

# The Italian Matchmaker

---

**England**

**Spring, 2001**

Luca stood alone in the library, gazing out of the window at the glistening gardens of Dinton Manor. The clouds hung low and heavy in the Hampshire sky, releasing a light but persistent drizzle. A couple of blackbirds pecked the grass in search of worms before returning to the towering lime trees that had just begun to sprout new green leaves. The peaceful silence was punctuated every now and then by whoops of laughter that erupted from the drawing-room on the other side of the hall where the rest of the house party were commenting loudly on the Sunday papers or playing Scrabble. Luca found their *joie de vivre* grating. He had only come for Freya, having lost touch with her over the years. He admired her home, her family, her obvious contentment, and realised that in the last two decades he had somehow drifted off course.

He blew smoke against the glass, lost in a fog of melancholy as he considered his life. He was forty-one. Single again. Father of two little girls entangled in the wreckage of an acrimonious divorce. Unemployed, having quit the City after twenty years as a fund manager, making money with such dedication that making money had become an end in itself – a greedy, empty existence that gave him no satisfaction.

He had left the City in a blaze of speculation. Telephones

had buzzed as the news travelled across continents, leaving the banking world in a state of shock. Luca Chancellor, with a billion under management, had sold out to his two partners and just walked away. No one could explain it and Luca wasn't giving any answers. Instead, he had put his head down, turned off his mobile telephone and fled to the countryside. After a structured life in finance his newfound freedom made him uneasy; it had no limits.

Before he could dwell further on his unravelling life, he sensed he was no longer alone. The scent of ginger lily reminded him of that summer long ago when he and Freya had been lovers. She slid her arm around his waist and leaned against him.

'Here you are, Luca. What are you doing?'

'Thinking.'

'Thinking's dangerous. What are you thinking about?'

The smile in her voice encouraged him. 'You and me. Summer of seventy-nine.'

'You mean the summer I fell in love with you, only to be rejected when autumn came?' She laughed, able now to make light of a situation that had hurt her deeply at the time. 'Cast aside with all the other women who thought they'd be the one to tame you.'

'You've always been different. Letting you go was the stupidest thing I ever did.'

'Don't be so hard on yourself. It wasn't meant to be.'

'You would have been good for me.'

'I'm not sure *you'd* have been good for *me*. You were far too handsome and arrogant to stay faithful to one woman.'

'I'm a different man from the one I was back then.'

'Leopards don't change their spots. Once a bounder, always

a bounder. Still, you lasted with Claire for what? Ten years? That's nine more than I expected.'

'Look at you,' he said, turning to face her, his cornflowerblue eyes intense with regret. 'Happily married to Miles. Big, beautiful country house. Four blond, rosy children.' He ran his gaze over her features. 'More beautiful with every passing year.'

She blushed. 'Oh, Luca, really, don't. You only want what you can't have.'

'Are you happy with Miles?'

'Very.' She curled a tendril of blonde hair behind her ear.

'Pity. I'd like to make love to you again.'

Freya withdrew her arm. 'Just because you're half Italian doesn't mean you can say things like that to a married woman.'

'You're my oldest friend. There's nothing I can't say to you.' He dragged on his cigarette, now barely a stub.

She lifted a china ashtray from the sofa table and handed it to him. 'That's a horrid habit. You should quit.'

'Now's not a good time.'

'It never is.'

'It's as if I'm dying and seeing my life pass before my eyes. I was so consumed with making money I never had time for the important things. I've messed up my marriage. I never wanted to be one of those fathers who tears his children's lives apart. But look at me. I've made more money than even Claire can spend in a lifetime. I doubt she can remember the last time she travelled commercial. Bloody woman's fleecing me for as much as she can get. Yet, if she's a monster, I've only myself to blame for turning her into one. Money's no substitute for love. In spite of all my worldly goods, Freya,

I'm an empty vessel.'

She touched his arm. 'The girls will survive. I did.'

'You were lucky. Your mother married again very quickly.

Fitz picked you up before you had time to fall on your nose.

Your mother's not vindictive like Claire. She's sensible. She didn't poison you against your father.'

'It's still bewildering when you discover your parents don't love each other anymore and want to be with someone else.

However amicable, you still feel you're in some way to blame – they don't love you enough to stay together. But children are resilient. They adapt quickly. Yours will too.'

'John Tresco is no Fitzroy Davenport. It makes my skin crawl to think of him being a father to my daughters.'

He paled and took a final drag before stubbing out his cigarette.

'Why don't you disappear for the summer? You were just telling me about that amazing *palazzo* your parents have bought. The Amalfi coast sounds the perfect place to go and check out for a few months. Decide what you want to do.

London is stifling in the summer and everyone goes away.

You'll only be miserable if you stay. Perhaps your girls could join you there in the holidays. Children love palaces.'

'There's nothing peaceful about my mother! I've spent most of my adult life avoiding her.'

'At the expense of your father.'

'She's relentlessly social. Can't think how he puts up with all those people. That's not what I need right now.'

'A change of scenery will do you good – sun, sea, time to reflect.'

'On all my mistakes!'

'No one's perfect.'

‘I’m carrying a heavy load, Freya.’

‘Then drop it. Go and visit your parents. I know Romina can be a bit over the top but she’s got a good heart. Blood is thicker than water and besides, I’m sure they’re longing to show you their *palazzo*.’

He looked at her and grinned. For an instant her stomach lurched as she glimpsed the handsome rogue of her youth in his now jaded features. ‘You see how good you are for me,’ he said, the twinkle in his eyes restored. ‘I should have married you while I had the chance. It’s taken me years to discover that the woman I have always loved has been right beside me all along. Miles is a lucky man.’

‘You’ll laugh at this conversation one day. You don’t really love me, you love what I represent. I’m like a sheltered harbour, but once you’ve taken time to recharge, you’ll realise that you don’t want a sheltered harbour. You’ve always been a man for the high seas. I’m far too placid for you, you’d get bored with me again like you did in seventy-nine.’

‘You’re wrong. I was never bored of you, I wasn’t ready to settle down, that’s all. Bad timing.’

‘Come, let’s go back to the drawing-room. Mum and Fitz will be arriving soon for lunch.’

‘No, let’s go for a walk.’

‘In this drizzle?’

‘You’re meant to be a country girl!’

‘It’s a huge pretence. I have to keep it up for Miles. He won’t touch London with a bargepole. Are you sure you don’t want to give Annabel a try?’ she asked, changing the subject.

‘I can tell she fancies you.’

‘She’s got that lean and hungry look that turns my blood cold,’ he replied, watching Freya’s nose crinkle with laughter.

‘I’ve begun to notice it in the eyes of single women pushing forty – as well as the loud tick-tock of their biological clocks.

Thank you, Freya, for thinking of me, but I’ll pass.’

‘A good hostess thinks of all her guests’ needs.’

‘My only need is one that you are unable to give me.’

‘And one you shouldn’t mention under my roof,’ she retorted swiftly.

‘You never used to be so proper.’

‘I’m married,’ she repeated, with emphasis.

He sighed. ‘That’s not how I like to remember you.’

‘I don’t want to know how you remember me.’ She blushed again.

‘Car bonnet, your parents’ barn, midnight, summer . . .’

‘Enough! I don’t know what you’re referring to! I’m ready for that walk now. Let’s see if the others want a brisk route march before roast lamb.’

Luca wished she hadn’t asked the entire house party – of adults, children and dogs – to join them on their walk. He didn’t feel in the least bit sociable. Besides, there was no one except Freya he wished to talk to. Miles, every bit the landowner in Barbour, boots and tweed cap, led them up the track towards the wood, his wife dutifully walking a few paces behind with her brother-in-law and his wife. Luca found himself accompanied on both sides by women. Annabel, whom Freya had picked as his date, was pretty but dry like a chicken roasted too long in the oven, while Emily, whose vertically challenged husband hung behind with their children, was red-faced and plump as a goose force-fed for *foie gras*. He disguised his scowl by lifting his chin, his height giving him a great advantage, and watched Freya’s streaked blonde curls bounce against her back as she marched through

the long grass to keep up with her husband. He couldn't imagine what she saw in Miles, nice as he was. Two of their children hurried past, chasing a black Labrador, and he observed their golden hair and skin, inherited, as fortune would have it, from their mother. Miles had that pale, Celtic skin dappled with freckles, his thinning hair a dull reddish blond. It irked Luca to see Freya with a man like that. Had she married a man like *him* he would have raised his glass and bowed out of the game, graciously accepting defeat from an equal player. Miles wasn't his equal; Miles was inferior on every level. Freya had clearly compromised.

'Come on, slow coaches!' Miles shouted at the entrance of the wood. 'You won't work up an appetite unless you put in a bit of effort.' His Labrador sat obediently at his feet, panting excitedly.

'It's like boot camp,' Emily complained. 'Miles always has to be the first, whether it's on the ski slope or tennis court, he always has to be the best.'

'And is he?' Luca asked, shoving his hands into his coat pockets.

'No,' said Emily dryly. 'At least not when he's playing tennis against Hugo. My husband might be short but he moves quickly around the court.' She lowered her voice. 'Miles is not a very good loser.'

'You've known them a long time?'

'Almost ten years. Since they moved down here. We live about twenty minutes away, just outside Alresford. We met through mutual friends. Freya's heavenly. Not a competitive bone in her body.'

'What makes them work as a couple?' he pressed. Emily's round face beamed at the chance to enlighten the handsome

Continental.

‘You could say they work because they’re opposites. Freya’s so laid-back. Miles is sporty and competitive. Freya just rolls her eyes and smiles.’ She glanced warily at Annabel and lowered her voice. ‘I think Miles is rather pompous, actually. Perhaps Freya likes a man who takes control.’

‘What do you think, Annabel?’ Luca thought he might as well get something out of the walk. It was now drizzling heavily and he could feel a cold trickle down his back. Hunching his shoulders he wondered how long it would be until lunch.

‘Miles is a very good lover,’ Annabel stated authoritatively. Luca shuddered. The thought of Freya making love to Miles was as unappealing as the rain trickling down his spine.

‘Did she tell you that?’

Emily honked with laughter. ‘Did she really say Miles is a good lover?’ she echoed, suddenly seeing him in a completely different light. ‘Well I never.’ She couldn’t wait to tell Hugo. ‘Yes, he’s got an enormous cock,’ Annabel explained as if she were discussing the size of his car. ‘And he enjoys pleasuring her. He can stay down there for hours.’ Luca looked more appreciatively at Annabel. He liked women who were unashamed of sex. It had been Freya’s innocence that had frightened him back in ’79.

‘Secrets of the powder room?’

‘I’m sure Freya would kill you if she knew you had told us,’ said Emily, clearly titillated by the conversation.

‘But she won’t know, will she?’ replied Annabel coolly. ‘It’s not the kind of thing one discusses over dinner, is it?’

‘So how come she told you that piece of intimate gossip?’

Luca asked, watching Freya walk on ahead of them, oblivious



of her secrets being divulged.

‘We got drunk one evening just after she’d met Miles. I’d had a regrettable night with a man who looked like Sylvester Stallone but was a terrible disappointment, and she just came out with it. Looks can be deceptive. Miles is not only rich but a wonderful lover too. What more can a woman want?’ Up ahead, Freya joined her husband. He put an arm around her waist and drew her against him a moment while the others caught up. They shared a joke and she briefly rested her head on his shoulder. Luca felt jealousy rise in his throat. Miles wasn’t handsome but he was a good lover. He couldn’t help but wonder how *he* compared. It was so long ago now, Freya had probably forgotten. Yet, Luca hadn’t forgotten her. His memories of making love to Freya were like scenes on a video. He could take it out and play them over and over again at will. She had been naïve, sweet as nectar, and shy. He had opened her up like a bud and deflowered her. He had kissed her embarrassment away and she had let herself go, abandoning herself to the pleasures of sex. Then he had casually tossed her aside, scared off by the intensity of her desire to marry and live happily ever after. He had dropped her, leaving her to be picked up by Miles with his big house, big ego and big cock. If he had been more mature where would they all be now?

While Emily whispered Freya’s secrets to Hugo, Luca began to feel an unspoken connection with Annabel, like a pair of thieves recently returned from a robbery. They walked on, chatting like old friends, with the undertone of a growing sexual chemistry. Luca didn’t notice the glances that Freya threw in his direction. She had invited Annabel for his amusement, but now that they seemed to be enjoying each other’s

company, she didn't like it.

The house party returned hot and flushed, their hair wet but their spirits high. The smell of roast lamb wafted down the corridor from the kitchen. Heather Dervish had come from the village to cook and Peggy, the cleaner, who lived in the cottage at the end of the drive, had come to help serve.

Peggy had replaced her usual dowdy clothes with a bright red smock dress with matching red tights and silver-buckled shoes into which she had only just managed to squeeze her marshmallow feet. Freya did a double take, gathered herself and said, 'Gosh, Peggy, you look splendid, but you needn't have gone to such trouble on our account.'

Peggy smoothed her hands down her dress. 'I haven't worn this in years,' she replied proudly. 'Do you think I'm mutton dressed as lamb?' Freya ran her eyes up and down the sixtyeight-year-old widow's fulsome body and decided not to tell the truth. After all, Peggy had dressed up for her stepfather's benefit and he'd be highly amused. She went over the top every time he came to visit.

'I think you look lovely,' she said. Peggy's plump cheeks managed a weak blush.

The house party assembled in the drawing-room and Miles opened a bottle of champagne. The fire was lit, filling the room with the sweet scent of apple wood. Outside, the drizzle had turned to rain that rattled against the window panes like small stones. Luca sat on the sofa with Annabel. He could smell her perfume, sweet and overpowering. She leaned against him so that their shoulders touched. 'If you had to fuck anyone in this room or die, who would it be?' she asked, her face as innocent as an angel's. 'Present company excluded,' she added hastily. 'That way you don't have to be polite.' He

gazed down at her with sleepy eyes and, although he would have chosen Freya, beyond any shadow of doubt, the thought of Annabel after dessert was a tempting one.

‘Present company *included*,’ he emphasised. ‘It would have to be you.’

At that moment the tall, handsome figure of Fitzroy Davenport filled the doorway. ‘Any left for us?’ he asked, nodding at the champagne bottle Miles had just emptied.

‘Fitz!’ Freya exclaimed, hurrying across the room to greet her stepfather. ‘Where’s Mum?’

‘Here, darling, not far behind.’ Her mother squeezed past her husband. Rosemary Davenport was slim and vivacious with highlighted blonde hair cut to her shoulders and pale grey eyes like her daughter’s. She was proud of looking much younger than her sixty-six years and practised Pilates three times a week with a group of PLUs, the abbreviation Rosemary and her friends used for People Like Us. She was efficient and sociable and the first to admit that she was a little pushy: ‘If I hadn’t been pushy I would never have got Fitz up the aisle. A man like Fitz needs a pushy woman. Pushy women get things done.’

She glanced at her husband. He was blessed with enduring youth. His hair was still sandy with only the slightest hint of grey about the temples and he was more handsome now than when she had met him. For a man twice divorced he had been surprisingly acquiescent about giving marriage another go. She wasn’t the type of woman to let a good man like Fitz slip through her fingers. She might not be the beauty that some of his ex-girlfriends and wives had been but, in spite of Freya and her three half siblings, Rosemary was in pretty good shape. If she let herself go, she’d look like his mother.

‘For you, Fitz, I’ll open another bottle,’ Miles announced, working his thumbs under the cork.

‘I’ve left Bendico and Digger in the car,’ said Fitz, referring to his two yellow Labradors. ‘Might take them out this afternoon. You can show me that coppicing you’ve been doing.’

‘I’ll need to work off Heather’s lunch.’

‘I should go and say hello. How is the eccentric Peggy Blight?’

‘A fright. Don’t let her put you off your lunch.’ The two men laughed. Miles popped the cork and poured the bubbling Moët & Chandon into a tall flute.

‘If I had to fuck anyone in the room?’ Annabel mused, looking around. ‘Present company definitely excluded, it would have to be Freya’s delicious stepfather. I like tall men. He’s a good example of a man who just gets better and better. He must be late sixties, but he has the appearance of a much younger man. Yes, I think there’s a lot of life in that old dog!’

‘And present company included?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she teased. ‘Miles has already been road tested and proved very proficient indeed. Does a girl go for the dead cert or a man who looks like he has what it takes, but might be a terrible disappointment?’

‘I can assure you, you won’t be disappointed,’ he said, grinning at her confidently.

‘I’ll think about it over lunch.’

‘Of course, I have the advantage. Miles isn’t available.’

‘Nor is he handsome. That’s an advantage too – but also a disadvantage.’

‘Why?’

‘Because handsome men prize themselves very highly,

usually get what they want and therefore treat women badly. They have no respect for what doesn't challenge them.' She stood up as Peggy appeared in the doorway to announce that lunch was ready. Everyone stared in astonishment at the red ensemble, except for Fitz who approached her with a beaming smile.

'My dear Peggy!' he exclaimed. 'You're a vision in scarlet.' She blushed the colour of her tights.

'Thank you, Mr Davenport. Just something I threw on this morning. Nothing special.'

Lunch was in the dining-room at a large round walnut table. Freya had placed an elegant display of arum lilies in the centre and used the silver and crystal she'd been given as wedding presents. It was still raining, the clouds, heavy and bruised, moving slowly across the sky. Freya lit the candles because it was so dark, and the golden glow enhanced the cosiness of the room that was as stylish as its mistress.

Luca sat on Freya's left with Emily on his other side. Fitz was placed on Freya's right. As they tucked into the lamb Fitz caught up with Luca, whom he hadn't seen in a very long time.

'Freya married Miles, I married Claire, we drifted,' said Luca simply. 'Now I'm divorced I've returned to my old friends. Freya has welcomed me back without rebuke.'

'I'm sorry your marriage didn't work out.'

'So am I.' He shrugged. 'But it's life.'

'I've been through it twice. I sympathise.'

'Third time lucky, then,' said Luca. 'I don't think I'm going to be in any hurry to tie myself down again.'

'There's no need,' interjected Freya. 'You have two adorable

little girls to give all your time to.'

'I like being married,' said Fitz. 'Rosemary picked me up when I was at a low ebb and has organised my life ever since. I don't know what I'd do without her.'

'Claire just spent my money and nagged,' Luca said wryly.

'All women nag,' said Fitz. 'I hear you quit the City.'

'Yes, I've done my bit.'

'It was all over the financial pages.'

'I didn't read them.'

'No one can understand it. You've put the fear of God into them. Do you know something they don't?'

Luca shook his head and grinned. 'I woke up one morning and realised I was working like a clockwork mouse programmed to make money. To make rich men richer. It's a soulless existence. Money, money, money. How much money do I need to be happy? How much do I need to be free? I want more, I just don't know what it is yet.'

'What are you going to do?' Fitz asked.

Luca shrugged. 'That's the million dollar question.'

Freya joined in. 'I told him to take the summer off. Go to Italy and stay with his parents in their new *palazzo* on the Amalfi coast.'

Fitz's eyes lit up. 'The Amalfi coast?'

'It's a small fishing town called Incantellaria. You've probably never heard of it.'

'Incantellaria,' Fitz repeated, turning pale. 'Bill and Romina have bought Palazzo Montelimone?'

'You know it?' Luca asked.

Fitz glanced nervously at his wife. 'I went there once, many years ago. The *palazzo* was a ruin.'

'My parents bought it about three years ago. It took two

years to renovate.’

‘But what a perfect team!’ Freya exclaimed. ‘Bill’s an architect, Romina’s an interiors painter. I bet it’s stunning.’

‘They wanted to recreate it as it was before a fire almost destroyed it in the sixties. Return it to its former splendour. I haven’t gone out there yet. I’ve been too busy. I haven’t seen them in months. Now I’m free I just might pay them a visit.’

They turned to Fitz expectantly. ‘What took you to Incantellaria?’ Luca enquired.

#### 14 *Santa Montefiore*

7220\_tx.qxd 28/4/09 09:44 Page 14

Fitz stared down at his plate. ‘A very special woman.’ He said the words with such tenderness Freya felt the hairs stand up on her arms. ‘Before I met your mother, Freya,’ he added tactfully.

‘Apparently it’s a very secret place,’ said Luca.

‘Secret and secretive,’ Fitz confirmed. ‘Once you start digging in Incantellaria, there’s no telling what you’ll uncover.’