

Ferragosto

CHAPTER ONE

“Faaabioooooo!”

The singsong voice carried across the whole of Mont’Oliva, scampering through the streets and alleyways of the little village like an exuberant child at play. Chased by the hot breath of a late afternoon breeze, it skipped by the open doorways where the old women sat on the stoops, knitting and gossiping, then out onto the dusty piazza to the fountain where the little children cooled themselves by the water. From there it scuttled past the steps of the church and bell tower standing tall and dry and ominous, then back again between the houses with their gritty stone walls bleached white by the Italian sun. At last it went scurrying along beneath the lines of drying laundry flapping like flags overhead before finally coming full circle to its source.

Standing on the terrace outside her house, Liliana Terranova, the voice’s owner, surveyed the table where she had just laid out a plate of sliced tomatoes and mozzarella, a bowl of olives, a basket of bread, and a bottle of mineral water. After setting out the plates and napkins, and fussing with the tablecloth, she paused and inclined an ear to the window above her, awaiting a response to her call. When none was forthcoming, she looked up and cupped a hand around her mouth.

“Faaaaabiooooo!” she called once more, this time a little louder and more insistent.

Perturbed when this second attempt met with no better result than the first, she stood for a few moments more with hands on hips, tapping a foot in mild consternation.

“Ay, *figlio mio!*” she cried in a decidedly less singsong voice that no doubt carried well beyond the confines of the village.

Upstairs in the house, seated on his bedroom floor with legs spread wide, a set of earphones drowning out any sound save for the music playing on his iPod, Fabio Terranova paused for a moment and straightened up. Oblivious to the world outside from which his mother was calling, he had been there all along in his room, stretching for nearly an hour, a rigorous daily routine he followed without fail.

A thin sheen of sweat glistening on his brow, his legs still splayed, his head and back and shoulders in perfect alignment, Fabio breathed easy and rested for a time. Turning his head, he let his gaze methodically take in his surroundings. It first alighted on the mirror above the dresser where he saw displayed the ribbon he had received as a six-year old after winning his first dance competition, the very first he had ever entered. Many more from other competitions in the ensuing years adorned the rest of the mirror’s perimeter. Farther over, on the shelf to the side of the dresser, stood a small battalion of trophies, and beyond that the wall was papered with photographs and press clippings of his ballroom exploits. The message, from all he observed, was clear: It mattered little whether he danced solo or with a partner; wherever and whenever he danced, Fabio Terranova danced to win. The results spoke for themselves.

Fabio’s survey of the room continued. On the wall over his bed hung a poster of Fred Astaire twirling Ginger Rogers, beside it another of a rain-drenched Gene Kelly swinging around a lamppost, and a third of Michael Jackson moonwalking across the stage. Dancing was Fabio’s passion, his obsession

really, and wherever he chose to look he found inspiration and encouragement for his vision of perhaps one day finding his own image displayed on a poster. Ever since he was a little boy, surrounding himself with constant reminders of this goal was the way he had arranged his little piece of the world. Now just a few months short of his twentieth birthday, he worked at his flexibility and every other aspect of his dancing skills with the fanatical devotion of an aspiring athlete or anyone for that matter who was chasing a dream.

Fabio took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then slowly exhaled, releasing the tension from his muscles. "You're the best," he told himself as he extended his torso over the floor and relaxed back into his stretch.

It was just at that moment, as he was about to lose himself once more in the music, when a woman's shoe suddenly sailed through the open bedroom window, glanced off the dresser, and struck the back of the young man's head. The shoe knocked the earphones from his ears before it plopped down unceremoniously on his lap.

Though not at all injured by the projectile's impact, a wincing Fabio gave a cry of indignation at the assault. He sat there for a moment, rubbing the back of his head before giving in to a smile when he regarded the shoe. With a chuckle he grabbed it, eased himself to his feet, and went to the window. Nudging aside the curtains, he leaned outside and looked down to the terrace where he beheld his semi-barefoot mother looking impassively back up at him with arms crossed.

"*Scusami, Signora,*" he said haughtily, wagging the shoe at her for effect, "but does this shoe belong to anyone I know?"

"Ah, so you weren't dead up there after all," Lilitana replied nonchalantly. "I'm so relieved."

Fabio eyed her with an impish grin. "You know," he told her in an equally impish voice, "if this had been high-heeled you might have taken my eye out."

“That’s why I wear flats,” she replied, “what kind of mother do you think I am?” Then, gesturing to the table, “Now that I have your attention, *carissimo*, why don’t you come down and have a little something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” he told her.

“But you will be later. Come down now.”

“When I’m done stretching,” he answered.

“Enough stretching. Come down and eat!”

“When I’m done, Mamma,” he told her patiently before pulling himself back inside.

“Don’t be long,” she called after him. “And give me my shoe back!”

Fabio casually tossed the shoe back out the window the way it had entered. Apparently it landed on an inconvenient spot, for he heard his mother lamenting, “*Mannagia la miseria!*” as he sat back down to continue his routine.

Later, when he had finished stretching, Fabio slowly rose from the floor and stood for a time before the full-length mirror affixed to the bedroom door. Gazing at his reflection, he began to take careful inventory of himself. This was less an exercise in vanity—though he did possess an ample quantity of that particular attribute—than a thorough and, to him, very necessary period of self-assessment. He did not need to wonder if he was handsome of course; that much was self-evident. One needed only to consider the dark, captivating eyes, the thick, jet black hair, and the finely chiseled profile. Added to these, Fabio possessed an athlete’s physique, slender but well-muscled. But all of that was not enough, which was why Fabio scrutinized every part of himself, searching with cold detachment for areas of possible weakness: his posture, the angle at which he held his head, the tone of his chest and arm muscles, and above all else the air of confidence he exuded. Without this last, intangible quality everything else could fall apart in the judges’ eyes and, worse, in his own. In his young life he had already watched

more than his share of up and coming dancers come undone by nothing more than a lack of faith in themselves, dancers often equal in physical talent to him, equal in almost every way save for this one element. Fabio well understood that, for what he hoped to accomplish, doubt was deadly, and so he took great pains to chase every notion of it from his mind.

By the time Fabio finally showered, dressed for the evening, and made his way downstairs, his aunt, Zia Pasqualina, had stopped by. When he walked out to the terrace, a small valise in hand, he found her sitting at the table, chattering away with Liliana. At seeing her nephew, she threw her hands up in delight.

"There he is, *finalmente!*" she exclaimed. "I was wondering how long I was going to have to wait to see the famous dancer."

At that Fabio stopped, dropped the valise, and struck an upright, rigid pose like that of a matador who has just entered the ring. His eyes suddenly smoldering with dark but comic menace, he snatched his aunt's hand, swept her off the chair, and gathered her into his arms.

"Not famous yet, Zia, " he told his aunt, pulling her close, "but give me time." Then, rolling his eyes, he added breathlessly, "I think I feel a tango coming on."

"Careful, Fabio, you'll hurt her!" cried Liliana.

"*Dio mio!*" his aunt laughed helplessly as Fabio suddenly whirled her across the little terrace, paused, and whirled her back again to the table where he dipped her for dramatic effect before gallantly easing her back onto her chair.

"*Ma tu sei pazzo!*" cried Pasqualina, her cheeks bright red from the escapade. Then, laughing to Liliana, "He's crazy, this son of yours. Handsome, but crazy!"

"Dance, dance, dance," sighed Liliana. "It's all this one ever thinks about."

"What else is there for me to think about, Mamma?" asked Fabio, settling down at the table with them.

"You might think about getting a job someday soon," his

mother offered.

Fabio chuckled and held up his hands, gesturing about at the little village surrounding them. “Where?” he wondered aloud. “In this thriving metropolis?”

Liliana gave another sigh and shook her head. “Do you hear how he talks to his mother?” she complained.

“Oh, leave him alone, Liliana,” Pasqualina chided her. “He’s young. Let him live. He has his whole life to worry about a job. So, Fabio, where are you going tonight all dressed up?”

“It’s the last weekend of Ferragosto,” he told her, “so I’m going to Formia.”

“And what’s in Formia?”

“Seven Up,” said Fabio.

“And what is Seven Up, and why are you going there?”

Fabio smiled. “It’s a dance club, Zia, the best in the whole province,” he explained, “and I only dance at the best.”

“Dance, dance, dance,” clucked Liliana.

Pasqualina chuckled and nodded to the suitcase. “And what’s with that?” she asked. “Are you planning to sleep on the dance floor tonight?”

“No, Zia,” said Fabio. “I’m staying at my friend Enzo’s apartment tonight. He’s taking me to the train station tomorrow.”

“And where are you going tomorrow?”

“To Milano,” a rueful Liliana answered for him.

“Milano?” said his aunt. “And what will you do there?”

“What else,” said Liliana.

“I’m going to audition for *Dance Italia!*,” said Fabio excitedly. “All the best dancers in Italy go there—and I’m going to show them who’s the best of the best.”

“So maybe we’ll be seeing you on TV someday soon?” cooed Pasqualina. “How exciting!”

“Not maybe,” said Fabio, brushing a speck of lint from his slacks. “Definitely. And then it won’t be long after that when I’ll be going to America.”

“And why America?”

“Because, Zia, that’s where the best of the best go,” Fabio told her with much conviction. “Just wait. Someday you’ll come to New York and see me up on the stage on Broadway, or maybe in the movies, dancing with the most beautiful women in the world!”

“Like Fred Astaire,” said Pasqualina dreamily. “Wouldn’t that be something. Your father would be so proud.”

At that Fabio gave a wistful smile and fell silent before looking out over the red-tiled rooftops of Mont’ Oliva. Set amidst a cluster of houses near the highest spot in the village, the Terranovas’ little terrace afforded a lovely view of the valley down below where the vineyards and groves of olive trees knitted into the rolling terrain stretched out in precise crisscross lines like bristles on a brush. Beyond them in the distance the sandy sunburned peaks of the Apennines rose roundabout, guarding the horizon like ancient fortress walls. Closer to home, a solitary figure could be seen emerging from one of the vineyards. His work done for the day, he made his way down the dusty path that led to the road where he was soon joined by another man, the pair trudging back toward the village with shirts flung over their shoulders. It had been a blistering hot day—typical for late August—but now the breeze through the valley had kicked up in earnest and things were mercifully cooling as the sun fell off to the west and the shadows of the trees and the houses lengthened.

Fabio poured himself a glass of mineral water and took a sip, keeping an eye all the while on the two men ambling along the road. For a moment he was a small child again, sitting as he often did on the edge of the terrace, watching and waiting to see his father come walking home after a long hot day of toiling away in those same vineyards. “Papa!” he would cry at seeing him come into view. Then Fabio would be off like a shot to meet his father halfway as he made the long weary trudge uphill to the village. At the sight of the little boy careening his way,

Franco Terranova would inevitably stop and open wide his arms just in time to catch him as he leapt into his powerful embrace. Smelling of earth and sweat, the black and gray stubble on his face rough against his son's cheek, he would flip the boy up onto his shoulders and, weary as he might be, make the rest of the trek home with Fabio riding there like a conquering hero.

"So, Fabio," Zia Pasqualina was saying, bringing him back to the present, "what do you think, will you still bother with us anymore someday after you've become rich and famous and you're living in New York?"

"I doubt it, Zia," Fabio kidded her, giving a disdainful sniff for effect. "I'm sure I will be much too busy. You know how it is, signing autographs, posing for pictures, all the usual stuff celebrities do."

"What, too busy even for your mother?" cried Liliana, reaching out to give her son a slap across the top of the head. She missed intentionally, of course, for she could never dream of hurting the apple of her eye—the occasional thrown shoe notwithstanding.

"Ayyy, careful!" laughed Fabio, ducking below his mother's hand. "You'll mess up my hair."

Now it was Pasqualina's turn to give a wistful smile and look out across the valley. "But you are right, Fabio," she told him, her gaze fixed on some point off in the distance. "You *will* be too busy. So don't look back, not ever when you finally leave here. This place is a cage, a very pretty cage, but a cage all the same, and it's full of pretty traps. So get out there in the world and make your mark if you can. Don't give this little molehill a second thought until you get everything you want. And don't you worry about us, either, we'll always love you and we'll always be here for you if you need us."

"Hey, what are you trying to do, Zia," said Fabio, giving her a playful poke, "make me cry?"

"Hah!" laughed Pasqualina, coming back to herself. "That I

would never want to do.” With that she got to her feet and gave her nephew’s cheek a pinch. “And now, *bellissimo*, it’s time for me to go,” she said. “Your uncle will be wanting his supper.”

“Ciao, Pina,” said Liliana.

“Ciao, Liliana.”

“Tell Zio I said hi,” said Fabio.

“And you do what I told you when you get to Milano, *capisci?*” replied his aunt.

“*Si*,” said Fabio with a solemn nod.

After Pasqualina went on her way, Fabio and his mother sat for a few moments in silence. As he listened to the breeze whispering across the rooftops, Fabio looked down to the valley, hoping to catch sight of the two walkers on the road to see who they might be. By now, though, the pair were lost from view, so he sat back and folded his arms, thinking back to that long ago afternoon when he had sat there waiting and waiting, but his father had never come home.

“How old would Papa be right now if he were still alive today?” he wondered aloud.

His mother did not respond right away, even though she readily knew the answer to his query. “What makes you ask?” she said at last.

“I was just thinking about him, that’s all,” said Fabio.

“He would have been fifty-nine,” Liliana told him.

“Fifty-nine,” Fabio repeated. “So he was forty when I was born. That’s not old, I suppose, but it’s not really young either, is it? Why have I never thought about that?”

“You’re father and I married late,” said Liliana with a shrug, “and *he* died early. There’s nothing really to think about. That’s just the way things get arranged sometimes in life.”

Fabio paused to consider her words. “Do you think Zia was right?” he said after a time. “Do you think he would have been proud of me?”

“Your papa?” laughed his mother. “You were his whole

world. Of course he would be proud of you. He *is* proud of you, as a matter of fact.”

At that Fabio smiled. “But do you think he would have liked it better—I don’t know, let’s say if I played *calcio* instead of dancing? I was always good at it in school, you know. I could have been a great *portiere*.”

Liliana gave a dismissive wave. “The world is full enough of people who like to run around and kick soccer balls,” she said. “Your father knew that you too could have very easily been one of them if that was what you wanted to do. But he also knew that you have a very special gift, *figlio mio*, one more important than being able to throw yourself on the ground to keep the ball out of the net.”

“I don’t know about that, Mamma,” Fabio pointed out with a chuckle. “Keeping the ball out of your own net is pretty important in this country.”

“So is following your heart and using the gifts God gave you,” she replied. “Or at least it should be. You see, Fabio, you have something beautiful inside, something that everyone else can see right away when you dance. It’s like when you look at a really beautiful painting or a statue, you know right away that no matter what kind of crazy life he might have been living, something wonderful must have been going on inside the artist who created it, even if he didn’t know it himself. And like any artist, you give part of it away to whoever looks at what you do, you share with them that wonderful thing going on inside you.”

“So, you’re suggesting I should take up painting?” said Fabio, giving her a sideways look.

Liliana rolled her eyes and looked upwards with hands folded, as if praying for patience. “What I’m suggesting is that you had better watch yourself when you go to Milano tomorrow,” she told him. “*Sto attento!* And I don’t care how much of a big shot on Broadway you become someday, you’d better not ever forget your mother. Now eat something before you go. You’re

too skinny. People will think that I don't feed you."

Fabio took his mother's hand and kissed it. "Don't worry, Mamma," he told her. "Everybody knows you take good care of me." Then, as he pushed away from the table and stood, he said, "I should be going now. Enzo will be waiting for me on the piazza."

Liliana eyed him sharply. "So, you are going out tonight to have fun with your friends," she said. "And then what? How many days will you be away in Milano?"

"Three," Fabio told her. "The auditions are on Monday, and then the call backs will be on Tuesday."

"And how do you know you'll get a call back?"

"Mamma, please," said Fabio, rolling his eyes as if this was the most ridiculous question he had ever heard. Then he grabbed his valise and was off to the piazza.