

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

THIS HOUR I LOST

Indra Vaughn

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THIS HOUR I LOST

By Indra Vaughn

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two men are sharing a bath filled with bubbles. The one on the right fills pours champagne directly into the other's mouth. They are both laughing, looking elated.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two are together against certain odds and chances. The one on the left is the rich, party boy, maybe even a millionaire. Never had to work, never gave much care, felt entitled, likes the finer things, never saw himself mingling with the other people and side of the world. Not terribly friendly, sarcastic, aloof, etc. Beautiful and "ice princess" if you will.

The one on the right has always had to work hard for everything he's got. I'm not sure I see him as a father, but maybe he's been left behind to care for his two to three younger brothers. He's modest, but he definitely has bigger dreams. He works with his hands creating beautiful furniture or homes. He doesn't put up with people's shit, least of all from a spoiled guy who knows nothing about his world. Please don't write him as the typical everyman that is innocent. He's been around the block and then some. He's scrappy... rough.

They meet by chance. They fight, but right after the rich guy ends up with amnesia and runs into the other guy whose motives you get to determine decides to convince the other one they are married and takes him back to his place as husbands.

I'd like it if both men were in their late twenties to mid-thirties. These two should fight and have fire, I wouldn't even mind this to be dark and gritty. Please no super fluff! Make these two guys WORK for their HEA. Please no insta-love. I also don't want gay-for-you at all. Please make both gay or bisexual. NO family angst due to sexuality, drugs/alcohol issues, or anything else. I want the issues and struggle to come from the two men and them falling in love. I want there to be an awakening of betrayal once it's revealed. I want ANGRY sex. This should be a complete story from meeting, amnesia, to the adjustments and falling in love, to the reveal, to the HEA. Everyone's idea of

romance is different, but I imagine these two as having atypical ideas and styles to romance. Surprise me with something that makes me melt into a puddle of goo.

This image is perhaps after one of their epic fights. They have come inside after getting dirty or throwing dishes, something. They are at the point where they say fuck it and decide to get naked and drink champagne and start laughing... finally bonding. Or perhaps they are celebrating the rich dude's birthday that the other has made up a date for. You can tinker with the idea a bit.

Sincerely,

Jenn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: action/adventure, suspense, blue collar, rich guy, amnesia, enemies to lovers

Content Warnings: violence, dubious consent due to amnesia

Word Count: 23,390

Dedication

To Jenn: I hope you enjoy the story. Thank you for leaving this prompt; it really inspired me to write. I tried to fit in as much of your request as possible so I hope it satisfied a need.

To the Love's Landscapes organizers: Thank you so much for your hard work, it's an honor to write for an amazing event like this.

THIS HOUR I LOST

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*Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept and accept the end
Of a love or a season?
—from Reluctance by Robert Frost.*

Chapter 1

Travis

From the Ciampino Airport to the center of Rome, the drive could take anywhere between forty minutes to an hour and a half, depending on traffic, time of day and the amount of buses full of tourists on the road.

“Maybe I should’ve thought twice about renting a car though,” I say to cousin Gino in the back. “I have the feeling people drive a little differently in this country.” The gearbox lets out an unhealthy screech as I shift from third to fourth. I eye the shift stick dubiously. “Is it supposed to do that?” Of course cousin Gino doesn’t answer. He always was a taciturn little shit, but that isn’t why he is quiet now.

He is quiet, because he is dead. Currently residing in a very tasteful silver music box adorned with an unobtrusive but expensive golden carved lily, I would be slightly disturbed if he did reply. I have to admit, when I peeked under the lid of the original urn, I expected there to be more ash in death to someone who’d carried around such a rotund belly in life.

A woman with large sunglasses in a Smart car cuts me off and I stomp on the brake. The nose of the large BMW dips, and I cringe when cousin Gino tumbles off the seat.

“Oops.” A glance over my shoulder tells me the music box is as hermetically sealed as promised, at least. Apparently it’s illegal to smuggle dead bodies out of the country, so I had the music box especially made. Don’t let it be said I don’t love my family. “You’re lucky you left me all your money and the house in Martha’s Vineyard, or I’d have dumped your ashes in the Sound.” It isn’t like Gino would know the difference. There is, after all, only one death.

But he did leave me all his money—not that I need it, and I already live in the house in Vineyard Haven—and I am his closest relative. So, while the urge to leave him on the mantelpiece in one of the spare living rooms was fairly strong, I booked a ticket to Rome on a whim. After a grueling flight in first class, where the champagne was lukewarm toward the end, here I am.

On the plane I had imagined putting my foot down and racing to the city center in a convertible, hair blowing in the wind. I would dump cousin Gino’s

ashes at the *Forum Romanum* where he'd met his one and only love fifty years ago—and whatever God is listening, please don't let me die a sentimental fool—then go home again.

After checking out the local gay clubs of course. I always wondered if what they say about Italians is true. I'm only a watered-down quarter Italian, and since my hair is fairly light and my name is Travis Rupery Jones, after my very wealthy and very deceased British grandfather, no one has ever guessed.

"All right, old chap," I say to cousin Gino, digging up my old Eton accent. "Let's go pollute the streets of Rome with your remains." I aim for the city gates.

I arrive at my hotel forty-five minutes later and a good deal more stressed-out. There's a pretty bellboy waiting by the five-star entrance, and it shows how tired I am that I don't even give him a once-over. He mumbles something I don't catch when I hand over my keys and head inside. I leave my luggage where it is, but twist back quickly to fish cousin Gino out from under the front passenger seat. It probably isn't considered polite to have a hotel employee carry up your dead relatives, even in Italy.

Since this is one classy establishment, it doesn't take me more than five minutes to get checked in. The room is gorgeous, of course, with a balcony overlooking the lovely street below. Traffic zooms around, and from up here it looks like ants on crack. The enormous king-size bed looks so inviting I can feel my limbs grow heavier on the spot, but I know better than to lie down right after a transatlantic flight. If I sleep now I will never shake the jet lag, and I'm only here for a week. Instead of splaying face first in the thousand-count Egyptian cotton sheets, I shuck my clothes and take a slightly too-cool-for-comfort shower.

Cousin Gino waits for me on the windowsill, enjoying the view, and I figure I'll get rid of him first so I can see Rome without having his ashes on my mind. I want to visit the Colosseum of course, but I also want to take a look at the so-called Chubby Moses, who sits in a fountain less than a mile downhill from the hotel. It sounds like a good plan to my tired mind. And then after that, I'd like to find a sweet Roman boy to fuck.

I take care getting dressed, aiming for well-tailored but comfortable, since I'll be doing a lot of walking. The Forum is pretty far, so I'll take a taxi for Gino's goodbye.

The bellboy is also where I left him, and this time I do check him out. Maybe he could keep me company tonight, but no. Straight as the proverbial arrow, this one. He does hail a cab for me though, and his fingers curling around the tip I press into his palm are neatly manicured. I do like neat hands.

The wild taxi ride through Rome's crazy traffic leaves me queasy, and by the time I think I have to tell the driver to stop, he slows and double-parks, completely ignoring the angry horns behind us as he calmly tells me how much I owe him. Euros look like fake money to me, but I do like the bills. Especially the soft pink ones; you'd never get away with pink cash in America.

I take a couple of grateful breaths as the cabdriver pulls away behind me without caring if traffic is going to let him in, but all I get is a lungful of fumes. I move up the sidewalk, toward the *Forum Romanum*, with cousin Gino resting firmly in the crook of my elbow.

"You'd better not get me arrested for this," I tell him, checking for any Italian police, "or you'll end up in some grimy Roman carabinieri toilet bowl." I laugh at my own joke, and no one even blinks an eye. Europeans, man. They don't give a shit if you're crazy, as long as you don't address them directly. The streets are full of an eclectic blend of people, and I have to admit I like it. It's so easy to get used to the bland richness of Martha's Vineyard, despite the beauty of the place. Everything is so clean and recycled, it sometimes bores me out of my mind. Not Rome. Rome is vibrant and gritty, and... oh.

I reach the top of the hill I was climbing and the view steals the polluted air straight from my lungs. Rome is vibrant, yes. And gritty and busy and loud, but Rome also rests on the foundations of modern society. I am staring at stones stacked into buildings by hard-working people over two thousand years ago.

This, this is the heart of Rome, the place where Romans gathered and did business, hooked up, hung out. I can almost see them wandering the streets in their togas, even though I don't actually know if they wore those or if I've been lied to by Hollywood.

My original plan was to just walk up to the ruins of one of these buildings and discreetly scatter the ashes, but I see now that no matter how discreet I could be, cousin Gino would be carried away on the gentle breeze and cling to unknowing passers-by. While the idea that he might travel to several different countries is so funny to me it makes me laugh, I don't actually want to do this to anyone. There is a lovely tree not far from where I'm standing now, a thick gnarly thing that looks like it's going to stay put for decades, come what may.

The thought that these ashes might soak into the ground, reach those thick, strong roots and be soaked up along with earthy water, pleases me deep down, and I begin to walk.

Rome is green, for a city. There are several trees planted seemingly haphazardly all over the place. A lot of these are orange trees, and despite it being March, I can see oranges dangling off the branches. I bet it would be an epically bad idea to eat one of those. The fruit must be polluted down to their pips.

I'm surreptitious when I glance around. Just another tourist wanting to see the Forum from a higher vantage point, soak in the history, strengthen the bond with his forefathers. Or a quarter of them anyway. The rest would be drinking tea and playing cricket.

The music box in my palm is heavy, thick silver with a few small but beautiful gems. I'm glad to see the custom job was worth its money. No one discovered cousin Gino on his last cross-Atlantic trip. When I press the button for a merry little tune to start, the hidden compartment opens and there he is. For now, I snap it closed again. I wonder if I shouldn't just try and dig a little hole, but no, that way the ashes would never be able to reach the roots. I glance left and right; there is no one watching me. I casually approach the tree trunk—

“What are you doing?”

I spin around so fast I nearly fall over. Before me stand two cops in uniform, their guns and batons hanging off their belts like flashing neon warnings. My Italian is rusty, and it might be to my advantage to play the dumb American.

I say play...

“Is there a problem, officers?” I flash my whitened teeth. That's usually the first thing Europeans notice about Americans anyway. The two Carabinieri exchange a look. *Oh no*, it says, *one of those*. I widen my inane grin even further.

“Were you going to take a piss?”

My grin drops. “Excuse me?” The left cop's accent is heavy but perfectly understandable.

“No pissing in public,” the right one says, and I gape at him. “Step away from the tree.” I do what he says, because he does, after all, have a gun. And a

very menacing mustache. It curls up on his top lip like a bristly, hibernating caterpillar. We step onto the sidewalk dividing the park and the road. The left cop asks for identification. I left my passport at the hotel, but I have my wallet with my driver's license.

Hoping it will be enough, I reach into my jacket, balancing the music box in my right hand, when somehow it is snatched away from me. My first fleeting thought is one of the cops took it, but they look as bewildered as I do. A figure darts away from me, right into traffic, darting through cabs and bikes and mopeds.

"Hey!" I shout, running out onto the road, because *that's cousin Gino*, the only parental figure I've had in my life since I turned eighteen. One of the cops makes a grab for me, yelling hard in Italian. I can't make it out, but I think he's trying to stop me so I dodge him. Horns cut through the air like blunt, screeching knives, my left side is hit, and I lose my balance. My head lands on something hard, and then I can't think anymore.

Despite cars passing by my face way too close for comfort, the roar of traffic sounds far away. Something presses down on my shoulder, and I flinch a little when I'm dragged back roughly. A face appears in my vision and I squint at the bright sunlight. There's something strange about the sky, and I don't think I've ever seen trees like the ones rising high behind the man looking down at me. They are tall and thin, but their crowns sprout out like a bunch of broccoli heads.

The man snaps his fingers an inch away from my nose and I jerk my watery gaze to meet his eyes. He looks like a policeman, but... not.

"Are you okay, sir?" He sounds like it's not the first time he's asking, and his accent is strange. I don't answer right away because my head hurts and I'm not actually sure I *am* okay. The guy glances over his shoulder uneasily. There's another policeman talking to someone on a... scooter? What the hell?

"Will you be okay here for a minute?" my dress-up police guy asks, although I have to say, that gun looks pretty real from where I'm sitting. I nod and he walks over to the scooter. I watch the three of them talking from between the safety of two parked cars, and I gingerly touch the side of my head. Those kinds of bumps always feel bigger than they are, but geez. My cheek stings when I accidentally graze it with my fingertips. I must look a picture.

The second guy walks over and stares into my eyes, left, right, left again. “Do you need an ambulance?”

“No,” I immediately say. “No hospitals. It’s just a bruise.”

“Are you sure? Can you tell me your name?”

“Travis Jones,” I say and climb to my feet to prove—to him as well as myself—that I am, in fact, okay. My head throbs, and so does my hand where I must’ve broken my fall, but it’s not as bad as I feared. “I’m fine,” I say. “Really.” I offer a little smile, but it’s not returned.

“If you’re certain,” the guy says, shrugging as he spreads his hands. “Do yourself a favor and hail a cab, eh? You don’t want to wander about the city for too long.” He hesitates, waiting for something. I have no clue what so I keep my face pleasantly blank. “Was it important? The silver box, I mean.”

I gasp. “Yes!” I say. “Yes, it was.”

The guy shakes his head. “Pity.” He sighs and puts his notebook away. “It’s long gone now.” And then they’re gone too, the scooter, the strange policemen, leaving me standing there nailed to the ground. Yes, that box is important, but I can’t for the life of me remember why.

And where the *fuck* am I?

It doesn’t take too long to figure out I’m in Rome. Not too many places have a Colosseum parked in the middle of the city. I wander around until I find a little coffee shop, get myself an espresso and squeeze between a rickety little table and the wall. The city moves along on the other side of the window, an odd juxtaposition of harried locals and awestruck, dawdling tourists.

As I sip the strong coffee, hot enough to burn my tongue, I take stock. There is a keycard for a hotel room in my wallet, so yes, a taxi can at least bring me back to my room where I’ll hopefully find my passport and my way home. If this strange case of amnesia doesn’t clear, I’ll have to go see my doctor. But why am I here? Have I been here long? Why is that silver box so important to me?

The last thing I remember is talking to my groundskeeper, George, about what perennials he’d plant once the weather turned. I try to think, but my head only starts to hurt harder, and the coffee turns to acid in my stomach. I should’ve gotten a bottle of water instead, really. I gather everything back up in

my wallet, and aim for the little fridge by the counter when something catches my eye outside.

A man hurries past the window, glancing over his shoulder. As he crosses the street in quick, brusque strides, I see his profile and I *know* him. How could I possibly know *anyone* in Rome?

My headache forgotten, I push through the door and onto the street. I want to yell, tell him to slow down and wait for me, but I don't, although I couldn't say why. Instead, I follow him down a cobbled alley, taking a right into a street where no tourist in his right mind would wander, and watch as he walks into a nondescript building. I should follow him in. He might be the only person who could tell me what's going on. But I wait, watching the door from across the street.

Chapter 2

Malachi

The wad of cash feels heavy in my pocket, incriminating, and I hurry into the shop. Papa's old desk still sits where he left it, in the darkest corner of the warehouse at the back. I stuff the money in the top drawer before opening the curtains. I need to finish those dining room chairs today if I want to get paid for that job, but the work is boring, my mind is elsewhere, and I still feel sick to my stomach about taking that box. I didn't turn around when I heard brakes squeal and people shout, but I have a vivid imagination.

I wander around the warehouse, first opening the curtains in the corner where the office is set up, then opening blinds all around the large, open space. It smells of sawdust and veneer in here, a scent that has always managed to soothe me in the past, but today nerves crawl under my skin like bugs. There must be mold growing somewhere nearby; the dankness of it makes me want to sneeze. This place isn't what it used to be.

I strip off my sweater and reach for my gloves when I hear a noise behind me. Shifting my aim, I grab hold of the Maglite I keep on the second shelf with my tools. I turn around slowly, but it's Enrico who steps out of the shadows.

"Jesus Christ." I put the flashlight down. "What are you doing here, Rico? Why aren't you in school?"

"I didn't want to walk on my own," my little brother says, his eyes on the floor. "Someone followed me."

"Oh God." I bury my face in my hands. "C'mere." Rico steps closer. I take a deep breath, kneel down, and look him in the eye. "You know you're safer in school than here. Stick to crowded streets, okay? They're only trying to scare you so they can put pressure on me, but they're not going to do anything to you, okay?"

"I don't like being scared," Rico says. He has Mama's big brown eyes, but his hair is lighter, like Papa's, like mine.

"I don't like being scared either. Look, if it happens again, just call me."

"I tried, but I'm out of money." He holds out his phone and I sigh.

"Fine. Stay here. I'll go put some minutes on it. Lock the door behind me and don't open it for anyone, all right? And start sanding those chairs; if you're not going to school, you can be useful in here."

“Yes, Malachi.” Rico nods. He tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. I can’t keep doing this. We can’t stay here. *You picked a bad time to die, Papa.*

There is a little corner shop not far from my furniture store, and I plan on going there quickly to buy more minutes for Rico’s phone. Then I’ll have to rush back to get my work done. As soon as I’m outside I feel a pair of eyes on me, and fuck, I don’t have all the money yet. I can’t pay them. I try to look around without making it seem suspicious, but there is no one on the street apart from this one guy who clearly isn’t one of the Caivano brothers’ people.

He’s staring at me though, so I let my gaze travel over him without giving anything away and turn right. He pushes away from the wall and crosses the street. Ah, shit.

“Excuse me,” he says in English, and I slow my stride. A lost tourist? Here? “Excuse me,” he says again, like I didn’t hear him the first time. I turn around, hands in my pockets, appearing relaxed but ready to bolt if I need to. He’s a good-looking guy. Well-groomed, nicely dressed, American, and... oh no. He’s the guy with the music box.

He’s stumbling over his words, and there’s a big bruise forming on his left temple.

“Are you all right?” I ask him, remembering the squealing tires.

“Oh. Um, yes. Look, I know this is... strange, but... I...” He rubs a hand through his dark hair. His face goes red and he looks away. “Shit,” he mutters. I relax a little, even though I still have no clue what’s going on. He doesn’t look like he’s about to punch me in the face, anyway. “Okay, look. My name is Travis Jones, and this is going to sound really weird, but... I had a little accident this morning, and I seem to have, um, lost my memories of the last few days? Then I saw you and you looked familiar, and I thought maybe we met. And...” He laughs uneasily. “I don’t even know what I expected from you.”

My eyebrows go up in disbelief as I watch him turn red to the tips of his ears. Oh man, he must’ve hit his head hard, and the police just left him to wander Rome on his own? Jesus.

I think fast, taking in his expensive haircut, the thick watch on his wrist, as he runs his hand over his head again. The cut of his clothes, the light, alluring scent coming off him: everything about this guy spells money. I take a step back, drawing him closer into the shadows of the buildings behind us. If he remembers I stole that box and goes to the police, I’ll be arrested and Rico will be taken away from me.

He stares at me and I notice how his gaze drops to my mouth before he catches himself.

“You don’t remember me?” I need to make him trust me, before I ditch him. I let my eyes fall half-shut as I look at him intently. Let’s see what conclusions he draws. “It’s Malachi. Mal. We, uh... you know.” I glance away, to the sky, then back at him. His eyes widen, as do his pupils, and I watch him give me another once-over, seeing me no doubt, in an entirely different light.

“We hooked up?” he whispers. “Last night?”

I don’t say anything, just smile at him with a hint of secrecy, like we shared something intimate and wonderful. “You really don’t remember?”

“I... no. I’m so sorry. I—” His eyes flick from my face to his hands and back again. “You don’t... I didn’t tell you anything about a silver box, did I? I know it was important, just not why.”

A stab of guilt makes my stomach twist, but I think of Rico, afraid in our father’s furniture store, about the gun that was pointed at my head less than a week ago, and I push it aside. “A silver box? No, I’m sorry. I... Look, I really have to—” I point in the direction I was heading. “Do you need some help? Getting back to your hotel, or something?”

“Is that where we...” He frowns and shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter. And no, thanks. I’ll just grab a taxi.”

“If you’re sure. Don’t hang around here, okay? It’s not the best neighborhood, and you look... out of place.”

“Do I?” He smiles at me and I see a glimmer of someone else there, someone carefree and a little arrogant, someone who most likely never had to work with his hands, or worry about loan sharks threatening to cut off his fingers, one for every week not paid. A terrible idea begins to form.

“You know what, Travis? Why don’t I come with you, make sure you’re okay. You look a little pale.”

“You don’t have to do that.” That’s what he says, but his eyes flash hotly, if only for a second, and I smile.

“It’s no trouble. I just need to go into that shop over there for a minute, and then we can be on our way.”

“Um.” He looks at me with a hint of wariness and I soften my smile. He relaxes a little and nods. “Okay, I’ll wait here.”

"I won't be long." I hurry into the corner shop and buy a pay-as-you-go card for Rico's phone. When I return to Travis, he is going through his overstuffed wallet, looking at what seems to be a hotel keycard. Man, does he really not remember anything? My stomach turns when he looks up at me, and I feel a little sick.

"Just going to drop this off," I say. I glance at the card in his hand. "And then we'll take a taxi, okay? You don't look like you can walk that far."

"Okay," he says, but there's tension in his shoulders.

I quickly unlock the door and hand Rico's phone over to him. He's sanding the chairs like I told him to, and I kiss the top of his head.

"I'm going out for a little while. Don't—"

"Open the door for anyone, I know," he says as he rolls his eyes at me.

"That's right. Call me if you need me. I can be back here in twenty minutes."

"All right."

Travis waits for me outside, squinting against the sunlight like it hurts him. "Come on," I tell him, pointing in the direction of a more touristy area. "We'll be waiting forever for a cab here."

We walk side by side for a while, and Travis keeps side-eying me. It's funny really, in a way. I try to imagine what he's thinking, if he's regretting this supposed hook-up, and then I realize how frightening this must feel for him.

"So you remember nothing at all?" I ask him.

"Well, I know who I am and where I'm from, and stuff. I just don't know how I got here."

"Here as in, this part of town?" I grab his elbow as he nearly crosses the street without looking. A moped zooms past. He startles and presses closer for a second, then steps away again, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Here, as in Italy."

"Oh my God." I stare at him. "You don't even remember coming to Rome?"

"No."

I stick my hand in the air when I see a taxi waiting by a red light not far from where we're standing. The driver gives me a thumbs-up, and I turn to Travis again.

"I'm sorry," I say, surprised to find I mean it. "That must be awful."

"Well, I plan on getting out of here today or tomorrow. I just wish I knew what that silver box meant. Or what I'm doing here."

"Maybe you'll find a clue at the hotel." The taxi pulls up and I open the door, letting him climb in first. Travis tells the driver where to go, and he winces when we pull into the stream of stop-and-go traffic.

It's strange to be in cab in my own hometown. Driving here is terrible for anyone's peace of mind, and I either walk or ride a bike everywhere. Travis is silent beside me, so I turn toward my own window and look at my city through the eyes of a tourist. I've lived here my whole life. I don't see these remnants of the old world anymore. In fact, I've come to hate this place, fear it. I realize for the first time I desperately want to get out.

"We're here," the driver tells me in Italian, and Travis pulls out his wallet. He's about to hand over a bill but I tut at him, taking it and his wallet, too.

"That's way too much." I rifle through the wallet, my eyes catching on the row of black and golden credit cards. And fucking hell, he must have more than a thousand euros in here. I pay the driver, hand back the wallet, and get out of the cab.

"Thanks," Travis says, looking awkward. He stares at the huge hotel lobby. There are three porters outside dressed in crisp uniforms. A Rolls Royce pulls up under the awning, and my eyes pretty much fall out of my head. I've walked past this place before, but I never paid attention to it, really.

"Didn't we come back here last night?" Travis whispers, looking unsure.

"Uh, yeah. But it was dark. And I don't remember your room number."

"It's okay, it's on the card. Let's go up."

I follow him inside. He might not know what he's doing here, but he enters the huge building with its red velvet covered lobby, chandeliers looming over us like frozen-in-time golden rain, like he belongs here. I try not to feel impressed. He takes a quick look around, then turns toward a wide staircase covered in red and gold carpet, and I follow him up to the second floor. Inside, the place is a maze, numbers and hallways making no sense, and we laugh when we get lost more than once.

"I'm so sorry," he says when he finally slides the card into the right door. "You must think I am crazy." He's a little out of breath and his eyes shine with

something feverish. The room inside is unbelievable, and my mouth drops open.

“Fuck,” I say, taking in the enormous canopy bed, the little living room, the view through the large windows. To my left, the bathroom is bigger than my own bedroom. “This place must cost a fortune.”

“I take it you didn’t get a close look last night.” Travis advances on me, and his hesitance is gone. He’s on his turf now, surrounded by things he recognizes from home. The closet is open, revealing a few suits and other expensive clothing. Two watches lie abandoned on a desk. One has a thick leather band; the other’s silver or platinum, I don’t know, but thinner, more elegant than the one he’s wearing now.

Travis kicks off his shoes and doesn’t stop until I am trapped between him and the sofa behind me. “How about we get reacquainted,” he says, and it’s collide with him or fall back on the couch. I choose the falling, but it makes no difference. Travis keeps coming until his knees are bracketing my hips.

“I don’t—”

“Did I fuck you?” he whispers in my ear, and an unwelcome thrill shoots down my spine. He takes one of my hands in his and traces the calluses on my palm with the tips of his fingers. “Because I think if you’d fucked me I’d still feel it. Man like you, with hands that big...” He pulls back a little and offers me a filthy grin. “Do you kiss?” he asks, and I manage a fast *no*, so he veers off course and his mouth grazes my jawline instead. He sets his teeth to my earlobe and I feel his breathing accelerate. Without warning, he worms a hand between the two of us into my jeans to palm my cock over my briefs. My head spins, because *fuck* I’m so hard and I hadn’t even realized. “Oh yeah,” he groans, squeezing me. “Can I fuck you again? It’d be a shame to leave Rome without remembering how that felt.”

I want to say no, but I’m here now. I’ve gone this far, and if I want to get what I came here for, I might not have a choice. He takes my silence as consent, or he knows I could throw him off easily if I didn’t want him. When he says, “Turn over,” his breath is so hot in my ear I shiver and do what I’m told.

Expecting to feel his weight on me right away, I jump when he undoes my shoes, then takes off my socks, and massages the backs of my legs.

“You’re so tense,” he tells me, which only makes me tense up more.

God, this is such a bad idea. I haven’t bottomed for anyone since—

“Do you want a drink first?”

“No, I’m good,” I say, taking a deep breath and willing my muscles to ease up. His hands move to my hips. He pulls me up a little so he can get underneath and undo my jeans. He leaves my briefs on and then lies on top of me, parting my knees with his. He’s naked, and I’m surprised by my curiosity, but I keep my forehead tightly pressed against my arm. His dick is hard and heavy between my crack, and he rocks his hips a little, pushing my erection into the couch. I haven’t gone soft at all.

“So, what did we do yesterday? Tell me everything. Where did we meet?”

“In a bar,” I say, breathing slowly and deeply as he runs his hand over the back of my thigh, bristling the hairs there. “We had a bit too much to drink, so we walked back here. I—” My voice falters as his hand sneaks up my briefs. I feel self-conscious because I know I must be sweating, but Travis doesn’t seem to care as he caresses my balls lightly. “You gave me a blow job,” I say, squeezing my eyes shut until I see stars. A wounded noise comes out of my mouth. He’s pressing his dry thumb against my hole and I tense up, my butt cheeks tightening on his dick.

“Oh yeah,” he whispers, rubbing me. “Tell me more.”

I gulp for air because I’m beginning to feel lightheaded. “You... you fucked me. On the bed.”

“Face to face?” he asks, breath hot against my ear again. He licks the shell, sucks the lobe, and blood rushes to my groin. Unconsciously, I press against the couch and then up against his thumb, opening a little so the tip of it pushes inside.

“No,” I manage, because there is no way I am doing this with him looking down at me. “On all fours.”

“Oh God.” His voice trembles, and the weight of him disappears along with his thumb. I feel grateful and robbed all at once, but I don’t lift my head; I’m afraid of what he’ll see. I hear him rummaging around, and then a soft, “What the hell?”

Feeling a little more composed I look up. “What is it?”

“My bottle of lube is unopened.” His eyes widen. “I didn’t hurt you yesterday, did I?”

“No,” I quickly tell him, feeling my face heat, so I hide again in the crook of my arm. “No, I had some.”

“And a condom?”

“Yeah, that too.” *Fuck*, am I really going to do this? I have to, I can't back out now. With a deep breath, I try and turn off the churning cogs in my brain.

“Okay.” He hesitates, then I hear the ripping of foil and the click of a cap. If he checks the trash, it would be empty from room service anyway. I'm starting to tense up again because I don't know where he is, or what he is going to do next. I can't help the shout of surprise when a wet finger rubs my asshole.

“Sorry,” Travis says, not sounding very sorry at all. “Cold?”

“It's okay.”

“Yeah it is.”

His thumb pushes inside, careless of any resistance, and I gulp because it doesn't take him two seconds to unerringly nail my prostate. “Oh,” I moan. “Non ti fermare.” He just rubs it and rubs it and I can't remember it ever feeling like this.

“Oh you want it, don't you,” he whispers. He kisses the middle of my back, so he must be kneeling beside the couch. He presses hard, and I rock against the couch until he yanks down my underwear. “On your knees.”

I'm scared, but I obey. I don't think he'll be rough to the point that he'll hurt me. Two fingers push inside me and I let my head hang between my arms. My cock throbs between my legs, my balls already heavy as they swing every time he pushes into me, hard. It feels like I could come from just this, which is insane. How did I get here? Half an hour ago I was thinking about sanding chairs.

“You're tight,” Travis says. “Was I careful with you? Tell me about it; I want to know.”

“You were,” I tell him, squeezing my eyes shut again. I don't want to watch how my cock's leaking already. “You were so careful it drove me crazy.”

“Yeah?” I jump because his voice is right beside my ear again. It seems to be his thing. “I think you like being driven a bit crazy. Look at you.” He nails my prostate again, hard, over and over, my entire body bracing for the impact. My mouth is open and going dry, and I hope he doesn't want me to talk anymore because I don't think I can. Just when I think this is it, I'm going to lose it, he pulls his fingers out. “Let's move to the bed.”

The last thing I want to do is to move, with my T-shirt still on, naked underneath. I lift my head to see Travis standing there, waiting, and smiling

cheekily. His clothes didn't do him justice. He is ripped in that carefully sculpted way from doing exactly the right amount of weightlifting, cardio, whatever his personal trainer tells him, no doubt. It's attractive, sure, but it makes me feel self-conscious about the rope-thick muscles of my thighs, the roughness of my hands.

I stand up quickly, realizing the position I'm in isn't exactly dignified either, but before I can climb onto the bed Travis drops to his knees and takes my cock in his mouth. The unexpected heat makes me curl up and I grab his head, holding it in place, sliding back and forth in that sweet mouth. Oh my God, it feels so good. I barely even notice when he nudges my knees apart and slides a finger into me, until he nudges my prostate again and I feel like I'm about to shoot.

He pulls off. "Don't come," he says, looking up at me, lips wet. He already has the condom on, and for some reason it looks obscene. "I want to feel you squeeze my dick when you do."

I stumble back but Travis catches me, pulling me close. For a second it looks like he might kiss me, but he puts his mouth on my neck instead, sucking lightly. I don't want to wait anymore, so I push him toward the bed and crawl on, getting on my hands and knees. That dark thrill is back, and while it isn't fear this time, like hell am I going to acknowledge I want this. I'm about to steal more of this guy's stuff, the least I can do is let him fuck me as repayment.

Chapter 3

Travis

There is a flash of uncertainty in Mal's eyes before he turns away and gets on the bed. It's a shame he doesn't kiss; he has a lovely mouth, but I also think it would put him at ease. I don't feel the nerves I usually get when I hook up sober with a stranger, but maybe that's because my body knows his already, even if my mind doesn't. I move to the end of the bed and watch him get into position. He's gorgeous, tougher built than I'd expected, and he doesn't strike me as a bottom at all. Every time I touch him he jumps like we're plugged into the same electrical current.

"You ready?" I ask, pouring more lube over my palm, slicking my aching cock and rubbing the rest over his hole. He nods but doesn't say anything, and I feel him tremble when I put my dry hand on his hip for balance. He's still hard though, and his balls look tight underneath the downy hairs, so I stroke him once to give that little zing of pleasure before I begin to push inside. At first Mal resists me, and I wonder if this is his game, if that's how he plays, but the whimper that comes out of his mouth when the fattest part of my dick breaches him isn't fake. He spasms and contracts around me like a virgin, and I hold very still while I gently rub his ass, his flank, his thighs. After a minute that feels like forever, he drops to his elbows and relaxes.

"Go," Mal says, just as I'm wondering what's going through his mind. This is just a fuck, and yet there's an intensity about him that makes me feel incredibly powerful. I push into him with half-thrusts to let him get used to me again, because it's taking him a while. Maybe we were drunker last night than he's letting on. I pour some more lube on my dick, feeling the coolness of it through the condom, and Mal gasps, tensing up again.

"Okay, this is no good." I put my weight on him until he gives in and lies flat. Then I roll him onto his right side without sliding out. I lift his left leg and begin to fuck him like that. I won't hit him as deep, but his prostate is incredibly responsive and he'll enjoy it more this way. "Touch yourself," I tell him, because I can't reach him like this, and he has gone soft now.

He makes that same pained noise again he did earlier when I hit his prostate for the first time, and begins to tug at his dick. I can see his face now, and his eyes are squeezed shut like he's hurting, but I don't think that's it. I deepen the

thrusts a little, going a bit slower, and Mal gasps, mouth open against the comforter underneath him as I push into him, his cheek rasping against the fabric.

When I pick up speed, so does his breathing, and his cock is once again thick and flushed in his hand. I don't think he realizes what noises he's making: punched out grunts of tortured satisfaction. His hand speeds up and so do I.

For some reason I've lost all track of my own building orgasm at the sight of him, but the storm of it begins to gain force when he closes his mouth on the comforter, biting it, pulling at it with his teeth as his eyes open and he stares unseeing into nothing. I angle my hips and punch his prostate relentlessly, and Mal makes a keening sound that doesn't seem to stop. He's biting the comforter so hard his teeth must ache.

I lift his leg, go faster and faster until his hand is a blur on his cock and he shuts his eyes again, turning his face into the mattress so all I hear is a muffled scream. He jets thick and white over the bed, over his stomach, over his fist, and he milks me so hard all I can do is push my hips against his ass and shoot into the condom.

My own awareness overwhelms me, and suddenly my breathing is loud in my own ears, I am wet with sweat, and weak with the tremors of the orgasm that blindsided me like it never had before.

"Holy shit," I say, holding the condom in place as I pull out. Mal doesn't move, apart from shifting away from the wet spot, and I collapse beside him. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he says. I want to ask him more, lift up and look at him, but I am unduly tired for some reason.

Yawning, I sling an arm over his stomach. "I'll grab a towel for you in a second. I just—"

When I wake up, I feel horrible and sluggish, my limbs the sort of dead weight that comes from sleeping far too long. I notice Malachi is gone, but that's not my first concern. There's a shard of pain reminding me of the collision with the scooter and everything that came before it. The cops, cousin Gino, the music box... and fucking Malachi grabbing it and running off. I'm so angry, tears well up in my eyes. I can't believe that bastard is a filthy, common thief.

With a lurch of nausea I scramble off the bed, but my wallet is exactly where I left it. The money is gone, of course, but my credit cards aren't. My passport is still there, but my two watches are gone too. The Cartier timepiece alone is worth thirty thousand dollars. It was my father's, and Mal will pawn it for four, maybe five thousand euros, and that makes me angrier than even Gino finding his final resting place on a grimy old shelf.

He let me fuck him. That piece of shit let me fuck him. It takes a bit of staggering from the bed to the window to work out I slept for nearly twenty-four hours, and I'm guessing my headache has a lot to do with that.

A quick shower helps me feel better, and I grab my wallet, dash out of the door, and try to remember where this fucker's street is.

In the end it takes me a while to find it, and it's the convenience store that rings a bell first. My first instinct is to barge into the furniture shop, but instead I linger, much like I had done that morning when the world was a frightening, unknown place.

Falegnameria Avellino, it says above the slightly dirty window. There is an ornately carved dresser in one window and a dining table made of different kinds of wood in the other. Skillfully done, no doubt, but not my taste. Why would someone who works at a place like this take cousin Gino, then let me fuck him so he could steal my watches? It doesn't make any sense, but it does make my blood boil again, and I'm about to cross the street when two guys step out of the door between the two windows.

They don't look like the type who'd like to order a custom, handmade rocking chair. Something begins to dawn on me, but I'm too angry, I feel too used, to let it take shape. When the brutes have rounded the corner I cross the street and silently open the door. No bell rings out a warning, and the shop floor is empty, so I make my way through the center aisle.

The further back I go, the more I begin to like the furniture. The wood is paler here, the lines sleeker; everything looks more modern and like something I'd have in my house. But I can't be distracted now. I listen for sounds and hear something coming from the back. There is a doorway with the door missing leading to what looks like a warehouse. It smells of scorched wood, and there are metal tables with strange looking tools everywhere.

At first I don't see anyone, but then I spot him with his back to me, hands planted on a desk, head hanging low. I rush over and he hears me; he straightens up fast, but not fast enough. I punch him once, clocking him straight

on the jaw, and Mal goes down like a rag doll. For a second I just stare at him, but he doesn't move. I've hit him where it hurts, but not hard enough to knock him out.

Wary, I go around and crouch by his head, far enough away to jump if he's faking. His eyes are closed, his breathing shallow but even. His T-shirt is ripped at the collar, like someone might've grabbed hold of him. There's no better way to learn how to fight than as an American gay boy in a British all-boy school, but I made sure I didn't hit him too hard, so he shouldn't be out cold like this.

"Mal?" I say, worry beginning to churn in my gut. "Mal? Can you hear me?"

He doesn't respond at all, and I gently ease him onto his back. He doesn't wake, but his pulse is strong, so I gingerly lift up his shirt, keeping one eye on his face to make sure he's not waking up. The entire left side of his ribcage is an angry red, and in one spot I see an unmistakable boot print.

Oh *fuck*.

On the other side of the warehouse there's a small half-bathroom with off-white but clean towels rolled up neatly in one of the drawers. I don't see a kitchen or a fridge anywhere, so I just let the water run as cold as it will go and wet one of the towels. Mal regains consciousness when I press the towel to his jaw where I punched him. He blinks his inky eyes at me, and I bite back the apology that churns around my stomach. Yes, I punched him, but he stole from me, had sex with me, and used me while I was so vulnerable I hardly knew my own name.

"I'm not staying," I tell him. "I just want to make sure you're not dying."

"Okay," he croaks and tries to sit, but he winces when his torso curls up, and falls back.

"Did those two guys beat you?"

"Two guys?"

"I saw them leaving."

Resigned, Mal closes his eyes again. His pain is etched on his face like Michelangelo carved it there. "Yes."

"You owe them money?"

"That's the short of it."

"So my watches are gone."

He has the decency to turn his face away, a blotchy redness staining his cheeks. Good, at least he's ashamed. "Yes."

"Cousin Gino?"

Mal looks at me. "Who?"

"The silver box."

"At a pawnshop downtown. You can probably buy it back. I have the receipt in my wallet."

"Right." I stare down at him. "You know, the funny thing is, if you'd have been honest with me from the start I would've helped you out."

How much do you owe them, I want to ask, and why? Are they Mafia? Will they kill you? Or just hurt you more? I bite it all back; it's none of my business, and I don't give a flying fuck no matter how pretty his face is, how good his skin felt against mine. It tugs at me though, the way he just lies there with his hands covering his face. Defeated.

I walk away, receipt in hand.

When I pass the furniture on the showroom floor, I see the understated beauty in the pieces there. The faintly carved flowers on one table leg, the same pattern returning in the seat of a matching chair. You have to look closely to see the details, the hard work and the love with which these pieces have been created. I don't want to see it, so I keep my eyes on my goal, when it opens.

Through the door steps a little boy, the mirror image of Mal, only fifteen years or so younger. He looks tired, too tired for a kid that age to look, even after a day of school. He wears a uniform with a tie hanging slightly askew, the cuffs of his coat worn and faded. He eyes me up and down once, decides I am harmless, and plasters on a smile.

"*Buongiorno*," he says, and rattles something else off in Italian. I think of Mal—brother? father?—lying on that workshop floor with a freshly blooming bruise on his face and my heart twists.

"Hey," I say to the kid, crouching down. "Do you speak English? My Italian is terrible."

"Yes," he says in a heavy accent. "But not very well. You speak slowly, okay? I help you."

"Okay." I laugh under my breath. "Tell me about this table." I point at the one with the leaves. "You make it?"

“No,” the kid laughs. “My... brother make it. Malachi. He should be here.” He looks around, eyes clouding with worry.

“Oh yes,” I quickly tell him. “He’s busy in the back. He said he’d be right with me.”

“Okay.” The kid’s shoulders sag, and I see unshed tears shining in his eyes. Oh God, how bad is it? What are they involved in?

“What’s your name?”

“Enrico,” he says, eyeing me warily, and I repeat it in the worst American accent I can manage. The boy laughs. “Call me, Rico, yes? You Americano?”

“I am. Have you ever been to the United States?”

“No!” Rico bounces on his heels. “You from New York? I go to New York. See the Statue of Liberation.”

“Of Liberty, yes. Maybe someday you will, kid.” I nudge his shoulder and he grins until the cloud descends over his face again.

“I don’t think it.” His eyes drift toward the workshop behind me and I follow his gaze. Mal is leaning against the doorway trying to look casual instead of ready to drop, but I don’t know if he’s fooling Rico. He says something in Italian and Rico makes a face that spells *I don’t want to do homework* in any language.

“Ciao, New York,” he says to me, and trudges toward the workshop, burdened with much more than the books on his back.

“Ciao Rico,” I tell him. I wonder how old he is, if he knows the kind of trouble his brother is in. If the haunted look in his eyes is anything to go by, I’d say yes, he knows.

My gaze snags on Mal’s, but I don’t want to be swayed. I want to get out of here and go home. Cousin Gino might go on an adventure around Rome, or he might gather dust in a pawnshop. I don’t know, and I don’t care. I am tired and jet lagged, and I am going home.

When I turn to the door I catch my own reflection in the glass, but I see someone else in the shape of my face. My mother’s hazel eyes, my father’s light eyebrows. What would my little brother look like if he hadn’t drowned alongside my parents on their yacht ten years ago? I hardly knew him. He was two when I left for Eton. He was seven when I returned at eighteen, and he never grew much older.

I don't know Rico, and this is none of my business. Malachi is an asshole who deserves what he gets.

Then why am I turning around and heading back into the workshop?

Chapter 4

Malachi

I hear Rico's voice. Everything down to taking a single breath hurts like my ribcage is on fire, but I make a pathetic attempt to hurry into the shop. When I get to the doorway, Travis is crouched in front of him, saying his name in the worst accent I've ever heard. I think it's a trick to make him laugh. It works.

"Go do your homework," I say when they see me, and Rico grumbles but does what he's told. I'd take this pain and ten times worse if it meant I could give this kid a normal childhood. Like the one he had when Papa was alive.

Travis looks at me once, weighing me and finding me wanting, no doubt, because he turns around without a word and walks away. I should really finish those chairs so they can be picked up and paid for later. The watches made a nice dent in what I owe the Caivano brothers, which means my fingers are probably safe for now, but every time I pay them something they just up the interest on whatever is left. I will never be free of them.

I'm so deep in my own head, thinking of the gun under my bed, I don't notice Travis has turned back until he pushes past me—not as hard as he could've—to step into the workshop.

He sees Rico at my desk chewing on a pencil and says, "Anywhere we can talk?"

I jerk my head in the direction of the chairs I should be sanding and, trying not to limp, follow Travis to the other end of the warehouse.

"If you want money," I start, so exhausted I can't even breathe right, but Travis shakes his head.

"Tell me how deep the shit you're in is."

"Why would I do that?" I ask, perplexed, but Travis doesn't take it that way. His face darkens with anger.

"You think I'm some fucking stupid, rich American, fine. I don't care. But I'm giving you two options here. You tell me what the hell you're dragging that kid into"—he jabs his finger at Rico—"or I go to the police and report you for theft. I have the proof right here." He holds up the pawnshop receipt. "It's up to you."

“I... but why? What do you care?”

“About you? I don't.”

He doesn't elaborate, but I notice how he keeps glancing at Rico. “What was in the silver box?” I ask.

He shifts his gaze to stare at me, face blank but eyes blazing, and I am reminded for no reason at all of how he'd talked me so easily into kneeling on his couch, on his bed, how he'd breached my body and made it feel good like I had no idea anyone could.

Before I can give in to the heat on my face and look away, he says, “My cousin Gino.”

I bark out a startled laugh that hurts my ribs. “What?”

Travis cracks a reluctant smile. “It's a music box I had made, but if you press the lever, instead of music you get a compartment that opens to reveal his ashes.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper, hiding my bruised face in my hands. “I stole a dead body.” I can hear Travis laugh softly but when I look at him, the mirth is gone.

“Why?” he asks. He is still angry, but I think it is more out of betrayal than that he feels robbed.

“I need to know why you are asking me this,” I tell him. “And I need to sit down before I fall down.”

Without missing a beat Travis rolls a worn leather chair closer, the one I use for work if I need to bend down for a long time, and he sinks into an old recliner that used to belong to Papa. It has a broken spring that sticks up uncomfortably, as he'll find out soon enough.

“I was going to leave you to rot in your problems,” Travis whispers, glancing at Rico. “Until I saw your brother. That's all I'm telling you.”

“Okay.” I nod at my hands and take a deep breath. “This shop has been in my family for generations. When the economy failed, Papa's health began to fail too. I didn't know he'd borrowed money from the worst loan sharks in Rome until after he died. I've been able to keep up some payments until recently. Then things got... desperate.”

“How desperate?”

I don't look at him. I don't want to tell him anything else, but for as little as I know about him, I can tell he isn't going to let sleeping dogs lie.

"Tell me," he insists. I take a deep breath and look at him, but his eyes catch where my own body betrays me. I've been rubbing at the numb spot on my left forearm without realizing and Travis grabs my wrist, straightening my arm. "What the hell." He checks to make sure Rico is still doing his homework, then scoots closer. "What is this from?"

His thumb traces the round little scar about three inches above my wrist, then he turns over my hand and finds a matching scar on the other side. It feels weird when he touches it. Numb, but not.

"Mal," he whispers. "They did this?"

I nod once. "With one of my tools. A very thin and sharp chisel. Apparently you can shove a sharp object all the way through your forearm without doing permanent damage, who knew?" I try to joke, but Travis doesn't laugh. There's something in his eyes I don't want to see, because it looks far too close to pity. He doesn't let go of my hand and I wonder if he knows he is caressing my calluses.

"How much do you owe them?"

"It's not so much, but every time I manage to pay them, they increase the interest."

"How much?"

"75,000 euros."

His eyebrows climb up. "That's it?"

Annoyed, I snatch my hand back. "We're not all privileged American rich boys, all right?"

"Clearly," he says, with an eye roll. "I can give you that money without losing any sleep over it."

"Why the hell would you do that? And how can I accept?"

"You'll accept because you won't risk Rico being in danger for a second longer than you need to. You know they won't hurt the kid as long as you can keep some payments coming, but how many more rich Americans will cross your path with dead relatives in a box? How much longer before they start to threaten the boy?"

“You didn’t answer my first question,” I snap, irritated because he’s right. I’ll take the money in a heartbeat, pride be damned.

Travis leans closer, eyes shining, something wicked in their fathomless depths. “You don’t usually bottom, do you?” he says, voice so low I have to lean in to hear him, even though it hurts my ribs.

“No,” I grit out. I don’t like where this is going.

“That’s what I thought. Then why did you let me?”

“It seemed wrong for me to... do it the other way around, considering—”

“You were lying through your teeth? Taking advantage of my amnesia?”

“Yes.”

“How long had it been?”

It takes effort to keep my eyes open, and the memory at bay—of being held down, choking on a stinking pillow. “Years.”

“All right.” Travis drums his fingers on my knee. “Here’s the deal. You’re mine to fuck any way I please for the rest of the day and night, and I will pay you one hundred thousand euros, money wired over this afternoon.”

Chapter 5

Travis

Revenge doesn't taste as sweet as everyone would like you to believe. I feel the powerful adrenaline surge melt into nothing with Mal's quiet, "Okay."

I expected a fight for his pride, anger over what in the end amounts to charity, because what is a fuck? He enjoyed it enough earlier, he knows we're compatible, that it will be good. But he takes the offer without a struggle and that robs me of the perverted pleasure I thought revenge would give me. I look at Rico and feel like I'm the scum of the earth, but how did the Romans put it? *Alea iacta est.*

"It will take a few days for the money to be wired over internationally," I tell Mal. My voice doesn't tremble, but it wants to. "And I need your account information so I can start the transfer."

"I want that done before I go with you," he says, and there it is. Not anger, but a spark of hatred. It doesn't make me feel any better.

"Then get to it." I stand and turn away from him, fishing my phone out of my pocket. "George," I say when my groundskeeper answers. "I need you to set up a wire transfer. I will email you the details shortly."

"Certainly, sir," George says, and I hang up. Nothing ever ruffles that man's feathers.

I turn to face Mal again, who is watching me with a hostile look on his face. "Who will watch Rico?"

"I'll be your whore for the night," Mal snarls under his breath. "Mind your own business about everything else."

"Considering what I'm about to do for you, it wouldn't hurt if you tried to show a little gratitude."

"I'll be grateful on my knees later." Mal turns away and goes to talk to Rico. I don't know where he'll go, but I hope it's somewhere safe. Maybe he's used to being alone, since it seems to be only the two of them. I run a tired hand over my hair. My neck hurts, my eyes sting, and I honest to God don't know why I'm doing this. The underlying conviction that Mal wouldn't just accept the money without some sort of repayment from his side is irrelevant.

Mal is now talking to someone on the phone, pacing back and forth. The Italian is too fast to keep up with, but I do catch the name Caivano. His tormenters, I'm guessing.

I need to try and bring us to neutral ground again, or the rest of the day will turn out really unpleasant. "These guys don't fuck around," I say when he returns to where I'm standing. "How much do they want?"

Mal grimaces. "Eighty thousand."

"Interesting accounting system they have."

"Penalty for paying it off on one go," Mal says, laughing under his breath as he pens his account information on a piece of paper. "Fucking assholes."

"Hey." I want to reach out and touch him when he hands it over, but I know better. "At least tomorrow morning, you can get on with your life, right?"

He's silent for a few seconds as he gazes blankly at the scar on his forearm. "Right," he softly says. "Let's get this over with."

I try to keep the mood from plummeting on the way to the hotel, but it's no good. By the time we begin to climb the slight hill, hostility is coming off him in waves. Maybe I should just give him the money and walk away. It's probably the best idea I've had all day, but a part of me—the injured pride part—won't let me. *And, I think, if it were me, I'd have an easier time accepting this money if I felt I'd paid my dues.*

Mal hasn't said another word by the time we reach the hotel. I force myself to relax and climb the stairs at leisure. Mal is one step behind me and when I glance back, he has his head ducked down, hands in his pockets, looking relaxed if it weren't for the fists bunching the fabric of his jeans.

This time, I find my room without any trouble. Housekeeping has stopped by. The bed is made, two chocolates in golden wrappers resting on the pillows. The closet is closed, my papers are straightened, the windows have been left slightly ajar so the curtains billow slightly in the breeze. When I cross the hallway to close them, I notice fresh towels hanging from their racks in the bathroom. It gives me an idea, but first—

"What are you doing?"

Mal is hopping on one foot, taking off his socks. His shoes have already been kicked carelessly aside.

“Getting this over with, like I said.” He begins to shrug out of his clothes and I walk up to him, crowding him until he’s pressed against the wall by the bathroom. I’m slighter than him, but I think I impressed him with my right hook, and he doesn’t underestimate my strength anymore. His eyes are wide, but the anger returns when it dawns on him what I’m doing. “No kissing,” he snaps, turning his face aside.

“For a fucking hundred grand, I think I get to kiss you.”

“Key word being *fucking*,” Mal says, but he gasps when I take him by surprise, knocking his knees apart so he slides down the wall about a foot. I take hold of his neck, fingertips digging in, and kiss him hard, pushing my tongue in his mouth. Mal makes a noise that doesn’t sound entirely like a protest, but he shoves me away anyway.

He’s strong, so I stumble, and he picks up the first thing he can reach, which is the hotel policy binder, and he throws it in my direction. Flyers printed with Rome’s attractions go flying in every direction, and the binder hits me square in the chest, before it thuds to the ground. I’m on him before he can blink, fisting his shirt as I push him against the wall.

“Get off me before I fucking hurt you,” he grits out and I laugh, all of this striking me as irrationally funny somehow.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, smoothing down the wrinkles over his chest, but he knocks my hands aside.

“Forget it. Keep your money.” Mal shoves away from the wall, grabs his shoes and aims for the door, and I stare after him in disbelief.

“Seriously? You’re going to walk out because of a kiss after I’ve already had my dick up your ass?” He doesn’t listen, yanks at the door handle, and I tell him instead, “Fine. Go, if you have to, but I’m not stopping the transaction. The money is yours.”

Mal falters, the heavy door slipping through his fingers as it whispers closed again.

“Why?” he asks after a quiet moment.

Because I don’t want you to die, because I can’t walk away and forever wonder if a kid got hurt because of it, because I don’t think I can stand by and do nothing. I say none of this.

“Because I don’t think you can walk out of here with that debt hanging over your head.”

Mal laughs, a soft, derisive noise. "Yeah?" he asks under his breath. "Watch me." His hand tightens on the door handle, knuckles turning white. He doesn't move.

"I'm watching," I tell him, taunting him despite knowing what a bad idea this is. Mal's hand clamps around the handle so hard it must hurt. He lets go, punches the door and spins around.

"Okay, you got me." He drops his shoes and raises his hands, palms up. "What do you want from me, huh? I'm your hooker. Do you want me on the bed?" He walks past me, ungently nudging my shoulder. "Legs in the air? Or ass? It's up to you. Call me any name you want, use me any way you want." He brings his face very close to mine, and his breath is hot and smells like mint when he says, sneering, "Show me what a *man* you are."

"I believe," I softly say, standing my ground, "you said something about being grateful on your knees?"

Mal's eyes widen for a fraction of a second, and I'm glad I caught him off guard. He thinks he's in control now and I need to throw him off balance if I want to make this in any way enjoyable. He gathers himself fast, I'll give him that.

Taking a step back, he inclines his head, conceding, and says, "As you wish." Slowly, he sinks to his knees and reaches for my pants.

"Hands behind your back."

He freezes, eyes fixed on my crotch for a long second before he slowly lifts his gaze. For a second I think he'll fight me again, but he doesn't.

"May I take off my shirt?" he asks. "I don't have a change of clothes."

"No." I wait until he accepts this too, and then he folds his hands behind his back. His eyes are blazing and for a second I hesitate. Do I really want to put my dick in someone's mouth who is this mad at me? But despite everything, I know he wouldn't hurt me. Not like that, anyway. "Very good," I coo at him when he remains silent, waiting. I stroke his head, the back of his neck, and his jaw, before I push my thumb into his mouth. He tries not to react, but I can tell his breaths are coming in short bursts through his nose almost immediately. Fascinating. "Suck."

He does. And the thing is, I hadn't expected him to. I expected him to fight me further, to maybe pull away, but he sucks my thumb and when the air leaves

my lungs in a puff of surprise, he sucks harder. I watch, mesmerized, as his eyes flutter closed, against his will almost.

With my free hand I undo my pants and pull my cock out, hard already. Mal's eyes open again and there's a flash of something calculated, but it's gone almost immediately. He lets go of my thumb and opens his mouth wider. I want to say something snarky but it wouldn't help either of us, and truth be told, all I want is to push into the pink heat he offers so beautifully.

Mal makes another noise when a drop of pre-come hits his tongue before my cock does and then I slide home. I give him no time to adjust to it and cup the back of his head, making him take me deep. He closes his mouth around me easily, even though I can feel him wanting to fight it.

Before he gets used to it I pull out again, and push in, keeping an uneven rhythm, until he's had it and he begins to suck, hard, struggling against my movements to set his own pace. He goes all out, no inhibitions, eyes firmly closed, a streak of spit beginning to leak down his chin, and suddenly I get it. I get what he's doing, and I laugh, knees almost buckling when I let the orgasm he so desperately wants to draw out of me come, because if he thinks that means our evening is done, he has no idea. No idea at all.

Before I can tell him he can go and spit in the sink if he wants, Mal has swallowed and is climbing to his feet.

"Now," I say, "you can take off your shirt. And the rest of your clothes, and get on the bed." His face falls, and I do my best not to grin, I really do, but going by the angry glint in his eye I don't succeed. "Don't worry. You'll like this part."

Without a word, Mal strips and gets on the bed, on his hands and knees. I appreciate the line of his back and ass with my eyes as well as my hands, and I feel him tense, his muscles coiling. When I say, "Turn over," he doesn't. Not immediately. The hesitation seems significant, but I don't understand why, and eventually Mal rolls onto his back. He looks like he's waiting for punishment rather than orgasms.

I'm two fingers in, knuckle-deep, before he makes the first noise, a mournful sound, like he's giving up on something, letting it go. His jaw unclenches, and he gasps for breath like a free diver breaching the ocean surface after minutes of being oxygen starved. His knees fall open and his hands scramble for the sheets beneath him. Something in him gives way, and I

feel it do the same to me. Suddenly, just like that, with that one sound, the rules have changed.

Up until now I had something to prove. I wanted to break his resistance, and I wanted to make him feel good despite whatever hang-ups were holding him back. But now I soothe him, rubbing his knee with my free hand as he tosses his head from side to side, a single tear tracking from his right eyelid.

“Do you want me to stop?” I quietly ask. Mal doesn't answer me, but he presses on my fingers when they curl over his prostate. His throat stretches beautifully as he arches his back, soundlessly telling me what I need to know. He's so hard a gossamer thread connects the tip of his cock with his belly, every once in a while a thicker tear dripping down the spiderweb-thin thread of pre-come. It's one of the hottest things I've ever seen, despite having seen it before.

“I'm going to fuck you now,” I tell Mal, because the need for it curls around my balls like a vice, an urgency as inevitable as an oncoming storm. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't tense up either, and I can't resist; I bend down, lift his balls out of the way and lick at his hole. It tastes of good quality lube but I don't care because Mal shouts out, the loudest he's been so far, curling in on himself like he's doing a sit-up.

His eyes are open when I meet them, bewildered, and I want to explore this. I desperately hope in that moment when we are nothing more than two men who really need to get their fucking rocks off, that one day I will have the time to do this to him, slowly, until I drive him wild.

I put on the condom, nudge him back onto the mattress and hold his legs wide as I push for the home run.

Mal's head is turned, and his mouth is open against the sheets. It reminds me of last time, of how he'd bitten the sheets, and I don't *want* him to bite anything back. I want him to admit it feels good. To himself, if not to me. I fuck him tenderly and I wonder when it turned into this.

After a while I have to drop to one elbow because my arms are starting to shake so hard they can't carry my weight anymore. My hand lands near Mal's face, and he immediately turns into it, nuzzling my palm, putting his mouth on the base of my thumb. His eyes are half open, but I don't think he can see anything, he's so out of it. He moans brokenly every time I push into him and I bare my teeth, grinding them hard against the regret that wants to spill out of my mouth.

This could've been something so amazing, him and me, something I will never find again in this lifetime, yet now one hundred thousand and one reasons are standing between us.

I pick up my pace when Mal starts making these mindless noises as he sucks unabashedly on the base of my thumb. His mouth is hot and wet and it makes me want him to feel that, it makes me want to suck his cock until he comes in my mouth. I stop holding back, stop trying to aim for his prostate, and just hammer my way to an orgasm until it spills over me like the inevitable. I pull out, take off and tie the condom, shove two fingers in his ass and take his cock to the root.

It's been a while since I've deep throated anyone, so I have to fight back the gag reflex, but I know how good it feels to have a throat close around the head of your dick.

Mal thrashes against the sheets for a few seconds. He might be oversensitive by now, and I wait for the hitch in his breath to die down before I begin to move. When he's settled in to it, I curl my fingers and listen for the noises he can't hold back whenever I push that prize button. I want to put my mouth on his hole, I want to lick around it, in it, I want to drive him wild, but I've never done that to anyone before, although I always thought I'd do it to someone I really loved. I push the urge aside and suck his cock until he comes, spasming on my fingers, the strength of him grinding them together.

Chapter 6

Malachi

I shift in my seat. My ass is fucking sore and I want to be thinking about a hundred different things, but all the whirling thoughts in my brain keep coming back to the same eye of the storm: I liked it. And Travis knew I did, which is why I acted like a complete asshole when I left the hotel early this morning.

“What is it, Mal?” Rico asks me as I sit there chewing my lip. “Are you worried?”

“I am, but not about us. You... you remember that guy that was here yesterday?”

Rico’s face lights up. “New York? Yeah, I liked him. Is he coming back?” His eyes widen. “Is he... your *boyfriend*?”

I huff a laugh. “No. No, he’s not, but he helped us out. He... arranged it so we won’t have to pay the Caivanos anymore.”

“No way!” Rico jumps up and hugs me hard, his head knocking into my chin. It hurts when he squeezes my ribs, but I don’t complain, and I pretend not to hear or feel the little hiccups he’s trying to control. “That’s great,” he says when he straightens. “But then why are you worried?”

“I think I saw someone outside of Travis’s hotel. One of the Caivanos’ men.”

“Malachi.” Rico grabs my wrist. At first I think it’s a coincidence, but it’s not. His thumb finds the scar and he rubs it. “You have to warn him.”

I tug my hand free and press my palm against my eye until I see fireworks. “I don’t have his number.” My voice is an ugly, tired croak. “I don’t know where he is. The hotel says he checked out not long after I left. I don’t... I don’t know where he is.”

I fucked up. Why didn’t I go back inside? Why didn’t I warn him? Was I really so afraid of how good it felt, being screwed by him? It had nothing to do with that first guy years ago. None of that was Travis’s fault. He pretty much saved my life, and Rico’s, gave me good sex when he had carte blanche to do as he pleased. And I left, knowing what these guys are capable of. “Shit, Rico. I made a mistake.”

“Then you have to make it right.” Rico’s mouth is trembling and he doesn’t even try to stop his tears. It’s what Papa always told us. *Everyone makes mistakes, mio figlio. It’s a good man who makes it right.*

“I know, Rico.” I rub his arms up and down, thinking hard. He resembles Mama so much it hurts to look at him sometimes. At least I’ve never had to realize I’ve forgotten her face. “Listen. Go upstairs, pack whatever you can’t leave behind, but no more than one bag. Don’t open up for anyone while I’m gone. Keep your phone on, and call the police the moment you notice something weird, okay? Wait until it’s rush hour, stick to the main streets, and take a train to Firenze. You remember Aunt Silvia, don’t you?”

“Yeah, Mama’s sister.” The woman Rico knows better than he’d ever known his own mother.

“Yes. You call her, you tell her you’re on your way and you ask her to meet you at the station.”

“You’ll follow, won’t you? With New York? I don’t want to live here anymore.”

“I don’t know about Travis,” I tell him quietly. “But yeah, I’ll follow as soon as I can. I’ll call you when it’s over.”

“Okay.” Rico hugs me hard, rubbing his wet face on my shoulder. I give him all the money I have in my wallet, and the bills I’ve kept stashed in the desk, too.

“Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t open the door for anyone. Lock yourself in.”

“I will.”

“Get what you need, and don’t keep your money all in one place. Stuff some in your shoes, some in your backpack, and some in your coat.”

“I will. Be careful, okay?”

“You too.”

Rico doesn’t say anything else; he just looks at me hard and then turns away.

I don’t know anything about tracking cell phones, so I don’t have a clue where to start. I could go to the police, I suppose, but they won’t do anything for another twenty-four hours at least. In the early days, when I thought I could find a way out of the Caivano brothers’ clutches, I’d followed them to a bar once. It’s the only clue I have, so that’s where I start.

It's actually one of the better clubs in Rome, which is scary in and of itself. Of course this early in the day it's closed, and as I stand there watching the place from across the street, I wish I smoked so I'd look less conspicuous. There is a little bakery behind me, gelato arranged in the window to attract tourists. I wish I hadn't given all my money to Rico now, but the hundred thousand euros coming in from Travis gives me some leeway in my bank balance. Hooker money. May as well spend it on something like this. I go inside and order two boxes of whatever pastries and other treats they have on display.

Heart hammering, I cross the road and ring the doorbell beside the heavy glass door before I can change my mind. A huge guy with a dishtowel slung over his shoulder opens up. It takes forever before all the chains and bolts are removed.

"Delivery," I say, "for..." And then I pretend to search my pockets, hoping he won't notice how hard my hands are shaking. He rolls his eyes and steps aside.

"In the back down the stairs, but you've got to leave through the back door because I'm not unlocking this again." He mutters something about new guys and starts sliding the bolts back in place. I let my eyes adjust to the dim lighting in the empty club until I spot a sign at the back pointing to stairs and bathrooms.

I cross the floor but slow my stride the minute I'm out of sight. Maybe he'll call down to say I'm on my way, in which case I'm screwed. If he doesn't, I could at least check if Travis is here, and if he's not, I might still escape through the back door. I smell bathrooms and bleach before I'm all the way down the marble steps; they are down a corridor that also leads to the back door, but I hear voices down another flight of stairs. Slowly I creep closer, clutching the boxes with pastries to my chest. I've only seen the brothers once, and I've got the scar to prove it. They always sent their thugs over for the money. Maybe they won't recognize me if I'm spotted.

There are three guys in what looks like a storage room with a desk. Neither of them are the brothers, and one of them is Travis, sitting in a chair like he's waiting for the complimentary breakfast at his expensive hotel despite the gun being trained on his head.

"Stop being funny," the guy holding the gun says in terrible English. He's the one I had seen outside the hotel, and I also recognize him now as the one

who had held me in place while I was being stabbed with the chisel. I don't recognize the other guy, but he looks on edge, wary. The only person facing me is Travis, and he sees me almost immediately but doesn't so much as twitch.

"I'm just tired of waiting," he says. "You said Messrs. Caivano and Caivano would be here any minute."

"They will be," the wary guy says, and I understand Travis is warning me. We don't have much time. I shift the boxes to my left hand, reach into my jacket with my right, and plaster on a smile.

"Delivery," I call out brightly, and the guy with the gun rounds on me while the other one startles but goes entirely still.

"I didn't order—" The guy doesn't even have time to lift the gun in my direction. Travis is on his feet, and he smashes a half-empty bottle of something on the gunman's head. He crumples with a muffled noise, and I turn to the other one, dropping the pastries and whacking the side of his head with my Maglite. The batteries go flying when the lamp part breaks off. Goddammit, and here I thought this would make a great weapon. I drop the flashlight and raise my fist, blind with rage, with grief, finally overwhelmed with being so afraid for so long, and I take it out on this wide-eyed guy who holds up his hands in self-defense.

Chapter 7

Travis

Malachi lands three punches in a row before I can even open my mouth to speak. “Stop,” I manage when my heart starts beating again. “Don’t, he’s a cop.” Mal’s fist hovers, shaking and bloody, his eyes so dark in a rage he looks alien. He blinks at the groaning guy on the ground and then at me.

“Carabinieri?”

“Yeah. Undercover, I guess. Come on, we need to get the fuck out of here.”

“How did you know?” the cop asks in crisp, clear English. “No, never mind. You’re right. You do need to get out of here. I can give you two minutes of pretending to be unconscious.”

“Find me,” I tell him and the cop nods. “Come on.” I drag Mal away toward the back door, trying to run through the pain in my left leg. When we’ve run so long I can’t breathe anymore, I have to tell Mal to stop. He does immediately, and comes to stand in front of me. I lean against the wall, trying to catch my breath.

“Now what?” he asks. “What did they want from you?”

I snort. “Money. They figured you had someone coughing up for you, goddammit. They must have a mole at the hotel. I think they wanted to add a bit of kidnapping to their CV, but since there’s no one left to pay my ransom, it wouldn’t have worked out so well.”

“You need to get out of here.” Mal’s eyes search mine with an understated worry.

I can’t believe he came for me. Rubbing a hand over my hair, I close my eyes for a second. I wish he hadn’t snuck out this morning. I wish I could’ve given him something other than a paid-for fuck.

“So do you. If you stay and they find out I got away, they’ll come find you. Rome isn’t safe for you anymore, Mal. Not for a while, at least.”

“I know, and I plan to leave.” Mal holds up his phone. “Rico is already on his way out of town, and I’m going to follow him right now.”

“What about the store?”

He shrugs. "It'll still be there in a few months. I'll probably sell it anyway. Start new."

"Good. Sounds... good." My leg hurts in that numbing way blooming bruises always do. Fucking steel-tipped boots.

"What will you do?" Mal asks me quietly.

"Go to the American Embassy. Those idiots have my passport and my wallet." I wriggle my fingers. "But the embassy has my fingerprints, so it shouldn't be a big deal. I'll call from there to cancel my credit cards and arrange my flights, since I can't go back to the hotel now."

Mal fidgets for a second, looking down. "The embassy is close to the hotel."

"I know," I say and I smile at him softly. "I'll be careful." This is it. There's nothing else to say, really. And still I can't find it in me to go just yet. "Thanks for... for coming to find me."

"It was nothing. Are you going to be okay?"

I smile at him. We both know we're hiding bruises. "Yeah. You? Your hands..."

"I'm fine." Mal nods at me once, quickly glancing away.

I don't know why I do it. Gratitude, maybe. Relief that, against all odds, we're still alive. I mean to aim for his cheek but the kiss lands somewhere on the left corner of his mouth. I back off immediately, embarrassed as he blinks at me, looking as dumbstruck as I feel. We don't do this. We're not like this, so I turn away, hoping he just writes it off as a spur-of-the-moment thing.

His hand curls in my sleeve and he spins me around. I don't know what I see in his eyes, I don't recognize that desperate glint, but his mouth is warm when it lands on mine, his tongue slick and hot, and it makes my insides twist viciously. Forget butterflies, this is a roaring tiger trying to get out.

Mal's hand bunches up the fabric of my shirt, and he touches the skin of my lower back, setting my entire body on fire. He pulls away and opens his mouth to say something, but I don't let him. If we talk about this it will be ruined and I don't want it to be. I don't know what I want from him—I can't trust him after what he's done, and I know he'll never trust me either—but I do know I don't want to stop. I grab him harder, pull him closer, but he wrestles free. His hand tightens on my bicep, and then he lets go.

"Take care," Malachi says, and with that, he's gone.

I let myself feel it, the sweet agony of 'what if.' Just for a moment, so I can move on after this, because I have my work cut out for me.

If things had been different...

Straightening, I shake the melancholy off and head for the tall gates of the American Embassy.

"There is a policeman here to see you," a young woman says, bringing a bunch of files into the sterile room where I've been told to wait.

"I thought there might be," I say to her, accepting the pen and the papers.

"Are you sure you're all right, Mr. Jones?" She points at the bruise on my temple. I'd completely forgotten about that. It seems so long ago now. Poor cousin Gino...

"I'm fine, really."

"Okay. I'll send in the officer."

"Thank you."

The same man who helped us leave the Caivanos' bar earlier sidles through the door. "I don't have long."

"No." I grin at him. "I bet you don't." He looks different here in the harsh overhead lighting: taller, prouder, like he's shed his other persona and I'm staring at the real guy now. "Who are you?"

"The less you know, the better." He takes a chair opposite mine, elbows on the table. "How did you know I was a cop?"

I laugh. It must bug him that I figured it out, since he's in danger every second of the day. "At the risk of becoming a weepy cliché, I've been beaten up plenty of times for being who I am, and I know when someone is pulling his punches." I pat my thigh. "You could've done a lot more damage, but you didn't. Whenever you thought the Godfather's monkey was going to go too far, you reeled him back in. You were subtle, but I was"—*scared shitless*—"let's say, hyper vigilant. So I noticed things I wouldn't have otherwise. I think you're safe, though."

"Good. Well, call me John for now. Why did you want to see me?"

"John." I plaster a wide grin on my face, even though my empty stomach twists with fatigue and pain. "What if I told you I have this friend..."

Chapter 8

Malachi

Rico rushes past what would be the dining room with an elated squeal, sliding over four or five feet of shining wooden floor on his socks before he comes to a stop. He looks happy, eyes shining when he hurries back to the doorway and beams at me. The peace and quiet of Toscana does him good, and I feel it too. The sun seems warmer here, the air cleaner, lighter.

"I love this place," he says. "Is it very expensive?"

Aunt Silvia glances at the real estate agent, and then at me. "No," she says, "which is strange."

"When I saw this on the real estate website last week, it was over twice the price he's telling us," I say to Silvia, keeping my voice low. The guy hears me anyway.

"The owner needs to sell fast," he says, smiling brightly. There's a twinkle in his eye I don't like. "Unforeseen circumstances."

"There's something weird about this," I tell Silvia, and she nods.

"I have a friend who's a contractor; I'll have him take a look at this place before you sign anything. But the contract..." She fans the thick document she'd been reading. "This is a standard real estate purchase agreement, nothing unusual at all. And the owner is an old guy who has lived here for the past forty years. He's moving into a smaller place because his wife died, I think..." She checks her phone and nods at the agent. "I need to go. I have a divorce to settle at two. Will you guys be okay?"

"I can give you a ride back to town, if you like," the realtor says.

"Thanks."

The house is gorgeous, the location perfect, with a very good school less than five miles away. Open windows bring the scent of spring inside, actual sheer voile curtains billowing lightly on the breeze. The sunlight spills in like watered-down orange juice, and it looks like the scene of an overly romantic movie. The floors shine, a fan spins lazily above my head, birds chirp in trees bracketing a garden with a small, kidney-shaped pond. Somewhere, ducks quack, responding to the peeping of what I imagine are the fuzziest yellow ducklings in existence.

I've never seen anything yell *too good to be true* more than this place. It might be the biggest mistake I've ever made when I say, "I will take the ride, but I'll have to get back to you about the house."

"Don't wait too long. It will be gone in a flash."

"I'd be suspicious if it wasn't."

The guy's face sours a bit, but he's cheerful enough as he leads the way to his car. I can tell Rico is sulking in the backseat. He doesn't love sharing a house with Silvia and her husband any more than I do, even though they've been amazing, putting up with us for this long. The real estate guy drops us off with a cheerful wave, and I send Rico up to go do his homework.

Maybe I'm too jaded, and I can't even tell good luck when it slaps me in the face. I let it slip through my fingers once, after all, though I don't know if I'd call Travis good luck. Good fuck, more like. I snort at myself and turn on Silvia's laptop.

When I check the listing, it's gone already. Of course it is. I click through to the job ads instead. I don't mind working at the big furniture chain, but the work isn't exactly a challenge.

Every once in a while I try a surreptitious search for the Caivano brothers, but nothing ever shows up. I've been meaning to go back to the shop to collect some of my personal things, at least check if the place hasn't been ransacked, but I keep putting it off. Maybe I should go this weekend.

Silvia corners me after dinner as I send Rico to go do the dishes.

"My contractor was in the neighborhood of that house, earlier," she says. "He says he remembers that place being built when he was a kid. It was solid then, and from what he could see on the outside, it's still as solid now. There's nothing structurally wrong with it, and he says if you buy it and run into trouble, he'll help you out cheap. But he says if you let it go to somebody else for that price, you're an idiot."

"It's too late," I tell her. "It's already gone."

"Really?" She cocks her head to the side and gives me a sharply raised eyebrow. It makes her look like Mama so much I could cry. "Then why was it still available five minutes ago when I called the agent to say you'd take it?"

"What? But—" Why would they take the listing down hours before?

"He's staying late at his office so you can sign the contract. Now go; you can take my car. No offense, but I want my privacy back, and so does Daniel."

Silvia and Daniel are both career people who never had kids, so I understand we're starting to get underfoot after living with them for months. I nod, but I'm still not convinced.

"Go," she says, more gently now. "If there's something wrong with the house, I will sue them until they're cowering under their desks. Don't worry. Everyone deserves a break every now and again. Your time is now."

"Okay." I grab my wallet and head for the door. "Make sure Rico finishes his homework."

"I got it," she says, steering me out the door before I can protest any further.

Maybe I do deserve some good luck. Maybe it *is* my turn. I almost laugh when I walk up to the real estate office and I see he has a sign up in his window that says *Sr. Carpenter wanted*, with an address barely two miles from the new house. Yes, I think as I push his door open, a bell softly tinkling over my head. *My time is now.*

"Malachi!" Rico shouts from the living room. "Come check out the news!"

"You're supposed to be unpacking!" I yell back from the kitchen. "Not watching TV."

There are boxes everywhere, and even they can't dampen the soft golden light that spills through the windows—our windows.

"I'm not kidding, get over here!"

There's a high note of something close to panic in his voice, so I rush into the hallway, sliding on the wooden floors like he'd done when we came to see this place for the first time. I catch myself on the doorway leading into the living room and step inside.

"What is it?" I ask, but he shushes me, and I tune in. A clip is being shown, a repeat by the looks of it, of two handcuffed men being guided up to a courthouse, through a throng of reporters and onlookers. A reporter talks over the muted sounds of the crowd.

"...accelerated trial of the Caivano brothers begins today. The police have been very careful to keep everything quiet up until now. The entire city of Rome is shocked and surprised to hear about the arrest, which was allegedly made possible through a set-up in which an American man played a big role. No one knows who he is, but it is said he is currently fighting for his life. While long-

time suspects of racketeering, coercion and extortion, there was never enough evidence to convict the Caivano brothers, until now. An inside source claims there is no doubt the brothers—“

Rico mutes the sound. “It’s New York,” he says, his eyes wide. “It has to be. Unknown American?”

“Rico, that could be anyone—”

“It’s not!” He stamps his foot, angry tears welling in his eyes. “This isn’t a coincidence. None of it is! Don’t you understand?” He gestures at the room around us. “And he’s fighting for his life. You have to find him. You told me he was safe. You have to *find him*.”

“Okay,” I tell him, kneeling down so I can hold him close. I don’t understand why Rico is so invested in Travis; they barely spoke for more than a second. “Why do you care so much about him?”

“He saved us,” Rico hiccuped. “He’s a hero. And now he’s dying.”

“He’s fighting,” I whisper. “If it’s him, he’ll fight hard.”

“Please,” Rico whispers in the small voice of a boy in desperate need of a hero. “Please find him.”

“I will.”

Chapter 9

Travis

At the embassy they advise me to take the first plane back to the US and I plan to, but for some reason I just... don't. My hotel room has clearly been searched by the time I go back, but the spare credit card and stash of money is still safely hidden between my socks.

I find a smaller hotel in a less expensive neighborhood, and while no one comes for me, I find I can't just leave and forget about all this.

Four days after I've said goodbye to Mal I pick up George from the airport, and I wonder if it's pathetic that I feel so much warmth from seeing my groundskeeper again.

"Morning, sir."

"Morning, George." We have a small, dignified grapple over his bags for a second, but he lets me take them, and I lead him toward the car I bought. No BMW this time, for obvious reasons.

"Did you find what we need?" I ask George as he settles back in his seat. I pull out into traffic, ignoring the beeping horn behind me.

"I did, sir. You have a distant cousin who is a carpenter. She has a husband and two children in Verona, but she's willing to work for you if she can go home every weekend and you pay extra for childcare."

"Of course."

"What else do you think we'll need, sir?"

"I think you'll have to call me Travis for the time being, and we have to get someone to fix the bathroom. I don't mind slumming it for a while, but I draw the line at lukewarm showers every day."

"I see why I couldn't convince you to come home, sir," George says wryly, and I laugh.

"We have things to take care of here, George."

"Very well, sir," George says, smiling a little when he adds, "Travis." His usually impeccable white hair is a little messed up from the flight, but apart from that he looks the same as always. Maybe it's me who's different.

It takes one week to add all the updates to Mal's store, the apartment above it, and the workshop. Fixing the bathroom—and by fixing I mean replacing the whole thing—takes a lot longer. Christine, the distant cousin twice removed or whatever it is, arrives in the meantime. She's down to earth and doesn't put up with any of my idiocies, and she's scarily beautiful like only Italian women can be. If I wasn't gay, and we weren't related, I would be a little in love. The first time she walks into the shop, she looks around, face unreadable.

"This friend of yours," she says after she has toured the warehouse. "He's talented." She refuses to speak English to me, and it takes me forever to get what she means.

"Yes," I eventually say when she points at one of his chairs and gives me a thumbs-up. "He is."

"Will you be able to work here?" I ask her.

"*Si.*"

"And George explained what will happen?"

"*Si.*" She opens up her handbag and pulls out a gun.

"Good," I tell her, my eyes going wide. "Great. I'll uh, leave you to settle in down here, and then I can show you where you'll be sleeping."

"Can I get you anything to drink, Miss Genovese?" George asks.

"I'd love some coffee," she says in perfect English, and George grins at me while I grumble on my way out of the room.

The thugs show up every week after the store opens again, even though the sign above the front door now just says *Genovese*, but a whole month passes before they turn up the heat. I always stay out of sight, but I'm nearby when Christine has to deal with them, though I don't doubt she could take them on with one hand tied behind her back.

"What did they want this time?" I ask when they leave. My Italian is getting better, but that exchange had gone far too fast for me to keep up.

"Protection money," she says grimly. George steps out from the warehouse, tucking his gun into the waist of his pants. I'm always surprised when I see him carry a weapon. It's so easy to forget after all these years, that George wasn't always the groundskeeper for our family. "It won't be long now."

“You refused to pay up?”

“Like you told me to. Now get out of my way, I have a coffee table to finish.”

I step aside and glance at George. “You got all that?”

“I did, s—Travis. Would you like me to email it to John?”

“Please do. Although it won't be enough.”

George nods and turns toward the stairs, but hesitates with one hand on the railing. “Has the snooping on Malachi been fruitful?”

I roll my eyes, but I know when I'm caught red-handed. “He still lives with his aunt Silvia, though it looks like he's trying to find work. Not easy for carpenters, apparently.”

“A store of his own?”

I shake my head. “He doesn't have the start-up capital.” Even with the ‘dirty money’ left over in his account. As far as I can tell, the Caivanos are leaving him alone, so they must've been happy with what he paid them.

“Would you like me to make inquiries?”

Laughing softly, I look away, but George doesn't move. He just waits patiently until I have the lurching of my heart back under control. “Discreetly.”

“Always, sir.”

It's three in the morning that same night when an almighty crash has me jumping out of bed before I'm even half awake. I rush down the stairs, George on my heels, to find Christine in the shop window.

“Stop,” she orders, and I freeze on the last step, my bare toes curling over the edge. “There's glass everywhere. They shot through one of the windows.”

“And I'm guessing they'll be back tomorrow to offer their *protection*.”

“Maybe not that fast, but soon.” She squints at the ceiling. “That camera is broken. And you'll have to have the microphones checked too.”

“Travis?” George quietly says behind me. I nod, and he goes back upstairs. To Christina I add, “I'll have someone come in to replace the window tomorrow.”

“No,” she says. “We’ll board it up for now. This isn’t a wealthy neighborhood, and it will look suspicious if you fix a window like it doesn’t cost you a thing.”

“Okay. Go get some sleep. I’ll put some shoes on and clean up. The party is about to get started.”

“Fine.” Christina pushes past me, but I stop her with a hand on her arm.

“You okay?”

She raises an eyebrow at me. “Of course I am. I’m Italian.”

Laughing, I follow her upstairs and get dressed.

One of Caivanos’ bullies comes by three days later, suggesting we better pay for that sorely needed protection because this area of the city really is going to shit.

As Christine refuses, I whisper to George, “This is no good. And things are going to get ugly soon. I don’t feel comfortable keeping Christine here for much longer.”

“She can take care of herself.” He grins. “And so can I.”

He’s right, I know he is, but I sleep less and less as the days pass and we get murder threats, another broken window, and a dead cat pinned to our door. And yet all we ever see are low-level thugs, so I decide to take matters into my own hands.

“I don’t like this,” George tells me as he reads John’s email over my shoulder.

“Neither do I,” Christine says, though no doubt for an entirely different reason.

“It’s the only way.”

We set it up.

When one of the bull-necked idiots turns up about three months after we set the whole game in motion, I’m waiting. He gives his usual threats to Christine. I walk up behind him, make sure he gets a good look at my face, and then whack him over the head with a pipe. We then strip him to his underwear and dump him in an alley, naked in the lukewarm May rain.

I'm ready when they come for me, and I can only hope John is ready too, because I find out I don't like being bound to a chair and having the barrel of a gun shoved down my throat.

"American boy," the man holding the gun says, and this is one of them. One of the Caivano brothers. I hope the other one isn't far away. I can't help how my heart hammers, my nostrils flaring as I breathe like a frightened racehorse, the metal tasting like terror in my mouth. Caivano tosses my wallet to the side. "We almost met before, didn't we? I wondered where you disappeared to last time."

He rubs a hand through my hair, yanking my head back so my neck strains, and I almost gag on the gun. There are three other men in the room, but I don't dare to take my eyes off this one, so I don't know if John is here. Either way, this is going to be over soon. "You won't get away this time, but I realized you probably need a little extra incentive to cooperate, so I have a few of my men with your pretty little cousin right now."

He drags the gun over my tongue, in and out of my mouth in an obscene move, and I buck against the chair, trying to wrench my head away. That fucking bastard. I will skin him alive if he hurts Christine.

Caivano laughs, yanking my hair to keep me in place. "You feel like paying up, pretty boy? I might take a finger or two anyway. It's not like rich boys do anything useful with their hands, do they?" The others in the room laugh, and now I don't want John here; I want him with the others, keeping them safe, because it's been a long time since George was a bodyguard. Caivano pulls the gun from between my lips and begins to wipe it on my shirt.

"You motherf—" A hand clamps over my mouth from behind.

"You don't want to insult Mr. Caivano's mother," a soft voice says in my ear. And fuck, *fuck*, it's John. Which means there is no one with Christine and George. I try to keep calm, but panic starts to twist around my insides and doubt begins to cloud my reasoning. What if John is in on this? What if he's a dirty cop? Then the past months will all have been for nothing, and Christine, George, Mal and Rico, they'll all die.

"I'll pay," I gasp, and I'm not even faking it. "Whatever you want."

"Oh, you're going to do much more than that," Caivano says. I watch as he puts on latex gloves. He pushes a towel aside that had been covering a tray with what looks like small, white, plastic-wrapped balls.

“No,” I whisper and I begin to tremble. “No, please.”

“Strip him,” he says to John, lifting a syringe off the tray, a bead of liquid leaking from the tip. “And hold his arm.”

Chapter 10

Malachi

The sound of the monitor beeping is so familiar now, I hear it in my dreams. The old man with the white hair straightens when he sees me, smiling gently.

“Ah, Mal. I’m glad you’re here. I need some coffee.”

“You need some rest,” I tell George. “Go home and sleep. I’ll stay.”

George nods. “There’s been no change. I don’t know—”

“He’ll pull through,” I say. “He will.”

“Yes,” George says, but his eyes are sad. “I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Sleep in if you can. I have nowhere to be.” I settle in the chair George left, a comfortable recliner, unless you’re trying to sleep in it for days on end. “Hey Travis,” I whisper, stroking the hair from his forehead. “How are you? Rico sends his love. He says you should wake up soon. He wants to show you the new house. He thinks you paid for most of it, and I think he’s right, you little shit. Wake up so I can yell at you, huh? What do you think?”

They don’t know what will happen when, if, Travis wakes up. The heroin they’d injected had been enough to mess with his system, but when one of the cocaine balls burst in his intestines... I can’t think about it too much.

When John told me what had happened, I couldn’t believe how brave they had all been, much braver than I ever was. Gathering evidence, videotaping and recording the extortions, handing it all over to John... It makes me feel humble and proud. Rico was right: Travis is a hero. I just don’t understand why he’d go through all this trouble. I take a deep breath and get my voice under control.

“I like what you did to the bathroom above the store, by the way. Those improvements will help me sell it for a nice little sum. And then I can pay you back for the house when you wake up. No, don’t argue. I have a good job lined up. They said they’d wait for me. I’m sure you have something to do with that too. But anyway, I am paying you back. I don’t care what you say. I don’t want to live in Rome anymore. Toscana is gorgeous, and we’re close to Firenze. I love it. You’ll have to come visit. I mean... if you want.” My voice gives out and I take his hand, resting my forehead against our entwined fingers. “Please.”

Wake up, Travis. Please wake up. Come on, wake up, I think before I fall asleep.

I open my eyes when my back begins to hurt so much I can't pretend to be asleep any longer. It's almost dawn, the light graying through the blinds I forgot to close, and I blink to focus my eyesight on the room around me. When I look back down, Travis's eyes are fixed on me. I sit up so fast I nearly fall off the chair, and his hand falls from mine. He looks down at it, flexing his fingers.

"Travis," I whisper. "*O Madre de Dio*, Travis, you're awake."

"Hi," he says, voice hoarse, blinking slowly like he wants nothing more than to go back to sleep. "Who are you?"

I stare at him, dumbstruck, stupid tears burning behind my eyeballs. Lifting my eyes to the ceiling for a second, I try to hold them back. "I'll go get your nurse," I say, but when I look down I find him giving me the wickedest grin. It still takes me a second to work it out, and then I do.

"You asshole," I croak, not caring when tears start to stream down my cheeks. "You fucking asshole." He lifts his arms weakly and I fall into them, holding him as gently as I can despite wanting to squeeze him so hard he'll feel it forever. I lie there hiccuping in his arms for ages, until he pats me on the back.

"I'm so tired," he whispers. "I have so many questions, but I'm so tired. Which is ridiculous because I feel like I've slept for a long time."

"You have, but I think it's okay if you sleep some more. As long..."

Travis lifts his eyebrows. He looks pale, and his eyes look sunken, and he's the most beautiful man I've ever seen. "As long?"

"As long as you think you'll wake up again."

He closes his eyes and breathes, like he's testing. "Yeah," he whispers, "I'll wake up again." He mumbles something else that sounds like, *now that I know you're here*. I reach for his hand, and by the time I've squeezed it, he's asleep again.

I watch him for five minutes, my heart feeling like it grew wings, and then I gently let him go to tell the night nurse he woke up.

Epilogue

Travis

The airport is a busy, frantic bustle of business people pushing through harried families trying to keep their children in line. It looks a lot like herding cats to me.

Malachi is staring and I don't know what to make of it. Beside him Rico is giving me the stink-eye, but about that I can do something at least.

"You should come visit," I tell him, crouching down to his level. "I'll show you New York." I beam at him even though I don't feel the happiness I'm trying to pass along. Maybe that's why it doesn't work. His bottom lip juts out and he looks down without saying a word.

"Sir," George says beside me. "We should make our way through security."

"Yes," I say. "I'll be right there." George nods and takes our hand luggage. He doesn't move far—I think it will be a while before he'll leave my side—but we have the illusion of privacy at least.

"So this is it," Mal says. I can't read him. He's like a closed book and the blurb on the back is blurry.

"Seems like it. It's been... uh. Interesting." Do I shake his hand? Do I kiss him one last time? My emotions are all over the place, so the best thing to do is to keep them in check, really. "Take care, Mal." I pull him into a quick hug, or I figure it will be quick, but he holds on when I try to let go.

"Why?" he whispers. "Why did you go through all that trouble?"

I smile and gently pry his arms from around my shoulders. If he doesn't know by now, it's too late to explain, isn't it? "What else is a spoiled rich boy to do with his time and money?" I offer lightly. Mal doesn't smile, and it makes me sad. I would've liked to see him smile one last time. "Look after your brother, okay?" I tell Rico, and he nods, solemn, like only a child can do. "Bye Mal."

Malachi takes a deep breath, but all he says is, "Bye, Travis. And thank you, for everything."

"It's been entirely my pleasure."

I turn and walk away, ignoring George's silent but brief surprise. The flight home will be grueling with all my bruises, but what's a little physical pain compared to the rest of it.

There is snow on the ground in Martha's Vineyard. "Snow in May, George," I complain from the recliner. "What have we done to deserve this?"

"Built landfills, sir," George says drily. He's watering the plants in the conservatory where I'm lounging around, bored. "And I believe cow farts are another cause."

"What did I used to do with my time? It seems I've forgotten." There's only so much resting I can do before I turn into a whining child, apparently.

"I believe you use to say sleeping late was an art. And you used to attend parties." George sends me a droll look when I glance at him over my shoulder. "That's about it. Oh, a package arrived for you earlier."

"Oh, how thrilling." I roll my eyes. We've been back from Rome for ten days, and this is the most exciting thing to happen since. Not to say I haven't had enough excitement over the past weeks. "Where is it?"

"I left it in the big kitchen, sir. I'll go fetch it for you."

"I can do that, you carry on being useful." Jumping to my feet, I hurry to what used to be the staff kitchen when the manor was still full of people. Since it's just me and George now, we generally use the small kitchen on the south side of the house.

The package sits on the gleaming counter, and I eye the slightly battered box curiously. My heart pretty much jumps out of my throat when I see it came from Italy. Grabbing a pair of scissors, I cut through the hermetically sealed package, but the thick duct tape puts up a heroic fight. When I finally yank the box open, green foam peanuts fly everywhere, and in between them nestles a very familiar, silver music box.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God, Cousin Gino." I laugh, the sound shuddering hesitantly on its way out. My belly aches with longing, and I lift the small from the box. I have to resist the urge to press it to my face, and ease the lip from the envelope.

A thick, cream-colored card has elegant loopy handwriting on it and I have to blink a few times to make out the words.

Cousin Gino got bored on the top shelf of Pedro's Pawn Shop.

That's all it says, no name, nothing else. The disappointment I feel is irrationally huge and stings my eyeballs. Well, Gino didn't get his final resting place, but at least he traveled to Rome one last time. I take the music box, already wondering which mantelpiece would be best, when another piece of paper catches my eye. I stick my shaking hand in the peanuts and draw out the note, only it's not a note.

It's a plane ticket. One way to Rome. And it leaves tomorrow.

I stare at it, open mouthed, eyes wide, and after a frozen second of stunned silence, I bellow, "George!"

Right behind me, he says, "Off you go, sir. Can't deny a dead man's wishes, after all, can we?"

I turn around, my hand pressed to my mouth. When I have my voice under control, I say, "But what about—" I indicate the house around me.

"I'll hold down the fort, sir."

"Oh, George." For the first and the last time in my life I hug my bodyguard hard.

"Just be careful, sir. Don't linger around Rome. Go straight to Tuscany if you can." He lowers his voice. "Gino won't know the difference between one piece of Italian soil and the next."

"You're the best," I whisper.

"My Christmas bonus confirms it, sir," George says, and I laugh, already turning toward the stairs. I have packing to do. A lot of it, since I don't know when I'll be back. By the end of the week, maybe. Or never.

I'm anxious and rumpled after the flight, and twelve hours' worth of scenarios on how this can all go bad flashes through my brain as I wait for my luggage.

How can I be sure the package came from Mal? What if the brothers already bribed their way out of jail and I'll be walking straight into a bullet? What if I completely missed the cues and the plane ticket really is just to dump Gino on the ancient Forum. Some sort of repayment for my help.

But then he would've sent a return ticket too, wouldn't he? Unless he couldn't afford it...

I'm secretly hoping Mal will be waiting for me, but he's not. Instead there is a taxi driver with my name on a sign and I walk over.

"I take you to *Forum Romanum*, si?" he says, tipping his cap.

I sigh. "Si." At least I can buy a first class ticket home, then.

The drive into the city leaves me nauseated, but I can mostly ignore it. I have to admit, I'm thrilled to be back here. Despite the danger I am very possibly in just by showing my face in this city, I feel alive, here in Italy. Like a real human being rather than a caricature of the spoiled American rich boy.

To my surprise, my driver parks his cab and gets out of the car too.

"I stay close," he tells me when I eye him curiously. "I make sure no one see you. And he say I take bullet for you if I have to." The driver laughs heartily, like it's a joke.

"He?" I ask, rummaging through my luggage until I find Cousin Gino.

"He who hire me," the driver shrugs, like that explains it all. I suppose it does.

Together we walk to the same tree I'd spotted last time. There are no cops in sight. No one around but tourists, really, and a lot more of them than last time. Maybe that's why I blend into anonymity a lot more than before. When the moment comes it's strangely anticlimactic.

"Rest in peace," I say, because I feel like I have to say something, and then I tip the music box into the small hole I dug in the soft earth with a credit card. The driver adds something in Italian, his head bowed, and then we walk away. When I aim for a garbage can, he stops me, face horrified.

"Give it to me," he says, holding out his hand. "I hide it on cemetery for you."

"Oh. Yes, that would be great. Thank you." I climb into the cab—the front, not the back, because I don't actually want to throw up from carsickness—and close my eyes. "Back to the airport?" I ask when I hear his car door slam shut. There is silence, and a strange feeling crawls over my skin. I don't know how I know it, but I know this isn't my driver who is sitting next to me. I jerk upright, eyes flying open, hand ready on the door handle in case I need to escape.

Everything goes cold and hot at once, because there he is, staring at me, with the most beautiful smile I've ever seen.

"Malachi..."

“Is the airport where you want to go?” he asks in that beautiful melodic voice of his. I swear all the blood in my upper body rushes south just at the sound of it. “Because I have a bubble bath waiting, and a bottle of champagne. Especially imported for spoiled American rich boys.”

“Bath,” I say stupidly. “Definitely bubble bath, not airport.”

He laughs a little bashfully, and I stare at him for a moment longer until I can't take it anymore and throw my arms around his neck, kissing him with all I've got. We both startle when someone raps on the window.

“Can I have car back now?” the taxi driver asks, and Mal grins at me, then lets me go to roll down the window.

“Actually,” he says in English, for my benefit no doubt. “Can you drop us off at the train station?”

The bath is hot and the champagne travels to my head faster than it has any right to.

“Are you trying to get me drunk so you can have your wicked way with me?” I ask when Mal tops up my glass. I can barely keep my eyes off his beautiful body.

He laughs, throwing his head back in delight. I've never seen him this carefree and I love it. I love it so much, I never, ever want to leave. The house he lives in is amazing, and I'll have to call George to say he made an excellent choice. I don't want to think irrational romantic thoughts but they are true none the less. If Malachi would have me, I could live here for the rest of my life.

“Aunt Silvia is watching Rico,” he says. “Which won't happen a lot so we have to make the most of it.” The smile slips from his face and the look he gives me hurts my insides. “I never had the chance to say I was sorry,” Mal whispers. “I can't take that I hurt you like that. That I used you. I'm so... sorry. I'm...” His face twists, lips parting in a grimace, and he turns away, then buries his hands in his hair.

I can't stand it. It tears at me that he beats himself up like this. “I did worse,” I whisper, and I'm less stoic than he is, or maybe fatigue is catching up with me because tears are already streaming down my face. “I treated you like a—”

“Don't say it.” Mal yanks at his hair and I have to grab his wrists, I can't sit here and watch him torment himself. “Don't say it,” he repeats, lifting his eyes

to mine. When he sees me, he draws in a deep, wet breath. “Oh God. Don’t. Don’t, let’s just... we can get past this. We can. Start over. Right here, if you want that. I don’t want to lose—”

I kiss him. I shut him up with my mouth on his, and it tastes like pain, like grief and salt and hurt, and I drink it all in.

“We can,” I say, dragging my mouth away, across his jaw, his cheekbone. It hurts, his stubble catches on my kissed-raw lips but I don’t care. We both have penance to do and we have a lifetime to do it in.

The End

Author Bio

In 2008 Indra Vaughn packed up everything but the kitchen sink... no, that's a lie. She left everything behind apart from her books and moved from Belgium to Michigan.

She now lives in the suburbs of Detroit with her dog who thinks he's a toddler. Indra's professional background is in Nursing and Chinese Medicine, but she prefers to spend time making up stories about mysterious men and their unrequited love.

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