

NO WAY HOME

by Stephen Allen Holmes

Leaving a birthday gathering for a friend at the American Bar, I walked among this generation's beautiful people strolling on the via Vittorio Veneto. I was tired. Perhaps I'd sipped one cognac too many, so I returned to my villa atop one of the seven fabled hills of Rome. I love being in the air conditioning and seeing the blistering streets of Rome spread out before me through my window wall.

My maid turned a TV on as background noise so that I might nap. It was a live awards show with movers and shakers walking the red carpet next to celebrities. I recognized an old friend.

For no obvious reason, I had a terrifying premonition. I knew Monique should flip off her glamorous stiletto heeled shoes and run away as fast as she could. My body began trembling, fearful she was about to die. I was helpless to save her, so I pushed 'record' and tivoed her death.

I know I shouldn't watch her die over and over, but I can't help it. We were once in love. Or, she was in lust and I was in love. I don't know for certain any longer.

We'd run into each other many times over the years. Always a pleasure. In fact, the last time, I told her I knew I'd see her at least one more time so we might finally hold that conversation we'd avoided for so long. Or, even if we couldn't talk, I said I might see her across a crowded room and catch her eye and she would wink. But I never thought I would outlive her.

She was still lovely, but the cameras were searching for young starlets among the celebrities. Even so, she always seemed to stay centered on my TV screen.

Center stage. She was born to be center stage. No matter what name she went by, she was always center stage.

I was a nobody fresh out of college spending my hard earned savings on the first vacation I'd ever had when we met in the South of France. Recently out of UCLA, I was fluent in Italian and Castillian Spanish. I'd only spent five frustrating days in a French class so, logically, I should have gone to Rome or Madrid, but they didn't appeal to me. I had this daydream of meeting an exciting young French woman who was lying topless on a Cote d'Azur white sand beach.

I landed in Nice and ran into an American actor who did voice-overs. He introduced me to some bikini clad lookers who didn't wanted to be more than friends. They liked my football player's hard body, but they weren't in the market to have an affair with a foreigner.

We kept being invited to parties given by an older moneyed crowd who liked to chat with young beautiful women and men. We were mere decorations, like their expensive clothes. My naivete was amusing, and my poverty was ignored because I was so handsome and strong. I didn't care if they were merely tolerating me. Old and young, these were jet setters. Born poor, this was an opportunity I might never have again.

The Cannes Film Festival was about to start. One of our crowd, Ed Sullivan, insisted we should come up the coast to enjoy the pageantry and mingle with the stars he knew.

I couldn't go. I couldn't afford to keep up with moneyed people. Reluctantly, I said good-

bye as they packed to leave.

An Italian Baroness came to my rescue by asking me to travel with her as her fiancé, no strings attached, she would pay for everything. Sixtyish, she wanted to shock her friends by introducing me as her twenty-three year old lover and soon to be husband. I'd never been kept before. Having worked my way through college, I couldn't resist going along as a lark.

Before we drove to Cannes, the Baroness had a tailor make me some suits and sports clothes befitting a man worthy of becoming her bridegroom. We stayed in a villa several blocks up from the Carlton and the Croisette. Evenings, in formal dress, we went from restaurants to night clubs with the Baroness picking up the tabs. I got to meet all the beautiful people and many famous Hollywood types. I liked Kim Novak. She was just as stunning off screen, but she wasn't as introverted as roles she played in her movies. She told wonderful stories.

We attended some of the screenings until my patron got bored wasting her days inside theaters. The paparazzi snapped us wherever we went, whatever we were doing. Because of my looks, my stylish wardrobe, and the people I was around, they must have thought I was someone worth filming, not just a kid in the midst of a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I saw newspaper and magazine photos of myself with the in-crowd. I liked feeling important.

Thinking I was after a title and money, the Baroness's friends were very suspicious of me and protective of her. Even so, they were polite and gregarious. They welcomed me into their doings so as not to insult my bride-to-be.

One evening, the Baroness asked me to go fetch Gary Cooper who was staying at the Carlton. He was a friend and she wanted him to come to her party. When I knocked on his suite's door, it was opened by the most beautiful young woman I'd ever seen. Heart stoppingly

gorgeous, she knew I was having a hard time thinking about anything but her. She was obviously amused by my reaction.

“Yes?” she asked in unaccented Continental English.

“Hello,” I managed to say. “I’m Alex Harding. The Baroness Vecino asked me to come make certain Mr. Cooper didn’t forget her engagement party. She wants me to escort him to the villa just to be certain he doesn’t lose his way.”

“Gary’s a big boy,” she said. “I’m certain the taxi drivers all know where the Baroness is staying. But, please come in. I’ll let him know you’re here.”

She wore a white evening gown with a diamond necklace hanging intriguingly low in her cleavage. She looked like she might be Kim Novak’s younger, far more attractive, sister. Her short blond hair was swept back in Novak’s style. I thought she might own Tiffany’s instead of just having breakfast there. She walked away with that graceful swinging gait European women master. I was sorry to see her disappear into a different room.

Soon Mr. Cooper came out and we introduced ourselves. He wore a perfectly tailored black evening suit that probably cost much more than the car I’d left parked back home.

“Please tell the Baroness I’ll be late to your engagement party, Alex. My excuse is I’m in a movie that starts shooting next week and I’m running my lines with Diana. She’s helping me memorize the script. I’ll be along in a couple of hours.”

He was very polite. I asked him about his new film hoping Diana would come back into view, but she didn’t.

Later, I saw the two of them enter the villa’s ballroom. I asked the Baroness about the young woman. An amused look crossed her face.

“You could be like her, if you want,” she said so only I could hear. I had no idea what she meant and she obviously saw the puzzled look on my face. “She’s a courtesan, Alex. She’s becoming wealthy by being beautiful and charming. Sophisticated men and women pay her very well for her time and occasional liaisons.”

“She’s a hooker!” I said.

“Hookers live in the U.S., Alex. Courtesans are Continental. They aren’t whores, they’re entertainers. This one came from parents who lost everything in the V2 attacks on London. She’s intelligent and ambitious, an Oxford graduate. I have no doubt that one day she’ll marry one of the richest men in the world. That’s her goal and she never loses sight of it. You could learn a lot from her, things I’m too old to teach you.”

“I know it must be unbecoming for me, during our own engagement party, to drool at another woman. I apologize. I can tell you were her equal a few years back.”

“I like compliments, Alex, but please don’t start sounding like a gigolo. One of the things I love about you is how sincere and real you are in that North American way.”

While the Baroness introduced me to everyone as the young man she was stealing from the cradle, she pointed out two men she wanted me to get to know. Baron Sepi Dubronovich, was a forty-something, dark haired, handsome continental type whose family lost everything in the war, including their country to the Soviets. Alejandro Cordova was a dashing young man with longish black hair and blazing blue eyes. He looked like an artist and less intimidating, so I went to talk with him first.

He invited me out to a terrace to chat privately.

“Congratulations, Alex,” he said when we were away from the crowd. “You’ve done

exceedingly well. Soon you will be a baron by marriage and that still carries weight with these people. Of course, she has a history and doesn't have a lot of money, but she owns a half dozen villas in various countries. If I were in your position, it would be my first business to figure out how to make each property income producing. Put in some vineyards, do estate bottling, charge the jet setters an arm and leg to say they've just vacationed with you and the Baroness."

Of course he was off track. He thought my engagement was real. I didn't tell him the truth because the Baroness wanted to play her gag out. So, instead of talking about me and how to run her affairs, I changed the subject.

"You seem to know what a man should do after marrying for money. Why's that?"

"You met Salvador Dali and his wife this evening, didn't you?"

I didn't know why he asked, but I said, "Yes."

"I'm her lover. Have been for years. Salvador has a mistress. We're all very friendly. I apprenticed with him and one thing led to another. You might say I'm a less fortunate gigolo than you. I understand you are new at all this. That's why I wanted to speak with you privately."

"Well, I appreciate that, but why do you say you're less fortunate than me?"

"Being a kept man, I have no security. She can kick me out at any time. Marrying the Baroness, you'll have security if you don't sign a prenuptial agreement. Dump her if she insists on one of those. You've got cache' now. Other women, and men, will want to take you in. Don't let them, unless they pay up front. You must accumulate a bank account so you can weather the 'between times' in style. Has she given you any money?"

"No. Just clothes."

"That's typical. If you don't have resources they can make you almost a slave, like some

wives. I've been living in style but I haven't been able to stash much away until recently. Last month she gave me a Ferrari for my birthday and I think she's regretting it because I could sell it and leave her."

"Do you love her, or like her?" I asked.

"I love the life I lead now and her for choosing to share it with me. A man can fall in love with anyone if he's so inclined, but why bother? Love is for children. You must understand that or you wouldn't be marrying the Baroness."

"So, you see this as a business."

"Of course. Being in the circles we move in, other opportunities will arise and we'll take advantage of them just like all good business people do. Our resource is ourselves. We must nurture and perfect ourselves in many ways to survive. There will always be younger newcomers who want to replace us."

"Exactly right! Alejandro," Baron Dubronovich said as he closed the door to the ballroom behind him. "Alex, I hope you're listening carefully to what my friend's been saying. I know the Baroness wants you to learn. She sent me out to share some of what I do."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes. I coach men and women to be my lovers and then to branch out on their own. Of course, I'm always looking for the right woman for myself, one who can afford to keep me in a style to which I wish to become accustomed."

"Like the Baroness?" I asked.

"Oh, certainly not. She doesn't have wealth enough for me and I don't want to help build up her neglected properties."

“What are you looking for then?”

“I want to find a tycoon’s widow. The younger the better. You see, women want men who are sexually sophisticated, who can bring them unexpected pleasure and excitement. You, young man, must learn to be a masterful lover. Even as you age, a reputation as a great lover will keep money flowing into your savings accounts. As you travel from country to country, deposit the bulk of your wealth in Switzerland. They were stable even during the war.”

“How do I become a great lover?”

“You practice with great teachers. Let a woman show you how to make love to another woman before and after you’ve pleased her. You can also learn a great deal about your own physiology by letting homosexuals explore you –”

“We’d better be going in,” Alejandro interrupted. “My patroness will be wondering who I’m with and what I’m doing with her.”

“Here’s my card, Alex,” Sepi said before he turned to go inside. “Let’s continue this conversation when you aren’t so filled with the joy of your new engagement.” He’s very discreet, I thought.

When my two would-be mentors returned to the ballroom, I stayed outside leaning on a railing and looking at the beautiful little city overlooking the sea. It was the first town I’d seen built for the enjoyment of wealth. I knew I was at a crossroad, that I had to decide whether to change my whole life. My intellect was inclined to go back to LA and the world I’d grown up in, but my heart wanted to stay and become what these men thought I already was.

A soft hand settled on my shoulder and a warm, alluringly scented, female body pressed against my back.

“I didn’t want you to think I didn’t know who you were when you came to the hotel,” Diana whispered. “I knew instantly the way your mind works when you said ‘her engagement party’ instead of ‘ours’. Welcome to the club.”

“Thank you. I thought you were laughing at me.”

“Only a little. You reminded me of me when I first turned pro. Use your brains. Insist on money up front. Good luck,” she said and walked away before I could turn to look at her face.

I think I fell in love with her as I watched her stroll elegantly back to the ballroom. She was more together than anyone I’d ever met. More sensual than any woman I’d ever seen or imagined, but far too distant. I wanted to take her in my arms. I wanted to talk with her for hours, both in and out of bed. Was I thinking and feeling like every other man she’d met? Or every woman, for that matter? Probably so.

I saw her often. I kept company with almost the same people she did. She never made any attempt to talk with me and avoided my lame advances.

Oddly, to my mind, wealthy Europeans loved driving around in big American cars instead of their own sportier makes. Alejandro rented a huge Cadillac convertible and the Baroness had a long white Thunderbird convertible. One day, after everyone was tired of the beach, Alejandro challenged the Baroness to a road race on the high cornice road to Nice.

The Thunderbird held six, three in front and three in back. Naturally, I had to sit in the middle of the front seat next to the Baroness. By chance, Diana sat next to me on the passenger side. It was the first time we’d been close since the engagement party. Her body touching mine, even through clothing, set my libido on fire. Fortunately I was seated and she didn’t notice what otherwise would have been obvious.

The road race was actually frightening. The Baroness had no business driving fast. Those two four-wheeled boats were not meant for the narrow twisty turns, and the passing was terrifying. Diana and I were so tense we didn't make a sound except to scream when the cars seemed totally out of control.

Alejandro was trying to pass us on the left when a car emerged around a blind corner racing at us from the other direction. Everyone slammed on their brakes and the Thunderbird went spinning around. It came to a very abrupt stop as we hit a boulder head on, which happily prevented us from going over the cliff. This was in the days before people used seatbelts.

It all happened in slow motion, like it often did for me during dramatic football plays. The Baroness was safe because she gripped the steering wheel and I did the same with my left hand. Diana was flung forward and I watched her start to fly over the windshield. Instinctively, my right hand flashed out and grabbed her by the belt. I pulled her back into the car and then immediately grabbed one of the back seat passengers who was flying directly over my head. I pulled him down and he crash landed awkwardly on me and Diana.

One of the girls in the back was ejected, but she landed without going over the cliff's edge. She was cut and scraped and bleeding badly. Alejandro turned his Cadillac around and we all crammed in uncomfortably for the ride to a hospital.

I was surprised when Diana didn't say thanks, or anything about me pulling her back into the car and saving her life. I wanted to be her hero, but perhaps she wasn't aware of exactly what happened in all the excitement. I never told her. She might have not believed me.

Even along the coast, France was becoming unacceptably hot by the end of July. The

Baroness told me we were going to Sweden for cooler weather. She bought me a a large suitcase for my tailor-made clothes. I told all my new acquaintances and friends that we were leaving on the coming weekend.

Two days later, as I was taking my usual morning walk along the boulevard, a taxi drove up and slowed to stay alongside. Diana rolled down the rear side window and said, “Men like you should not be allowed to run around loose on the streets. Get in.”

It was an invitation I never even considered refusing. We hadn’t spent any time together, just the two of us, all summer. She was wearing a silk summer dress over, apparently nothing. She wore her usual high heels and a scarf on her head to protect her golden tresses from sun damage. As always, one look at her and I was in love again.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Does something have to be up, Alex? Can’t a girl just say hello without you being suspicious?”

“I’ve never seen you to do, or even say, anything without a motive.”

“Am I so transparent? Others don’t think so.”

“Maybe it’s because I’ve been studying you ever since I first saw you.”

“And why would you do that?” she asked and then told the driver a destination.

“I’m sure all men stare at you, but I’ve been admiring your poise and competence ever since you told me I should be a gigolo.”

“I never said that!”

“Not in so many words, but that’s what you meant. You knew I was just a dumb kid from California, but you treated me like an equal that evening. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But, I think you’re a liar. It isn’t my poise and competence you’ve been fascinated by, it’s my face and body.”

“True, but so is what I said. I do admire you.”

“Enough to come live with me for the month of August?” She cocked her head and waited for my reaction.

My heart started beating irregularly. I didn’t know what to answer. I didn’t want to play the fool if she was teasing, but I didn’t want to miss living with her if she wasn’t making fun of me.

“You’ve never given me even a clue that you wanted to spend time with me. Why now?”

“Better late than never. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes.”

“So don’t play hard to get. It’s in your eyes even though you try to appear cool. You want to be with me more than you’ve ever wanted anything else in your life. Isn’t that true?”

“It is.”

“Good. That’s settled. Resistance is futile, you know. We’re on our way to a flat I’ve rented in St. Tropez. Your meager luggage is in the trunk. The Baroness has agreed to let me have my way with you for a month or two. Is that a problem?”

“None at all. But ---”

“But what? I know you want to be with me as much as I want you.”

“True, but a very wise young lady told me not to give myself away too cheaply, I should always get money up front she said.”

“You are a good student. I’ll tell you what. I guarantee to make this experience worth

your while. If, in the end, you think I've underpaid you, just tell me and I'll give you all the money you feel is due. I will."

"Deal."

"Good."

"Why me?"

"Because you're sexy."

"Now try the truth," I said.

"OK. Everyone in France takes August off from work because it's insufferably hot. I've been working for years without a real vacation. You're not like the people I'm normally around. You're a decent honest boy/man who wants to love me in an innocent way that I've never experienced. Some vacationers go to distant places for peace of mind. I'm going to you because you are sweet and I want to experience your passionate innocent lovemaking. It's my idea of a perfect holiday."

And so, we wrapped ourselves in a cocoon of summer days and nights filled with our love and laughter. Surprisingly, she was an amazingly fine cook, having studied at Le Cordon Bleu. Since I was reluctant to let her out of my sight, I watched and learned. She made a point of teaching me about art and music, too.

One month stretched into two, and I began to have hope we would never part. She revealed her own sweet innocent inner self to me and soaked me in her sweat as I discovered all the ways she loved to make love.

Even so, all summers turn into falls and winters.

One day, I came home from shopping for groceries and she was packed, sitting on her luggage in our front room, waiting for my return.

“Thank you for loving me, Alex,” she said before I could say anything. “It’s been extraordinary. You are more than I could have ever hoped for, in so many ways. I know it hurts both of us that I’m leaving, but it would hurt us more if you stayed with me while I’m working with other bodies in other settings. I want you to remember us as untouched by the reality of what we are. I love you. I’ll carry the memories we’ve created for the rest of my life. Thank you.”

Of course I tried to change her mind, but I knew she was right. Our love could not survive our lives as prostitutes. If we gave up the luxury of other people’s money, we could live together, but we would become ordinary. Since she was incapable of that change, we had to let each other go before there was any bitterness between us.

The taxi driver put her luggage in the trunk and waited behind the wheel for us to finish saying farewell.

“I’m afraid you will grieve too much, Alex, and do something stupid like going back to Los Angeles. Do you remember what I promised you when I asked you to come live with me?”

“What?” I asked because I was too depressed to bother trying to think.

“I said I’d pay you if you felt you didn’t get adequately compensated while we were together. I always keep my promises, and so must you. How much do I owe you?”

“You’re fishing for a compliment. You know it’s I who owe you, Diana. No amount of money would be worth our time together.”

“That’s sweet. You’re sweet, but you have to toughen up. To prevent you from fleeing

back to your miserable life in North America, I've paid the rent here until January first. Use these months wisely. I've landed an Arab who finally decided that being with me for a time was worth a million, so don't worry about me. I've left you a 'Dear Alex' letter on the kitchen table, things I'm too shy to say in person."

She never looked back as the cab drove away.

Her handwritten letter was taped to a thick sealed manila envelope.

Thank you, sweetheart, for teaching me what young love is like. In all the time we were together your eyes never strayed from me, so you missed seeing the women, and men, who were admiring you. You've met them all, so I've made a list of their names. Be kind to them when they're around. I've contacted each of them on your behalf. They're all more than willing to fatten your bank accounts in return for your attentions.

A male courtesan must be able to finance some of his adventures until he's heavily in demand, so I've left you a little something I knew you would refuse if I told you about it before I was gone. I will always love you. Diana.

P.S. Remember, I can easily afford this gift.

The envelope was filled with bank notes from several countries, but none from the U.S. There was about fifty thousand dollars worth in the envelope.

Years later, while I was in Paris seated four rows back from center stage watching the Russian Ballet, I got the feeling I was being watched. I looked around at those nearby but none were paying attention to me. Then, I saw her sitting in the front left side balcony box with three elegant men. She smiled when I caught her eye. She winked and I winked back. Our secret was

still sacred and unsullied.

Another time, we had cocktails together during intermission at La Scala. I always kept my eye out for her wherever I was in hopes of seeing her wink at me again, at least one more time. And I did.

I saw her when she was Emma, Jana, Samantha, Doreen and a few more. I never asked why she kept changing her name but she finally told me.

“I change my name and a little of my persona with each new husband or significant patron. They don’t care. They’ve got the trophy they wanted and the names mean nothing to them. I’m married now to a billionaire and he’s the only one who’s been curious. He saw my birth certificate. How could I tell him I love him only for his money and its security? He should never know that Diana existed only during that one sweet innocent love affair I had with you. Diana has never been unfaithful to you, Alex.”

One time, she asked me to go to her hotel and make love with her, but I said, ‘No, I can’t go through the pain of another separation from you.’ She laughed at me. She said I hadn’t toughened up at all.

I’m an old raconteur now, privately teaching young men and women how to make themselves irresistible.

It’s sad that God lets terrorists live.

An entertainment reporter held a microphone out to my Diana, Monique to him, and asked what award she was to present. She turned to the camera and stared into the lens for a brief moment without speaking. In the background, I heard someone shout something indistinct, but

hostile. She ignored the commotion. Diana smiled and clearly winked at her viewers just before some asshole's bomb extinguished the picture. I'll never forget that look.

I think she knew. I think she was saying hi and good-bye to me.