friend from where?"

"London."

"England? I knew you were English."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No." She stepped closer to him and pretended to look over the wall of the terrace too. "It is a very good thing, Mr. Banks." She brushed her fingers over his hand.

He pretended not to notice her touch, though his skin was tingling where her hand lay.

"Italian men are good men, but Englishmen are smart, gifted men." She put an emphasis on the word 'gifted'. Banks wasn't quite sure what to make of her yet. He needed time, and distance.

Banks withdrew from her touch, stood up straight, startling her, and kissed her hand, then withdrew it in one fluid motion. He walked away, downing the last of his scotch. She stared after him, her kissed hand hovering near her own lips.

Banks strolled over to a table set for one in the garden and was immediately served by a local boy no older than fourteen who couldn't take his eyes off of Anna Maria. Banks felt the woman's eyes burning into his back, knew when she flounced off into the hotel, yet he remained where he sat. He enjoyed fresh goat cheese and meat, selected with care from the Due Laghi's

own hand-fed livestock, and they were sad to see the creatures go, the Italians; they had such a bond with their animals and it showed in the taste of the savory lamb, steak, and pork sampler Banks chose to enjoy that night, and he tasted home grown wine from the summer's harvest before last.

He did not know, however, as he methodically cut and chewed the flesh of the animals he could see around him (wondering if this was somehow immoral, eating it right in front of them) that the woman had gone into the hotel, gotten an extra room key from the reception boy — they were friends for many years now, practically family — and perused his personal things while he had dinner. She ran her hand over a journal she had been drawn to, perched innocently on the nightstand next to a fancy pen and cologne bottle, and then she settled down into the duvet to read the words painstakingly printed by none other than the Englishman, Mr. Banks himself. The corners of her red lips turned up as she read.

Mr. Banks smoked a cigar and had a dessert brandy out on the terrace, and he wondered when he would see the lovely Anna Maria again. Mr. Banks was a private man, a serious man, but women and horses had proved to be his greatest weaknesses in the Italian countryside, and he planned to exploit them both while here at the Due Laghi.

* * *

As the morning sun crept past the fading moon in the sky above the Due Laghi resort, Banks awoke groggily from his bed. He rubbed his eyes and peered around his cavernous room; there was the striped duvet balled up on the floor, his sheet mashed into a tangled heap at the foot of the bed, his clothes from the night before laid neatly on the chair beside the bed, even his shoes stacked in line by the door. He stared at his folded clothes for several moments, deep in thought.

Banks peeled his sweaty limbs from the bedsheets to stagger over to the chair and touch his worn clothes. He brought them to his face and smelled his shirt. He caught faint traces of roses lingering on the fabric. He stumbled back to the bed, still clutching his soiled shirt, and let himself fall unceremoniously back on the mattress. His limbs ached as well as his head. Banks laid there on his back, naked apart from his skivvies, with linked hands resting behind his head. He supposed he must have gotten thoroughly drunk the night before as he had a hard time piecing together his last moments before sleep had overtaken him. He closed his eyes and settled his mind on the last thing he clearly remembered.

After dessert, he had over-tipped the young waiter that had served him dinner, tipped him to look the other way as Banks wrapped parts of his dinner in a napkin. It wasn't custom to take food back to the bedrooms, but he didn't intend to save it for his own midnight snack. Buzzing from the alcohol, he'd taken a night stroll to the barn and let himself in the deserted building. It had smelled of hay and leather, and most pungently, horses.

Forza's stall was at the end of the row, the largest of stalls in the entire barn. It wasn't out of favoritism on the Italians' part, but necessity; the beast was so large that he needed extra room to fit comfortably, though he was only kept stalled at night and in bad weather. The stallion had been snoozing standing up, his head drooping towards the floor, when Banks had gone to visit him. He'd woken him with a soft whistle and let himself into the stall to pat Forza and feed him

his leftovers from dinner. The horse had made such a ruckus munching his treats that Banks hadn't heard the stable boy who had entered the barn and come to see who was in there. With another generous tip, Banks had convinced the stable boy to allow him to visit Forza for a good while longer, alone and undisturbed.

This was when things became fuzzy. He rubbed his head and stared at the ceiling, thinking hard. Pieces were starting to come back to him. He remembered falling asleep in the stall, his back against the metal, as Forza stood over him. That explained the straw pieces stuck to his pants, he mused, looking again towards the chair. He raised the shirt to his nose to inhale the rose smell again, but it was replaced by the smell of horse dung. He balled up the shirt and threw it into the laundry basket.

As Banks lay still on the bed intent on probing his memory, he dozed off again. When he awoke once more, it was almost noon so said the sun rays on the wall stretching towards the ceiling. After a cool shower, he hurried to the parlor to procure a cup of the coveted dark roast brew the Due Laghi establishment imported from Sicily. Within just a few sips, he was feeling more alert and more able to ignore the soreness of his screaming muscles. He wanted to ride Forza today, but he doubted his body could handle it. Maybe a swim instead.

The English fellow stood out among the Italians who vacationed at the Due Laghi. He was alone, fair despite his tan, and taller than the average Italian while the rest of the guests were mostly families and older couples. Banks didn't mind sticking out as long as he was left alone; the staff had already learned to not go out of their way to wait on him, as he had explained he would come to them if he needed anything. He tried his best not to slight the Italians who ran the Due Laghi, knowing that it was their pride that made them such meticulous workers, but he was happier on his own and his tips proved it.

Happy to peruse the hallways, Banks went in search of the lobby boy. When he found him in the north hall painting over a scuff on the wall, Banks asked for extra towels and a swim suit, as his was snagged and unravelling from a scuffle with a patch of coral reef in Barbados. He was provided with three more fluffy bath towels and two swimming towels along with what looked like women's undergarments. With a raised brow, Banks held up the garment in front of the lobby boy's face. The boy look confused, but then remembered he was dealing with an Englishman.

"Sir, is what we wear in Italia. No long pants, shorts." The lobby boy grinned enthusiastically and held them up against his own legs, then thrust them into the waist of Banks.

Banks gave the swim trunks another hard look before flipping a coin to the boy who dashed off with a loud, "Grazie." He went back to his bedroom to change and put away his reinforcements. He stared at himself in the mirror in the tiny trunks. His legs were white where the sun hadn't yet touched, but the swim shorts had fit well, surprisingly. Maybe there was something to this Italian fashion, he thought, admiring the bulge his physique created under the glossy material.

He put a shirt on and tied one of the swimming towels around his waist. He locked the door behind him, unsure how long he'd be swimming, and went out the front door to the drive in front of the hotel.

"Sir, will you be needing transport?" It was the manager who had approached him. He realized he still did not know his name.

“What’s your name?” he asked the small man, ignoring his question.

“Fabregas.”

“Fabregas. Is that your surname?”

“Si, sir. Is the name of my famiglia.”

“Nice, strong name — Fabregas. Like Forza.”

The manager gave a tight smile. “Grazie, Signor Banks.”

“I will be needing a car today. I’d like to find a swimming hole.”

“Sir, we will find you a driver. He will take you anywhere you wish.”

“No, Fabregas. Thank you, but I want to drive myself.”

The manager looked uneasy for half a beat before agreeing with a cheery nod. “Anything signor wants, we do. You are our special guest.”

“Much appreciated.”

“What sort of veicolo would you like?”

“Rugged, able to go off-road. And Fabregas, I need to be able to fit *comodamente*, si?”

Fabregas’ cheeky grin told Banks he had understood, so he dismissed him to procure the vehicle while he enjoyed a nice smoke. It only took Fabregas six minutes to find a suitable vehicle on the grounds, but it was a work vehicle which the manager repeatedly apologized for but suited Banks just fine. He settled himself into the truck and waved goodbye to the manager who still looked uncertain and embarrassed at his “special guest” in a ranch pick-up imported from Messina.

The truck handled the gravel drive well, had ample room for his large frame to fit comfortably behind the wheel, and the radio was tuned to a wonderful station playing old Italian opera. Banks stopped the truck at the end of the driveway, looking at the sprawling acres of the Due Laghi in his rearview mirrors, happy to be alive on this day. He thought of God and his instincts, and debated between turning left or right. Another car suddenly tried turning into the driveway, the very drive that Banks was blocking with his large farm-use truck. He reacted immediately, quick and capable from years of training. He tensed up to brace himself for impact.

It didn’t come. The car had stopped just short of hitting the front of the truck. Glaring at him through the windshield was Anna Maria. Banks laughed at the silliness of their situation. Here was the woman he had been hoping to run into today, nearly running him aground in literal form. He hadn’t pictured it like this, but it would do.

“Anna Maria, my dear woman. That was a close call.” Banks got out of the truck and walked to her driver side window which was rolled halfway down. “Are you alright?”

Her fury abated at seeing that it was the Englishman blocking her way and she smiled sheepishly at him from the driver’s seat. “Scuse, I was driving too fast to see you in time.”

“You did stop in time. No harm done.”

“Si, I guess so. What were you doing stopped here?”

“I was deciding which way I would let the road take me.”

“No specific destination?”

“I’m looking for a swim.”

“Bracciano is just down the hill,” she said pointing.

He waved away her suggestion. “Yes, yes. I was looking for somewhere new. More private.”

“Ah, vita privata, no? I might be able to help.”

“Please, join me.”

“I do not have my swimming things.”

“Go to the hotel. Park your car. I’ll wait while you change.”

“You’ve convinced me, Mr. Banks,” she said after a short pause. “The day is perfect for swimming.”

“Good. Let me move out of your way.”

He got back in the truck, reversed until the driveway became wide enough for two vehicles to pass, and waited for her to go first. She drove by him, a flirty grin pasted on her face, and he swore he caught the smell of roses again as her car passed. He turned the truck to follow her and parked off to the side close to the front entrance to wait for her return. She took her time, but when she came back out of the hotel, her beauty nearly froze Banks to the hot leather seat.

“I am ready now, Mr. Banks.”

He hurried from his side to open her door and help her into the truck.

“Is this the veicolo agricolo?”

“Yes, Fabregas was kind enough to let me borrow it.”

“Ah, so you know Fabregas? He is mio zio.”

Banks took a moment to sort through his basic understanding of the Italian language.

“Your uncle?”

“Si.”

“So he is the brother of the owner, but runs it for his brother?”

“Si, it is an honor, he says. My father would gladly let him live here esente, but Fabregas is a hard worker. Always has been.”

“Where are we going?” Banks reminded her as they were at the bottom of the hill at the end of the drive again.

“Girare a sinistra,” she said, pointing left. “We must go up the hills, north.”

“Qualsiasi cosa per te,” Banks said, practicing his Italian.

“You flatter me so!” Anna Maria purred, happy with his Italian.

“Where were you born?” Banks asked his traveling companion.

“Roma. Mama was shopping when I decided I was ready to be born.”

“Demanding, aren’t you?”

“Do you think so?” She bristled, unsure if he was joking or not.

“I tease you, Anna Maria. Just a joke.”

“Good you tell me so. Sometimes it is hard to get your English humor.”

“Do you like my humor? Would you like me to stop?”

“No. I will get used to you, Mr. Banks.”

“I could never get used to looking at you.”

She blushed.

“You’re beautiful, you know?”

“Grazie.”

“You smell like roses.”

“My perfume. It is from Parigi.”

“It smells heavenly. Come, lean closer to me, just for a moment.”

Anna Maria conceded to scoot closer to his seat. She laid a hand on his thigh and looked deeply into his eyes. Banks' palms grew sweaty on the steering wheel as he trained his eyes on her hand on his leg and then her red lips so close to his face.

"You Englishmen don't look at the road when you drive?"

He ripped his gaze away from her mouth and back at the road. "I was distracted. You are distracting me."

"Do you like it?"

He could feel her breath on his neck. Her hand squeezed his thigh and his foot jammed down on the gas pedal in response. Anna Maria laughed and relaxed her grip. "Turn here," she said.

Banks followed her directions until they were parked on the side of the road beside a mountain. There were makeshift foot holes for them to reach the top of the cliff. "This doesn't look like a swimming hole," he told her, letting her lead the way. He kept a close hold on her waist as they climbed in case she should fall, or at least that's what he told himself.

"Trust me. It will be a magnificent surprise." Her smile charmed him into submission.

They were winded by the time they reached the top, but the view was spectacular. Anna Maria ushered him into the patch of trees ahead and took his hand to lead him to the secret place. Walls of stone loomed in the distance, their final destination as pointed out by Banks' lovely companion. Anna Maria fit easily through the narrow opening between two cliff faces, but he had to go slower and bend his body more to follow her. Just as he was feeling too cramped for his liking, the gap opened up into a clearing. In the center was a hot spring.

"It is much cooler up here, no?" Anna Maria gestured to the air around them.

"Yes, much cooler. Is the water hot?" he asked her, pointing to the spring.

"It is warm, but nice. Come in with me."

Anna Maria removed her silky cover-up dress to reveal a two-piece red swim suit underneath. She had a full chest that Banks couldn't help but admire and her whole body was tanned a deep, rich mahogany color. Her hair hung down her back, tickling her. Banks drew her to him, gathering her hair in his fist, positioning her face directly in front of his own.

"Kiss me," he commanded.

"Not yet." She pulled his towel away from his waist and went to work on his shirt buttons. "You bought these?" she asked, giggling at his shorts.

"A gift from the lobby boy," he said begrudgingly. "My own ripped."

"I like them on you. I do, Mr. Banks," Anna Maria said running her hands up and down his sides.

"Charles. My name is Charles."

"Charles," she practiced. "Charles Banks the Englishman."

He helped her down into the water and then slipped in himself. The water felt bath-like. His muscles relaxed as the water swirled over his shoulders. He drew Anna Maria close to him as he found a nice sitting spot on a rock where they could talk and enjoy the hot spring. He traced his fingers down her arms as she laid her head on his chest. She spoke to him of things he loved: cars, horses, business in London, even a passion for writing. She told him she dabbled in poetry herself. He couldn't believe how much in common they had, that her beauty would extend past her physical form, that her mind was so adventurously romantic. He was intrigued.

She kissed him then, there in the hot spring. As the water held them up, the Englishman and the *bellezza italiana* wrapped themselves around each other. Her soaked up her smell and her beauty as he explored every nook and cranny of her body. They made love in the water, and Banks decided this was the best day of his stay at the Due Laghi since he had arrived so many days ago.
