



*Love Like
the Medici*

EDMOND MANNING

Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	3
Love Like the Medici – Information.....	6
Acknowledgements.....	8
Dedication.....	9
Love Like the Medici.....	10
Day 2.....	11
Day 3.....	26
Day 4.....	31
Day 5.....	44
Day 6.....	45
Day 8.....	47
Day 10.....	63
Day 12.....	64
Day 15.....	70
Day 18.....	73
Day 23.....	76
Day 25.....	77
Day 27.....	78
Day 32.....	83
Day 35–42.....	85
Day 43.....	86
Day 46.....	87
Day 48.....	96
Day 61.....	104
Epilogue.....	105
Author Bio.....	106

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

LOVE LIKE THE MEDICI

By Edmond Manning

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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 embrace, lying on a cobblestone street. Scattered around them on the ground are colored pencils, a sketchpad, and artist supplies. It appears one man jumped out of a red car and another hopped off his scooter to meet between vehicles and kiss. Both men are young and dark-haired.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I just graduated with my Computer Science degree. I love spending hours with a computer, but I realized it's sad that my biggest excitement and let down of last year were video games (the newest HALO, awesome, but Assassin's Creed: Unity had me drinking in despair). I'm excited about my new job, which pays really well so I'll be able to afford the newest tech toys and video games. Yup, geek and proud.

For a guy whose furthest travels include World of Warcraft, this is a big step. No tech (okay, limited tech, not going anywhere without my tricked out phone), no video games (I'm serious). Just me, Italy, art, culture, and cobblestone streets for 2 months. I figured I should make use of that Art History minor (for graphic design reasons... like dabbling in After Effects) ei miei orribili competenze italiane.

And not because I'm running from a boy. Who definitely didn't break my heart. As far as Italy is concerned, no boys.

Then I met the Italian boy born to bend and break rules. My rules. Specifically my no boys rule. An art student, so different from anyone I know. I refuse to fall for him, to have my heart broken again. But maybe... no. No boys. Especially not this boy. I'm just here for Italy, art, culture, and cobblestone streets.

Author, I'm fluff-allergic (some okay). Feel free to make it sexy or chaste. Change any details as long as it's an American geek in Italy, I'll be happy.

Sincerely,

Alijca

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: Italy, gamer, Florence, art history, World of Warcraft, Medici, love, non-explicit, geeks/nerds, visual arts, Italian food, theft

Word Count: 31,018

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Lovely people helped Enzo and Chris find each other. In no particular order, I would like to thank Ellen Burns (who powered up my World of Warcraft gaming knowledge), Dr. Edward Goldberg (who corrected my inaccuracies about modern Italian life), and Dr. Judith Testa who was not only a beta reader but her fantastic study: [An Art Lover's Guide To Florence](#) is a fun, fascinating read. I would also thank another friend who is a consistent beta reader and also so shy she doesn't like to be named. You know who you are. I thank you. Catherine Dair, artist extraordinaire, volunteered to create this cover for me absolutely free. I gave her the slightest bit of direction and she came up with something I thought absolutely gorgeous. Way to go, [Catherine](#). And finally, thank you to Elisa Rolle who read my words in Italian and ensured I did not end up accidentally swearing in Spanish.

And hey, thanks to the awesome MM Romance Goodreads folks who put on the "Dear Author" event every year. I was recently describing to a non-author/reader friend all the intense volunteer work that goes into editing 200+ stories and preparing them for publication and this friend said, "I don't understand. Why would they do that?" I said, "I guess they love *love*. And sharing that with others." Pretty noble work in the world. Thanks to your team and also Alicja who created the intriguing story prompt.

Dedication

Dedicated to Dr. Judith Testa, author of *Roma Amor*, and *An Art Lover's Guide to Florence*, a *professoressa* turned dear friend who nurtured my love for Italy. I think the world of you.

LOVE LIKE THE MEDICI

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Day 2

Chris Spaulding pushed up his black-framed glasses and tried not to stare at the perfect butt. Chris had hoped to feel *something* when he gazed upon Michelangelo's most famous statue, David, but he had not expected to feel lust. *Inspired* maybe. Thrilled for the accomplishments of humanity. He did not imagine the first words to leap to mind would be, "I'd eat that ass."

He allowed himself to become aware once again of the chilly, echoing vestibule in Accademia Gallery, and wondered if the temperature was intended to enhance visitors' experience, "feeling" more like the cold, hard marble. Despite the constant *hush* sounds made by parents and irritated Italian tour guides, the echoing noise approached "subway station chatter," rather than the respectful silence one might expect to hear in the presence of sublime beauty.

As an art history minor, Chris had studied David many, many times. Any class on form and substance used David to make their points. Every class touching Italian contributions, the human form, the Renaissance, and so forth included David. David, David, David. Chris had grown weary of listening to college girls giggling over his perfect butt.

Feeling quite snobbish, Chris had convinced himself he simply might not visit David during his two month vacation to Italy, but it seemed ridiculous to bypass this masterpiece. That was like refusing to power up with every possible healing source before a massive raid.

How could you pass it up?

He suddenly felt himself lonesome for his World of Warcraft guild. They would be raiding without him this week, attempting to accomplish another step in achieving the Shield of Damatos. A trip to Florence was a dream realized, but already he missed his man cave in his college apartment, and the high-backed red leather chair from which he healed his guild and cast spells. He adjusted the strap over his shoulder and gripped the expensive gaming computer in his bag, which comforted him. His guild was never far.

Chris stepped back a few feet, out of the David traffic, and wiped his glasses.

Every now and then he'd glance at the statue and flush with the thrill of seeing it live. It reminded him of ogling—hopefully without being caught—hot men who seemed out of his league. David's aloof stare roused the Florentines

in the 1500s and they pointed him at Rome defiantly, turning him into a symbol of city-state power. To Chris, the haughty disdain felt more immediate, as if David had just stepped out of an exclusive club's shower—where serious muscle men go—and he knew he was a god. Chris blushed, confused by the resentment, lust, and strange sense of feeling unworthy gazing up at David's perfection.

Under his breath, Chris said, "Good workout, bro."

Chris tried to appreciate the other masterpieces in the Accademia, a few unfinished sculptures by Michelangelo, as well as works by Botticelli and Andrea Del Sarto, but after reveling in David's perfect, masculine beauty, Chris did not feel prepared to absorb any more history or art. He decided to take a break and sit under the Italian sun, reveling in the experience of being *here*.

With so much vacation stretching ahead, he afforded himself the luxury of saying, "I'll come back. Maybe next week."

Outside, the cobalt skies above the city surprised him yet again. He had been warned Florence would most likely deliver rainy and gray winter weather through late March. He did not mind. Even rainy and gray would prove to be milder than an Iowa March, but the generous sunlight and welcome warmth brought unexpected pleasure to the backdrop of this fabled city.

Chris Spaulding had not traveled much, preferring Google maps to real maps, virtual museum tours to crowded spaces with whining art pretenders. He would sometimes ask himself, with the world so accessible by computer, why travel? The day prior, he answered his own question, listening to casual banter in an unfamiliar language, sidestepping noisy Vespas, dangerously close to the sidewalks. He touched a stone engraved with the age of the building, constructed in 1688. *Because of this*, he told himself. *You travel because you can touch this*.

With the laptop bag secure around his neck and chest, and gripped in his right arm, he left the Accademia and walked the few short blocks to his next destination, a Filippo Brunelleschi masterpiece, the *Ospedale Degli Innocenti*. Hospital of the Innocents.

An orphanage boasting early Italian Renaissance architecture.

How strange it must have been for the famous Brunelleschi to construct a building so openly luxurious, spacious and grand for abandoned children, a population who could not properly appreciate the hypnotic symmetry of the classically inspired facade.

Chris had read several guidebooks on Florentine art, favoring one in particular, written by a Midwestern art history professor whose racy commentary made reading Florence's history feel like gossiping with a friend. She had suggested visitors to the orphanage seek out the touching inscription in Latin, taken from the Bible, Psalm 27: "Our father and mother have forsaken us; the Lord has taken us in."

After his self-guided tour around the building, Chris decided to rest.

He purchased a *frittella di riso* from a delicatessen stall within the piazza's perimeter. The vendors were plentiful, scattered around the piazza, celebrating the Festival of San Giuseppe. The vendor made stereotypical tourist jokes and Chris laughed, pleased by this man's generous hospitality. He probably grew sick of tourists, yet he made Chris feel more welcome in Italy and Chris appreciated that. He decided to lean against the metal fencing protecting the piazza's gurgling fountain, the fountain being another gorgeous masterpiece in a city crammed with gorgeous masterpieces.

The sheer quantity of dazzling experiences intoxicated him.

He removed the strap from his chest and rested the laptop against the railing while unwrapping the sugar-coated fried balls, steaming in wax paper. They smelled delicious. With all the amazing restaurants nearby, he assumed he could eat better elsewhere, but the greasy thrill of Italian junk food held immediate appeal.

They were pretty good. Not what he expected, but tasty.

He observed cheap souvenir vendors hawking their trinkets in practiced voices. One promised papal bottle openers and trivets bearing Cosmo di Medici's likeness. Another one yelled the word *T-sheeerts* over and over. Chris wondered if the grand pater of the Medici family would appreciate hot turkey potpie parked on his face. He listened to men and women trill into cell phones, appreciating the poetry of the unknown words.

He stared at the white stucco articulated by gray *pietra serena*, a sandstone utilized by most exteriors around him, tasteful but worn, a kind of shabby elegance, arches and pillars adroitly boxing in the piazza, making Chris wonder if, even on days when there was not a festival, this might be a stopping place—

"Hey!"

The rice fritter was jerked out of his hand, and for a split second, he wondered why anyone would want his snack until he realized the someone had

yanked his laptop strap. His laptop bag was already disappearing in the arms of a running child.

He blinked and gave chase.

His game laptop! His iPhone! His headset and mouse!

That mouse cost him over a hundred dollars.

He darted around pedestrians, yelling. He ran hard, trying to anticipate the kid's next move. Everything was in that bag.

The young thief threw his laptop bag at another kid as they crossed paths, who was already running full speed, but even as Chris realized this was part of the planned escape, the exchange was already over. Chris switched directions to follow the bag.

Chris yelled, "Thief! Thief! He stole my bag!"

This second kid could run, darting toward the edge of the piazza, nimbly side stepping small gatherings. One or two adults half-heartedly reached out to grab him, but he avoided them easily. He tossed the bag behind him, and Chris instinctively knew the laptop bag was empty. *His laptop was gone!* The first kid extracted it, obviously. While he urged himself to run harder after the runt, Chris realized the kid had his iPhone. His laptop was long gone.

It was gone.

The kid raced from the crowd down another side street, already gaining distance.

Chris stopped running, realizing the futility and feeling the impact of his stolen breaths. He heaved, hands on his knees, removed his glasses, covered in sweat. Imbued with the proper speedster potions, his avatar Oman could outrun demons. In the real world, Chris could not catch the young punk who grabbed his iPhone.

The phone could be replaced. He hated being without it, but they had iPhone stores in Florence. The gaming machine, that was expensive. That was custom-built, half of it by him. This made the theft even more personal. In addition, he maxed out his priest's healing power using that machine, a personal quest two years in the making. While his healing powers remained intact online, he felt like he had a relationship with the physical construction of his computer, a history.

They took his fucking *life*.

Others had realized what happened, and while they might sympathize, there was nothing they could do. One or two stopped near him to say, “I didn’t get a look at them.” Someone else said, “I think one had black hair and one was a girl, but honestly, I’m not entirely sure.”

He accepted their almost excited sympathy with seething rage, rage at them for their *schadenfreude* attempts to be part of his misery, one of their unique vacation stories. *The guy who got his laptop bag stolen, right in the piazza where we had our gelato.* He hated their pity. It could have been you, he wanted to say. It could have been you.

He grimaced and walked, eyes ahead, to his laptop bag, now being protected by onlookers. Chris picked it up, opened it, and yes, everything was gone. The expensive mouse, the iPhone—his only link to family and friends—and his gaming computer.

He wanted to cry.

For real, cry.

In the Rome airport, he felt queasy homesickness for a few moments, considering his physical distance from the life he knew. The queasiness had passed as soon as he saw the city. Now, the queasiness returned, magnified, as he thought about how isolated he was. No family. No calls. No guild.

His passport and traveler’s checks remained locked in the room safe. His wallet remained in his back pocket. Ironically, he had worried the laptop would be stolen from the rented apartment, despite the apartment’s beefy security measures. What if a neighbor possessed a key and waited until he was gone? He supposed it “could have been worse,” but that thought was no consolation.

The need to cry passed, though he knew it wasn’t far from the surface. Later in the day, once he returned to his rented room, he might get around to letting out frustrated tears. This was his first vacation. His first real vacation.

All gone.

Without a clear purpose, he returned to the snatch scene. The *frittelle di riso* balls lay scattered, one of them already stepped on and squished, and Chris felt the same way. He asked a few people, “Did you see what happened,” but experienced the same success, vague descriptions and a few, “Sorry. I didn’t get a good look.”

One of the nearby street painters might have seen something. He was physically close enough.

Chris approached the man who seemed to attack his paper canvas with a ferocity that intimidated. Chris realized the painter might even know these children, especially if they targeted tourists regularly. The painter looked up and Chris's mouth hung open a split second longer than he intended. The short crew cut, the solid jawline, even the icy-blue eyes gave Chris pause. He wanted to admire the man a second longer, but his mouth was already open.

"Excuse me, did you see those kids just steal my laptop? Can you be a witness for a police report?"

The painter kept his gaze on the canvas. "No, sorry."

This irritated Chris. "But you're right here. Didn't you see?"

"I was looking down."

"Well, do you know these kids? Seen them around here ripping people off?"

He shrugged. "Lots of children here steal."

"He's finishing a painting for me," a woman nearby said in a slightly annoyed voice. "Can you talk to him about this in another five minutes?"

"No, lady," Chris said, happy to find a source for his growing anger. "It can't wait. I just lost over three thousand dollars in computer equipment and my only connection to my family. I'm having a crisis, here."

Everything was truly gone, and with the shock of it over, the reality was beginning to sink in.

She said, "I'm sorry. You're right."

This made Chris take a breath and realize as much as he wanted to throw a tantrum, he did not want to surrender to a tantrum. "No, I'm sorry. I'm upset. Please accept my apology."

"Sure."

"May I ask him just a few more questions?"

She nodded and stood to the side with her friend.

Chris turned to the attractive painter. He was almost a bear, a square man, possibly Sicilian, the dark brooding looks, and quiet demeanor. Dark under his eyes. Still, nothing could account for an Italian man's ability to look sexy under just about any circumstances.

"Please help me," Chris said. "I just lost everything."

The painter looked up. “I’m sorry. This is very popular spot for thieves. I might recognize their faces if I saw them, but there are dozens of children working this city, so I wouldn’t even be sure who I saw where.”

Chris took a step back, frustrated, wanting to argue more but what could he argue? The man lied, he knew the kids? That he probably knew something useful if he would just reveal it? There was nothing to argue. He glared at the artist, unable to find him as attractive as he did a minute ago.

Maybe there was a piazza code, or an Italian code. Or some street code. The kids won’t knock over your art supplies if you don’t give them up. Something.

Effort. That’s all Chris wanted. A little effort.

He wandered in a small radius, looking for non-existent clues, cursing how everyone else enjoyed the perfect Italian day and now he could not, would not. He would not enjoy the rest of his trip.

Day two. Vacation ruined. Chris realized he should fly back home. No point in staying.

Moments later, he recognized a policeman, easy to spot, a few hundred feet away, talking to tourists. Or attempting to talk to them. Chris approached and waited as patiently as he could, but now that he had found a police officer, he suddenly believed time was essential, and if they could get searching immediately, it might not be too late to recover his items.

Near the officer, a small crowd hovered nearby, which irritated Chris as he wished to speak to the policeman with more privacy. It was not the officer’s fault for the crowd, but another street painter, this one’s gimmick to paint with both hands, two separate paintings. Chris could see only the back of his head and saw the man didn’t actually paint both at the same time, but held the brush with dripping paint in one hand while working quickly with the other. Then, the free hand went to work while the other took a break.

When it was his turn to speak, the police officer seemed willing to help, his lack of English notwithstanding. He spoke basic English, but Chris wanted to get descriptive, the exact angle of the trajectory so they would have a path to follow. He grew frustrated at the abbreviated responses and the repetition of the word, “stolen. Stolen.”

Yes, he wanted to cry. *Stolen*.

“*Scusami*, may I be of service?”

Chris turned to find the gimmicky painter, a brush still in each hand, standing at his side.

The painter's short black curls hanging down his forehead were not thick, but crisp and *truly* Roman, the haircut made popular by George Clooney years earlier. His clean cut face remained guarded, but almost hopeful. Relief surged through Chris.

Someone willing to help.

Chris said, "Yes, thank you, please. The police officer doesn't speak much English."

The painter said, "*Permettetemi di parlare a nome di quest'uomo, traducendo in italiano. E' chiaramente sconvolto e questo lo farà sentire meglio.*"

"*Certo,*" said the officer.

He turned to Chris and said, "I asked if I may speak on your behalf and he agreed."

Chris said, "Thank you. Okay."

The painter said, "Tell me."

Chris described what had happened, the two-person hand-off with the laptop bag, providing the artist a better description of the various escape routes than he could explain to the police, including more landmarks.

The artist nodded, interrupted with a finger raised, and spoke to the police in Italian, stopping to listen to more of Chris's description. In turn, they wrote down information, and the three of them exchanged quietly in Italian. After the full account had been transcribed, they allowed Chris to keep a copy of a receipt, and through the artist, encouraged him to visit a police station tomorrow to get the number of his open police report. He would need that for insurance.

A pit grew in Chris's stomach. He had not insured the laptop. He knew he should have. He knew it. And he never did.

The police and the painter exchanged last words, and Chris waited as patiently as he could for the conclusion of the conversation. He was already disappointed that the officer wasn't phoning in an emergency report, or perhaps darting off in the direction of one of the young thieves.

The police nodded grimly, and one of them said, “I’m sorry.”

Chris, nodded, confused. Apparently, nothing was happening. Or perhaps he misunderstood.

The artist said, “I will speak with you. Let me finish these two paintings. They are waiting.”

Chris resented the man’s assistance at this second, forced to follow the street painter’s schedule, but why not? The police had no intention of chasing down criminals, so why should a street painter do any different?

He paced. He wiped clean his glasses with his shirttail.

The world as he knew it was removed from him. Online, more than physical, was gone for the next forty-eight hours at least. Maybe twenty-four hours if he paid some exorbitant shipping fee, which he might, to get all his apps and iPhone contacts back. No, he couldn’t afford that. Besides, he had his vacation notes stored on various apps. He had downloaded two Italian map apps, a Euro currency translator, a Roman subway app, and four art-related apps. Every Italian treasure he intended to visit, its research right at his fingertips.

To save money, he should fly home. Forget the rest of the doomed trip. Flying to Italy for a two-month vacation was one of the worst mistakes he had ever made. He knew that now.

He gritted his teeth and thought bitterly, *This is why people don’t travel.*

He stalked behind the artist’s small crowd, perhaps a bigger gathering than he initially assessed, as more stopped to stare at the strange skill. Each painting, already more than half done—the Florentine Cathedral on the left—and the Palazzo Vecchio on the right, skidded into a colorful, explosive shapes with black and brown lines added for accents.

The crowd gathered tighter, *ooo-ing* over purple splotches that took on richer meaning as it was now clear this was gorgeous shade from an overhang, the green squiggly mess darkened and outlined to become a green plant on a windowsill. In both hands, triumphant flourishes ended rounded shapes, as if the artist’s fingers were as fast as his imagination.

Even Chris noticed and forgot to feel kicked-in-the-stomach.

The crowd clapped with an enthusiasm somewhere above *polite* but under *whooping*, as the maestro displayed both works. He held them before a young

teenaged girl who smiled wistfully, and a younger boy, who seemed eager to get his hands on the freshly painted surface. His father pulled the younger boy back.

“For a sister and her brother,” the painter said, presenting them both toward the girl for her selection. “*La signorina* chooses first.”

She selected the Florentine Cathedral and with a smile, he advised her not to touch it for a few minutes until the watercolors dried.

The father snatched the second one before the boy could reach it. “You can have it when it’s dry,” he announced and then turned to the artist. “They’re beautiful. *Grazie.*”

He paid for them and the teenage girl timidly stepped forward to squeak out, “*Grazie.*”

The painter said, “You will always have these paintings, you and your brother. Just as you will always have each other.”

She blushed and Chris understood why.

The painter was more handsome than he had realized. He was young, mid- or early-twenties, with his short black hair, ringlets beginning to form around his ears but not quite. He spoke seriously as if each word mattered, and his lips were thick, which appealed to Chris, though he did not know why. His skin was what white people called “olive colored,” which meant not white. Not black. Not Hispanic. Somewhere else on the scale of gorgeous skin colors.

After moving only a foot or two away, strangers began gathering around the father and daughter, asking to examine both pieces, comparing the style of right to left. For a moment, Chris had the artist to himself.

“Sit,” he said, pointing to a spot on the ground.

Chris immediately began to crouch down, obeying, and then stopped. “Can I talk to you without getting on the ground? Would that be okay?”

“No. Sit.”

Chris found himself obeying, though he was not sure why.

The artist left his workstation, the two dueling paint boards with thick paper clipped to each. He left his paints, and came to Chris with only a large sketch pad. He sat.

A woman, mid-fifties and wearing an argyle sweater-vest emerged from the small crowd and spoke to the painter. “Will you paint me something? The Florentine church?”

“Yes, I would be happy,” he said. “When I am finished with this gentleman, yes. Do not leave, okay? I will paint for you.”

She promised she would stay.

The artist began to sketch and Chris realized the subject was not the Florentine cathedral or a famous building, but Chris himself.

Chris scowled. “Do we have to do this?”

The painter said, “Yes.”

Another man, older than the first woman, came and stood by the painter and said, “I’d like two paintings, one from both hands, two of them. If you want the money.”

The painter said, “Yes. I would like that. I have a woman in front of you as soon as I’m finished here.”

In an annoyed voice, the man said, “I’m in a hurry.”

The painter said, “I work quickly.”

The man said, “Look, I can get a shitty street painting anywhere. Any corner.”

“Yes,” the painter said and looked at Chris. “You can.”

Chris now understood why the painter needed to sketch him. So they could have a moment to speak.

The painter looked at Chris as if trying to remember his name. He looked down and began sketching immediately, taking a break to look at Chris again. Chris could not read the expression. The painter’s eyes were open and friendly, like a deer. But Chris could not read him.

The artist wore thin sideburns crew cut against his skin, which not many men could pull off. His face was relaxed and Chris realized he was once again ogling a handsome man. The last man he stared at this way had marble testicles from the Carrara quarry.

“I am sorry for your things,” the artist said. “You will not get them back.”

Chris found his fondness diminishing. “What?”

“The police will file a report. They will do that. But I am sorry to report to you, your items will not be found. Not likely.”

“Why?”

“Because no one will search for them.”

“So your police aren’t going to do *anything*?” Chris knew his tone was accusatory but he could not help it.

The painter said, “Would *yours*?”

“Yes.” Chris tried to sound haughty.

The artist frowned and his arm flew across the page. “We get reruns of *Law & Order*, you know. *NCIS*. *Cold Case*. *Bones*. We have Netflix. None of those cases are police going after stolen phones unless murder was involved.”

He cocked his head. “Was someone murdered?”

“How much longer is this going to take?” The demanding man returned quickly, pressing closer.

“Close to done with this one, *Signore*. Then, the lady. Then, you. I promise. This will go quickly.”

The man stormed off again.

Chris said, “So, you don’t think there’s any chance?”

“No. Neither do the police. I suspect they spoke better English than they pretended. They’re the ones who told me there is no hope of your items being recovered.”

“Great.”

Chris wanted to go back to the flat he rented. Buy a plane ticket and fly home. Of course, there was no laptop for purchasing plane tickets. No phone to call customer service.

“I am sorry,” said the artist. “This is what they said. Pick up the number of your police report but do not count on the report number being available tomorrow. Probably by the next day.”

“They told you that?”

“No. I just know. Things do not happen immediately in Italy. Almost finished.”

He exchanged the thick black pencil for colored chalk, and scribbled across the page. Observing the speed and recklessness of his fast hand, Chris thought he might be destroying the black outline. Perhaps the illustration was no good.

And how could it be good, Chris wondered? He felt as if he had been chewing stones for the past twenty minutes, grimacing and seething his unhappiness in every direction.

The painter turned it around and Chris felt another kick to his stomach.

The sketch captured Chris as he would have preferred to feel, his face wide with joy, his eyebrows raised in happy anticipation. His thick glasses were missing. The man in the sketch was handsome, brave. He laughed with bright colors, seven or ten vibrant hues integrated into the sketch, when Chris was sure he only saw the painter pick up two colored chalks. Who was this happy traveler?

He stared at this ideal version of himself, easily recognized, yet seemingly so far away, and his eyes filled with tears. This day was terrible. But this... this happy man...

He looked at the painter expectantly for an explanation.

“You must remember Italy in better times. Before the robbery.”

Chris stared at the sketch, surprised by its skill, the deftness in communicating so much emotion. The colors applied so hastily blended for the right amount of shadow, of thickness and substance. This painted man. Why couldn't Chris be this man?

“My glasses,” Chris said.

“A poor artist I would be if I could not imagine a man without his glasses.”

“But, I'm smiling,” Chris said, the words stumbling out.

Looking at it again, Chris already felt forgiveness toward Italy, toward Florence, toward this horrible day. He was still angry about the theft, sick over the loss of communication. He was obligated to participate in Thursday's raid tactics discussion. How? When would he calculate gear upgrades for his guild? Many turbulent, dark emotions swirled through him in angry currents, but at that moment, forgiveness gurgled into the stream.

“How?”

The painter said, “I heard you in the food line. You laughed at something the vendor said. I looked over.”

Chris looked at the food vendor, not far away.

The painter spoke again. “Oh yes, this reminds me. The police would like you to clean up your dropped fried balls. Please.”

Chris studied the drawing again, an ugly thought coming to mind. “Do you think those kids pegged me as a target? Did they see me smiling and think of me as a mark?”

“No,” the painter said. “I assume they saw you distracted by food. They look for things like that.”

The woman, first in line, appeared by the painter’s side. “I just want one painting. You don’t have to do both hands like that for me. It was impressive though.”

The painter nodded. “*Grazie.*”

Chris looked at the painter, sensing their conversation was over. He had more questions he wanted to ask, about the crime, the children, the police who spoke more English than it appeared... more to ask. Such as, how did he draw Chris’s face with such intimacy?

Instead, Chris said, “Thank you. Can I pay you for this?”

“No,” the painter said. “It is a gift.”

The painter nodded and stood, returning to the overturned bucket he used as a seat and made adjustments to the wooden backing as he anticipated the next project. He removed a fat brush from its water glass and dried it with a rag.

His patron said, “I’d like one with Il Duomo, like you did for the girl. That was just beautiful. You’re very talented.”

Chris watched the painter beam at her, grin, and thank her. The right arm jerked furiously across the page. It had begun.

As Chris rose to his feet, unsteady. Unsure what to do next. In vain, he looked around the piazza for the children who stole from him.

Without glancing up, the painter spoke. “You must not hide your radiant smile to protect yourself from harm.”

At first, he didn’t realize he was being addressed. Chris was suddenly very tired. Drained. He wanted to rest.

Without energy, he finally said, “Is that a common Italian expression?”

“No,” the painter said. “It is an Enzo Tenore expression.”

Chris couldn’t remember who that was, a philosopher, a Renaissance artist, some Medici follower? He didn’t want to think about it. He was tired. He wanted to fly back home.

Without looking up, the painter said, “I am Enzo Tenore.”

Startled by the quiet declaration, Chris’s eyes found the man and watched as the painter’s eyes roamed the canvas. The brush in his right hand flew in wide arcs.

Enzo looked up.

Chris saw the gentleness he witnessed earlier, the curiosity. The painter was like a deer who had forgotten to be afraid of people. And for the first time, Chris noticed the deep caramel in Enzo’s eyes, framed perfectly by his strong, clean-shaven face and the cobalt-blue, Italian sky.

Day 3

Chris woke the next morning, feeling less sure about his resolve to flee Italy.

He rose and showered, completing familiar morning rituals in such a foreign-feeling place that the rituals bothered him instead of comforted him. The shower curtain kept touching him, sticking against his naked skin, and he felt a little harassed by the time he was clean.

He stepped out and wiped his hand through the fog on the stranger's medicine chest.

Do not hide your radiant smile, the painter had said to him.

Enzo the painter.

Enzo with caramel eyes.

He left the bathroom and stared around the studio apartment. Not terribly big, but not as small as a New York hotel room, which was saying something. He had only been to New York once on a high school class trip. The word *decorated* might have been too strong to describe his Florentine apartment. The space was pieced together with leftover chairs, cheap patterned throw rugs, an old wooden table, a serviceable bed and maybe new mattresses, that one indulgence.

He slept well here.

Chris had not purchased plane tickets home, much as he wanted to. He realized he might need the police report number after all. He had not insured his gaming laptop, not himself, but a slim hope bloomed when he remembered that his parents bought him renter's insurance as an apartment warming gift. Two years ago. Had they renewed it? He thought he remembered they did. Would it cover items lost while traveling? Maybe.

He hadn't appreciated insurance as a gift, but now he felt he may have to write a better thank you note for their forward thinking. His current finances—while they accounted for a two-month stay in Italy on the cheap—had not accounted for purchasing an expensive dream machine. The renter's insurance might save him. His parents were looking into it. He would call them later today for the update. Call collect, of course.

The previous night, his mother cried on the phone when she heard what had happened. Chris felt comforted by her reaction. He felt less alone.

The police report number would not be ready today, Enzo had warned him. What would Chris do with himself? Would he sightsee? *Could* he? It seemed a betrayal of his anger to traipse away, visiting treasures and reading short descriptions of art, pretending his whole life hadn't been yanked from his hands.

He considered remaining in the flat.

And do what? Wasn't the reason he came to Italy, to see it?

Looking out his living room window over a modern Florence, he realized it could have been worse. Those words did not mock him today. And as long as he was staying an extra day or two, perhaps he should take advantage.

Chris felt nervous leaving the apartment, despite the double-locked door, his remaining valuables locked in a safe. He felt afraid for no other reason than having recently been taken advantage of. The building wasn't safe, the street wasn't safe, these people muttering in a foreign language were not safe. He knew that wasn't true. He knew he only thought that because he was angry at feeling so vulnerable.

Logically understanding the situation did not make him feel safe.

He bought fresh bananas from a corner shop but took no pleasure in the exchange. Yesterday, he would have thought, *I'm buying bananas in Italy!* Today, he wondered who saw him remove his wallet from his front pocket.

Chris had spent his first day strolling through Florence, abandoning the prescribed walking tour in favor of exploring narrow streets with earth-colored buildings, gently rubbing their rough-hewn exteriors with his fingertips, wondering each building's lineage, as if it were a family. He skipped important landmarks to walk average streets, pondering five-story ochre buildings that *could* be ordinary office buildings but somehow felt magically imbued with Renaissance history. He gazed beyond the carved cornices tracing the rooftops, each one with an architecturally frosting border, and thought *This is the same sky da Vinci saw*. Granted, the crisp blue appeared roughly the same as it did back in Iowa, but here, well, this sky was *Italian*. It belonged to *Italy*.

That was the first day.

Today was the third day of his two month trip.

The sky was ordinary. It was blue. The sun was out.

He wandered streets again, careful to remain on well-populated ones, more interested in watching his fellow pedestrians than the historic surroundings. He locked his face into a grim, don't-fuck-with-me mask, though inside he felt vulnerable. Those children, he realized, stole more than his physical items. They had stolen a two month trip, something he'd been eagerly anticipating for a year.

Do not hide your radiant smile, the painter had said to him, *to protect yourself from harm*. It was terrible advice.

Chris reviewed the mistakes that led to his laptop's disappearance. Mistake one. He had dragged the laptop with him.

He did feel responsible for its theft, as if he had somehow communicated "Take it. I'm easy." Perhaps he looked too relaxed while eating his rice fritters. He definitely unlooped the laptop from his chest and shoulder, which made it easier to grab and run. Another mistake. Maybe something in his dress suggested, "Stupid American." Chris spent the previous evening pondering these mistakes, including permitting the artist to witness his laughter. If the artist noticed, others must have.

He would not make this mistake again.

He grimaced his way down a cobbled street, barely noticing the very reasons he came to Italy.

By midday, he found himself standing before Brunelleschi's orphanage once again, the scene of the crime. At first he hovered around the piazza's perimeter, attempting to blend, while he scanned for the faces of the children who robbed him. How would he recognize them, when he had only chased the backs of their heads? He did not know. But he felt sure he would know. They would look at him guiltily and he would chase them again, this time with more success.

But he never saw them, not after hovering for nearly two hours.

When he first arrived, he had spotted Enzo's small crowd, if not Enzo himself. He knew inside the knot of admirers, the painter stabbed and splattered two paper canvases with a fury that might be trademark to street artists. The other artist, the one who offered little assistance yesterday, had also attacked his canvas. During his surveillance, Chris noticed the other painters working the piazza. They also entertained small crowds. Enzo was not unique in that regard. However, Enzo's crowd never quite dissipated. A few left, a few newcomers

joined. At other street artist stations, the crowds broke up regularly, leaving the artist alone for ten or fifteen minutes stretches.

This observation seemed innocuous enough, just a by-product of hovering on the perimeter searching for the thieving children, but at some point Chris realized that behind the observation was a desire to talk to Enzo, to have time alone with him. No audience. That didn't seem likely.

Chris revisited the deli vendor, the one who sold him the *frittelle di riso*. He asked questions of the vendor, who answered cheerfully, but had seen nothing. Of course.

"They love this location, the children," the vendor said, nodding at the founding hospital. "If they are caught by Americans, they beg for mercy, reminding tourists they now stood where the first orphans were shown mercy, right on Brunelleschi's *loggia*."

Chris said, "You're kidding."

The vendor shrugged. "It works. Tourists fall for it. Items are returned, children run away."

"How often are they caught?"

"Not often. Rarely. The children in this city are very skilled. You must be careful."

"Good advice," Chris said. "But a day too late for me."

Chris decided he had a favor to ask. He ended up buying another *frittelle di riso*.

The crowd fluctuated between nine and fourteen. Although a crowd of nine was not particularly intimidating, it was when you wanted a private word with the man at the center of attention. Chris glimpsed Enzo—brushes in both hands dancing across his papers—in gaps between people. It dawned on Chris that this was Enzo's workplace, which made demanding a moment of his time even more awkward.

But he knew he needed to ask.

After the successful completion of another two paintings, Chris stepped forward and offered the small bag of warm, deep-fried risotto balls to his only friend in Italy.

Enzo looked at him with pleasant recognition and smiled, which made Chris smile.

“Much better,” Enzo said, still gazing at Chris’s face as he reached out to accept the gift.

He took one out of the top. “*Grazie.*”

“No, take the whole bag. It’s yours,” Chris said. “Thank you for yesterday.”

“I’m next,” a woman insisted. “I’ve been waiting.”

Enzo faced her and said, “Most patiently you’ve waited, *bella donna.*” He took the bag from Chris and pointed it in her direction. He said, “Enjoy an Italian tradition. Take one right out of the top, that’s it. Thank you for waiting. *Un moment.*”

She smiled.

Chris said, “I know you’re busy. I’ll be quick. Would you be willing to accompany me to the police station tomorrow to get that report number? I’d rather not go alone.”

Someone else in the crowd said, “Can you paint a building even if it’s not in this piazza? From somewhere else in Florence?”

“Yes,” he said quickly, turning to the question asker. “Anywhere in Italy. Rome, Siena, Venice.” To Chris he said, “Yes. Two conditions. Meet me here at six p.m. tomorrow. And also, you must visit Palazzo Medici tomorrow during the day. You must.”

Chris nodded, though he was surprised. “Will the police station still be open at six p.m.?”

Enzo said, “Do not be late. And Palazzo Medici. I insist.”

Chris caught the friendly play in the big caramel eyes, and before he could stop himself, said, “It’s a date.”

Enzo chewed his rice fritter and said, “Yes. A date.”

Chris flushed with embarrassment that he had said *a date* in front of all these strangers. He wanted to explain that this wasn’t a *date*. He just wanted company. Yes, Enzo was handsome and the way those sultry curls dipped over the front of his head so naturally was exotic, but it wasn’t supposed to be a date.

He backed out of the small crowd and cringed.

A date.

Day 4

With many hours to kill before his evening trip to the police station, Chris lounged in the morning, still resentful for the theft, but feeling it less intensely now that a day or two had passed. He was a college graduate. A functional adult. He could make it for a day or two in Italy before flying home to plug back in.

He planned a lunch out in the city, a restaurant that had been recommended by the pick-up warrior who had recently found their guild. Good defensive abilities and some offensive numbers that were a welcome addition. Several guild members offered suggestions on things to see, but only this paladin offered specific restaurant names. Chris wondered if the pick-up warrior was from Italy. Unlikely, playing on their North American server, but he could be.

Before lunch, he returned to the Internet *caffé* where he had visited several times now, renting computer time. He received an update from his parents that things were looking positive regarding the renter's insurance, and they asked the computer's value, so they could report it. He felt lighter.

After the tribulations of logging into WoW servers on the other side of the world, Chris sighed with satisfaction to visit familiar terrain. He could not play, not on this public computer, but he could communicate with his online family. He found himself flooded with dozens of outraged messages from his guild, everything from "that totally sucks," to one of his druid teammates reciting a complicated curse designed to "do maximum damage on the ragamuffins who grabbed your shit." Impotent as online curses were, they still made Chris feel better, to feel the guild's shared anger, frustration, and read over and over again, "We need you."

The Shield of Damatos campaign was a six-month project, so Chris did not worry about missing that far-away battle date. But he had planned to participate in several ways from Italy, going after maps and locator spells which would reveal a section of the ancient shield's disassembled parts. The shield, a legendary item, was required to beat an optional boss in the latest raid encounter—the hardest boss in the game right now. Their main tank needed it, and by god, he would have it.

As a priest, Chris could heal, arguably one of the most powerful guild healers. They could spare him on a few smaller encounters, but prefer he not miss the big ones.

He updated a few messages with close friends, explaining he would soon fly home. Instead of wasting vacation money in Italy, he might have to apply it to a new gaming computer.

Depending on insurance.

One of his best friends, a druid with the ability to rend matter in half, no matter the material, responded almost immediately with “Negatory. Stay in Italy. Choose the real world over the guild.”

Chris considered it.

He might be able to make a better decision, he decided, if he were less stressed. More relaxed. And what would help him relax? Video games. Reddit. Tumblr porn. He could not engage in the one activity that would help him feel less panicked and alone.

As he walked to his lunch destination, he realized that the frustrating thing about his feelings—feeling taken-advantage of, vulnerable, feeling stupid and wronged—was how those tapped into similar feelings, unrelated to the thieving.

Back home, he had grown deeply infatuated with another programmer, a classmate, who, Chris eventually discovered, did not return an attraction. Feeling *stupid and wronged* had surfaced then and kept resurfacing now. Despite the fact that this classmate had done nothing to lead him on, Chris felt somehow vaguely taken advantage of.

Love was supposed to work out. At least get a chance.

All those shitty feelings about being ripped off applied to his complex and hurt feelings around Dan.

The lunch restaurant name was not memorable, something Italian, words that Chris felt he should recognize, but didn't. White tablecloths. Polished wooden window frames. The three waiters appeared adorned in classic black and whites. He ordered a few items, not sure how much he would eat, but he hadn't eaten much the previous two days. When he ate the pasta they served him, his eyes filled with tears because it tasted unlike anything he had put in his mouth, the best garlic, best spaghetti, and best flavors combining in rich luxury on his tongue. His *pollo al limone* was equally spectacular, different category sensations, and by the time he had finished, Chris felt grateful he had risked doing something ordinary and wonderful.

He left, already reminiscing the meal he had just finished, remembering bites, the first bite of each, the flavors, trying to get himself to remember the flavors. He knew he would forget.

Entrance to the Palazzo Medici had a line, tourists running out the front door and down the block, which was great for Chris. Half the reason to visit was to study its unique exterior, revolutionary construction for its time. He knew this from art history classes, but most recently the Florence companion book he read weeks ago and revisited on the plane. The bottom third, the Medici bank, bulked out with rough-hewn stone; the builders thought they imitated true Romans.

The second floor boasted more refined stone, its interior dedicated to mixing business and pleasure. Offices and guest quarters. Even a dance hall, if he remembered his reading correctly. Although the second floor was not part of the tour, his art history book said the guest suites of that floor offered private bathrooms. And while bathrooms back then lacked modern amenities such as running water, at the time this modern-day palace was constructed, not even kings had private bathrooms. The extravagance of each guest's private bath was shocking.

But that was inside.

Cosimo Medici insisted the exterior show no such extravagance. He wanted to seem to be *of the people*, regardless of the bathroom situation inside. He regarded that quality to be essential to ruling the city.

Of the people.

Along the exterior, an increasingly sophisticated stone structure climbed upward, so that by the third floor, the more intimate living and entertaining quarters, the stone almost presented a seamless, polished surface. Yet that level remained simplicity in its appearance. Unadorned. Elegant in ways the ground level dare never aspire.

Chris studied the exterior, recalling the construction tales he had read, one he had just reread on the plane, the rumor of how Cosimo fired Brunelleschi from the job.

Soon enough, he went inside, touring the third floor loggia and the small section of the second floor open to the public, the Medici Chapel. Chris chuckled to himself and thought about asking to use their bathroom.

The gorgeous home of the Medici was an important landmark on his list of "must visits," so Enzo did him no harm by insisting he tour this. Though he could not understand why Enzo would insist on this condition.

Enzo.

The word *date* flashed into him and although he no longer physically winced, remembering what he said, he also hadn't accepted it was a date. He would have to explain to Enzo he had chosen the wrong word.

He appreciated his time spent touring the palazzo and when it was over, he sipped a cappuccino at a nearby *caffé* studying its exterior again, taking it in. The Medici ruled a kingdom with no title of king. Their home was a palace but with no throne room. Rich? Yes. Powerful? Undoubtedly. Enemies? Many. Extravagant? Yes, although they tried to keep that private. Philanthropists? Yes. The grand pater, Cosimo, realized their family's responsibility to make the world flourish, and so donated generously to the artists, sculptors and architects, funding that wacky Renaissance, even if that generosity was also self-serving.

He sat for a while longer, sipping the drink too strong for his taste, and realized if he hurried, he could visit the *caffé* and check in on WoW again before meeting Enzo.

Later, Chris wondered if a San Giuseppe festival event were happening inside the piazza. There did not seem to be a single gathering point, a focus, but more people mingled than he had seen in his previous visits. Deliberately arriving early, he glanced around for the children, hoping for successful recognition but even he understood the futility of this action, an action by a man desperate to talk to his guild for more than ten minutes at a time.

When it was close to the appointed hour, Chris was surprised to see Enzo sitting alone, sans admirers. Chris walked briskly from his hiding spot and realized this would be their first conversation alone. He slowed down. He didn't want to seem too eager for the non-date.

Enzo nodded at him, wiping a brush absently. "You're on time."

Chris said, "I guess so. Where are your admirers?"

"Not always admirers. Sometimes slow. I give up this spot at six to that guy."

He nodded over his shoulder at a man kissing his girlfriend. Chris glanced over and understood that those two were saying their good-byes.

"So, this is your spot during the day and his at night?"

"It's complicated," Enzo said. "But for now, yes. That is so. Are you ready? Shall we go?"

Enzo called to his art friend and they exchanged a few sentences in Italian. As he picked up the bucket, his seat for so many hours, Chris was surprised to see a bottle of red wine appear from underneath. As he packed, Enzo explained he had communicated the day's gross, any news from the street, the mood of the tourists. Groups who he now knew where in town.

Enzo said, "Did you visit the Medici?"

"Yes, I did. I'm curious to know why that was one of your conditions, but yes, I visited."

Enzo nodded and offered the bottle of wine to Chris. "Good. Would you carry this please? The bucket is heavy enough."

The bucket did look heavy, packed with every supply. Enzo carried the drawing boards and drawing pad under his other arm. He had left behind the metal stands that supported the boards for the evening artist.

"Let me carry those," Chris said.

"Do not worry," Enzo said, "I carry this every day. It's all right."

It showed. The arms under his silky shirt were gently curved with muscle.

They left the piazza, for the police station, Chris assumed.

Chris had steeled himself to clarify, almost immediately, this was not a *date*, not in his eyes, but watching Enzo lug his profession under his arms, it was obvious that this evening's excursion was an inconvenience, and pointing out *it was not a date* seemed unnecessarily small and petty, given Enzo's generosity with his time. Enzo didn't think it was a date.

After all, the two men hadn't even communicated, "I'm gay," though Chris already felt they both knew that about the other, that internal gaydar app worked just fine, it seemed, internationally.

The sky was still light, would be, it seemed for another hour. As they crossed streets, ambling down narrow Florentine sidewalks, Chris noticed the sun did funny things to the oddly shaped buildings during this gloaming hour. Heavy shadows crisscrossed buildings dramatically, walkways from across the street or angles of building at odds with the sunset. The dark shadows deepened the sense of mystery, though there was enough daylight to not feel fear.

It was a relief to him that he could still see the intersection of light and shadow and recognize it as beautiful. He was worried he would leave hating Florence but that was less certain with each block.

Enzo inquired after his day, where he ate, what he did. Chris was happy to answer, happy to have someone to converse with. Enzo approved his choice of ristorante and promised him there were other, equally good or better opportunities to try pasta that would make him commit himself, once and for all, to gaining a hundred pounds.

“*Mangia, mangia*, I guess,” Chris said.

“Right,” Enzo said. “Because we always say that.”

Chris was pleased to see Enzo smiling.

Through gaps in buildings, Chris could see the tangle of red terra-cotta tiles on rooftops above the city, defining Florence’s iconic look. These glimpses delighted him more than he thought possible. He felt less deflated about the robbery than he had all day.

They wandered down cobblestones whose arrangement seemed to imitate water, the same logic in their placement, which is to say, no logic. Stone patterns seemed to leap over other stone patterns, and then swirled to the side of the road, creating small eddies, small currents of rock. He felt from another time just crossing them.

They chatted about who bought paintings earlier that day, and Enzo explained the complicated system of “ownership” for certain busy tourist piazzas in the city. While nothing was legally committed to paper, the spot went to whoever inherited *and* frequented it the most. Enzo inherited the spot from someone who found other employment, and Enzo went daily, same hours, to ensure it stayed his. If he took days off, three or four in a row, the spot could become a turf war for an aspiring up-and-comer.

If chased from his spot, Enzo might choose banishment to a lesser piazza or he might do something reckless like set up four feet away from his usurper, starting a different level of war with the street painters. The unwritten rules were complicated.

He said, “I need this spot. The money is very good. I need money for art school. My two-year internship begins in August.”

Chris inquired after Enzo’s schooling, which led to a discussion of art, artistic styles, and Chris’s revelation he himself possessed a minor in art history. Enzo was impressed.

“What about you? Is any part of your art degree based in art history?”

Enzo chuckled. “Every Florentine is automatically an art historian. You must be to live here.”

They passed several city landmarks and crossed famous streets. Chris remained puzzled Enzo did not point them out. When they reached the insanely famous Santa Croce, and Enzo said nothing, Chris could not hold back.

“Aren’t you going to point out the Santa Croce? Tell me it’s where Michelangelo is buried?”

Enzo said, “Michelangelo is buried there.”

“Yes, I just said so. How can you not point this out to me, a tourist?”

“I am not your tour guide,” he said. “If I were, you would know because we would be standing here and I would say, ‘Hey American, this is where Michelangelo is buried.’”

This made Chris laugh.

Even so, Chris felt growing apprehension they did not seem to be passing any police stations for all their walking. He decided to broach the topic, carefully.

“I appreciate your helping me out today, going with me to a police station. I am intimidated. I should have learned more Italian before coming. I know I am an ugly American.”

Enzo stared straight ahead and said, “You are not too ugly.”

Chris found himself stammering for the next line of conversation.

They crossed Via Tripoli and Chris could see the Arno, the beautiful river bisecting Florence. As picturesque as the postcards he passed all day, the Arno delivered on the true Florentine experience. The water was thick and clear, reflecting the buildings above. The stone walls on either side were as old and sturdy as you might want them to be, giving the impression of safety and stability, no small feat for a city that spent its teenage years in constant political turmoil. If Chris remembered correctly, all the bridges had been bombed out in World War II, all but the Ponte Vecchio.

As they got closer, Chris could see the famous river flowed green, a color tinted by the plant life within. Buildings bellied up to the Arno’s banks, not overly concerned with their proximity to flooding. Their exteriors were decorated and decorated well, both the more modern constructions and the

older ones, hinting at Renaissance Italy, making it possible for Chris to feel romantic about the city and another gorgeous vista.

Well, not romantic. After all, this was not a date.

Enzo said, “See that mark along the building over there? That indicates the level of water from the great flood in 1966. Several of these buildings have little signs or inscriptions indicating the floor level. *Now*, I am your tour guide.”

The trip to the police station seemed forgotten as they walked along the Arno. Chris found himself growing irritated worried that he might have to spend another day waiting for resolution so he could fly home.

In what he hoped was a casual voice, he asked, “Is there a police station along the river?”

As soon as he said it, Chris realized how true this might be, that it might be a very gorgeous, high-profile police station, positioned right against the famous city. Perhaps near a bridge so they could handle emergencies on either side. He regretted not trusting Enzo for a few more minutes. Enzo would deliver.

Enzo said, “No. Not that I know of. We’re not going to a police station. We are on a date.”

Chris wasn’t sure which part of the sentence to address first. He was surprised he felt less anger than hurt. If Enzo didn’t value the police report as much as Chris, it was understandable, but Chris thought the purpose of their meeting was clear, and now he sagged with disappointment.

“We’re not on a *date*,” Chris said.

“No?”

“No.”

Enzo looked around, as if he had lost something. “Yesterday, you said, ‘*it’s a date.*’”

“It’s an expression. I meant that we were, you know, getting together.”

“Yes, like a date.”

“No,” Chris said.

“Ah, well, we shall call this happy hour instead. Go into that shop and buy us a bottle of water. At the counter, ask the man for two cups.”

“Why?”

“We need cups for the wine. For happy hour. We will sit along the Arno, right over there, and look at the water. *Policia* will not disturb us drinking our wine in plastic cups.”

Chris felt sad. “I see.”

“I cannot go in myself, for when they see me with the bucket of art supplies and two boards, they will know I am a street painter and they will not want to give me free cups. But you’re an American and you might write a review on Yelp, so this intimidates them. They will give you two cups.”

It made enough sense to Chris for him to agree. In fact, he did not mind a moment apart.

Chris wanted to consider his next action, whether to get the cups for wine or simply leave, disappointed. That would be rude. But so was agreeing to go to a police station and then blowing it off. Before he made up his mind, he purchased the water and asked for two plastic cups. The owner complied, though he did not smile.

When he returned to face the dying sun, splattering the buildings with golden rays, Enzo had left. Chris felt surprised by the additional disappointment he felt.

Talking to him as they crossed town, Chris found several characteristics confirmed, such as Enzo’s openness, his quiet, assured demeanor, less placating than the painter who repeatedly said, “*Grazie, grazie,*” and “Thank you for waiting so patiently.” In short, the real Enzo differed from the street painter persona, but not much, which made Chris feel that he was seeing an honest man.

He heard a short whistle, almost the way one would call a dog without disturbing one’s neighbors, and Chris looked around. Enzo stood across the street, hands on the wall, bucket and boards at his side.

Chris felt relief.

They walked in silence to a less populated part of the wall, not far from the main action, but not close.

“Would you open the bottle and pour?”

Chris complied and as he looked around, he thought perhaps it was not so bad to be on a non-date drinking wine at the Arno River. His flight home would be delayed by a day, a bother, but he still hadn’t found a way out of the rental

lease. There was no lease provision for termination because, “my gadgets were stolen and I miss them.” He might have to accept the loss of the rent. So what did one more night matter?

As he unscrewed the top, he asked Enzo his opinion about the shift to screw top wine, and Enzo shrugged. “They say screw tops are now all right, so we drink it. But I miss corks. I know corks are still very popular at expensive restaurants in town. I think we will see a shift in the upper, upper class. They will have corks. The rest of us will have screw tops.”

Chris waited to drink his while Enzo rooted around in his wallet. Enzo extracted a slip of paper and then happily took the cup offered.

Enzo raised his glass and said, “*Alla salute.*”

Sad Chris could only manage half as much cheer. He raised his glass and said, “salu...”

The wine tasted much better than Chris had anticipated, full and flavorful. He did not know much about expensive wine, but he recognized cheap wine. This was not cheap. Instinctively he reached for his phone to photograph the label. But no, he could not photograph it. No phone, no camera. He hadn’t been to Instagram in four days.

He hadn’t even been to Reddit in three days!

“Here is your case number,” Enzo said, presenting the scrap of paper. “I called the police station for you.”

Chris blushed, feeling deep gratitude and shame, in that order, over and over, a cycle of humility and self-recrimination. How could he have not trusted kind Enzo? Deer-eyed Enzo?

In a shaking voice, he said, “Thank you, Enzo. This really means a lot to me.”

Enzo smiled and said, “You are welcome. I had to pretend to be your lawyer for them to give it to me. They were reluctant.”

“Oh. You shouldn’t have done that. Lied to the police.”

Enzo smiled dreamily. “It’s just the police. It is of no consequences.”

They toasted again and Chris led the “*Alla salute,*” toast this time.

Enzo laughed. “You did not finish your first toast, which means you only wished me half the good luck. I think you were mad we did not go to a police station.”

Chris blushed and laughed, assuring Enzo such was not the case, even though he was pretty close to the truth.

They chatted about the renter's insurance, the items in Chris's bag and Chris hinted at his online obligations, how others depended on his participation. Though he was not ashamed of his devotion to the World of Warcraft, he did not feel like explaining it, as it might make him feel worse.

The sun sank lower, and they each drank more wine, Enzo discussing the buildings in sight, the famous bridges, and his favorite part of the city, the river at sunset.

"Why did you send me to the Medici Palace?"

"Oh," Enzo said. "To make sure we had something to discuss. I did not know if I would be able to speak with you easily. I have only seen you grumpy and upset. Understandable, yes, but I did not know you. If we arrived at this bridge and discovered nothing in common, well, we could discuss the palazzo."

Chris felt bolder for the wine. "How am I doing?"

"We are doing quite well," Enzo said, raising his glass. "You are interesting. The sun is fat, like an egg yolk. The water laughs with us. People eating gelato, walking along. It is a beautiful time for happy hour."

Chris offered his glass to clink.

As their glasses touched, Enzo said, "Or a date."

Chris snickered.

"Why, Chris, does it bother you to call this a date?"

Chris liked the way Enzo pronounced his name, exaggerating the word without pretension, calling him Ca-riss each time, as if he were saying *caress* with a rolling *r*.

Chris said, "I didn't want to lead you on."

"Why not?"

"Why *not*?"

"*Si*, why not? A date is not a promise for a life together. It is not a promise of sex. It is a date. It is the present tense only, no future tense. Why not have a date? You worry I will be lead on. If I am led on, it is because I wish it to be so. That is not your problem to face."

Chris said, “In America, you don’t date someone unless you know your intentions. Of course, that’s not always true. But you ask someone out on a date when you know your intentions.”

“How ridiculous! How could you know your intentions for a date before you have a single date?”

Chris wanted to argue, but there was an irrefutable logic in Enzo’s argument.

Enzo held up his plastic cup for another toast. “Whatever we call it, I am glad you are here. This toast is to happy hour.”

Chris smiled and said, “To a date.”

“Oh, so *now* it is a date? I cannot keep up with you, American.”

Enzo drained the cup. He then laughed and leaned his head into the crook of his elbow. A man worked a rowboat in the water below, the movement catching Chris’s eye, and for a moment, he forgot about his stolen items.

“How do you paint with both hands? That’s an impressive trick.”

“A trick, yes,” Enzo said, “I train myself to have that skill. But I can only paint two things with my left hand. Always the same two, Il Duomo and a busy street scene. With my right, I paint anything. See, I paint Il Duomo so many times I could paint the strokes in my sleep. So, I practice painting with both hands at the same time, forcing my left to mirror my right until both are equally as good. Painting with my left is paint-by-imaginary-numbers. Tourists love it. Pay more.”

Chris pretended to be shocked. “The secrets of Florence’s seedy underside are revealed.”

Chris regretted the words as soon as he spoke, because they forced him to remember his own role as a victim of the seedy underside. He was alone. Cut off. He could tell *no one* about his date with the painter named Enzo. He was all alone with this knowledge. The feeling was more isolating than he had ever known.

And it *was* a date.

In every minute with Enzo, every sip of his wine in a plastic cup, it was clear. It was a date.

Enzo asked questions about life in the United States and Chris answered them. He graduated college with a computer programming degree and before

throwing himself into the corporate grind, he decided to take two months visiting Italy, soaking in culture and cobblestone streets.

“You will not visit Rome?”

“I had planned on it for a week, yes—” Chris hesitated. “I’m pretty strongly considering flying home. Back to Iowa. I have... obligations to my friends and I need a computer.”

Enzo considered this. “Are you Twitter?”

“No.”

“Skyping?”

“Sometimes. It’s gaming, really.”

Enzo nodded and drained his cup. “My mother wishes for me to Skype. She says I am not modern enough. I do not have an online presence. She scolds me.”

Chris smiled, finding it hard to believe someone Enzo’s age did not have an online presence. He also found it amusing to be scolded by your own mother for not Skyping.

“I like this world,” Enzo says, indicating the city with his arm. “I like rowboats and sunsets and observing pretty women buying jewelry while shopping. I am afraid of losing myself online. I love this world. On the Arno.”

“You love it? Have you rowed a boat down the Arno?”

Enzo hesitated. “I don’t love it *that* much.”

Chris poured them both more wine and felt gratitude Enzo did not try to talk him into staying.

Day 5

In the Internet *caffé*, Chris read an email from his best friend in the guild. The message was terse. “Starting a new campaign.” The email did not elaborate. Chris asked for clarification but received no immediate reply.

His parents delivered the bad news that because his laptop was a “specialty item” which was not declared to exceed a traditional value prior to leaving on international travel, it would not be covered by renter’s insurance. Not even a fraction of it.

Chris felt isolated all over again. No phone. No computer. No WoW humor, no friendships, no discussing math required to calculate various successes. No analysis of raid logs. No noobs to make fun of. No gear to admire. No quests to research.

The isolation did not feel as sharp as it did that first day when it bordered on vertigo and panic. The isolation did not exhaust him. Now it if felt like a familiar ache, a thirst which he could get filled from any Wi-Fi fountain, if only he had a glass, or in this case, technology.

Before he consciously made a decision, he found himself wandering toward the church they passed last night, Santa Croce, the “Temple of Italian Glories.” The place where Michelangelo was buried. The church hosted centuries of art. Giotto, Donatello, Cimabue from the Middle Ages. A dozen other notables. Altarpieces, sculptures, tombs, and frescos, all jammed into sixteen chapels, so much ridiculous history buried within that it made Chris’s head swim.

Standing before its great façade, feeling small and powerless in the face of such amazing achievements within, a wave of pleasure rushed over him and he decided. He stood before masters, *masters*, of western art history. He was not going to return early. He would stay in Italy for the full two months.

Having made that decision, he promised Michelangelo to visit another day and hurried his steps toward the Apple store, whose street address he had memorized. Not being able to photograph his food in Florence Italy was killing him. While briefly checking in from the *caffé*, he saw his Instagram followers were having a shit fit.

Day 6

Yesterday, Chris had noticed a delivery sticker on the collection of silver mail slots but paid it no mind. But returning from a short walk to buy milk and cereal, he now noticed three delivery notifications, lined up in a row. They were all addressed to him. The stickers were printed in both Italian and English, requesting communication for a better time to execute a drop-off delivery. Chris expected no packages. His parents offered to buy his ticket home, but they did not say they were sending a care package. He had only ordered his iPhone the day prior, and did not pay for overnight delivery.

He decided to visit the office at the address listed.

The employee insisted he sign forms for packages, refusing to listen to Chris's argument that he expected no packages. She handed him two boxes and a thick envelope which he carried home, confused and mildly alarmed. Instead of feeling excited by the mystery, he found it worrisome. He didn't recognize any of the three return addresses. What if someone had used his laptop to somehow scam his identity?

He hadn't worried about identity theft, not from the gaming machine. He had stripped out personal information before the trip. The machine was updated with the best encryption software available and Chris had even added his own code, tricks that would make it impossible to guess passwords. He was proud of that code. He had taken the precautions for identity theft, even while assuming it would never happen.

So why the packages? Who had his credit card information?

Back in the apartment he felt reluctant to open them, as if that made him culpable somehow.

Inside the first package, he found a memory expansion pack and a note in all caps. **SAVE THE PRIEST!**

Inside the padded envelope from Chicago, wrapped a half-dozen times was a carefully wrapped video processing card twice as powerful as his old machine. Another note. **SAVE THE PRIEST!**

The third package, arriving from an unknown town in Florida, offered a mess of wires and printed instructions for their installation. Same handwritten note in all caps.

That afternoon, a local hardware store delivered a soldering kit. Paid for by someone in Texas. On the invoice's memo were typed familiar words. **SAVE THE PRIEST!**

Chris realized he should expect more packages in the next few days. Ports. A frame. A powerful CPU. They were mailing him high-end parts so he could construct his own gaming computer. He didn't know some of the real-world names on the return addresses. He only knew them as druids and monks, mages and hunters.

His guild had started a new campaign. They were rescuing him from his isolation.

Alone in the city, he wept with gratitude.

Day 8

The CPU had arrived and a book, two books, instructing him how to assemble the computer. A death knight with a passion for PVP had sent him an email, saying, “Wren will send you bullshit do-it-yourself books. Ignore them. I’m texting YouTube links for this guy I found. He’s a pro.”

Still missing parts essential to construction, Chris could do nothing but happily wait. Knowing the solution would literally be in his hands within the week, he found his time away from the guild somewhat liberating now. He missed them. They loved him. He would be coming home, his true home online.

He strolled to the Foundling Hospital with an ease he had not known since the first day.

The piazza was thick with people, a lunch crowd he decided, and he instinctively searched for the children who robbed him, unsure if he would give chase. His possessions were gone and he was unhappy about that, but he had accepted that he would not receive justice.

Besides, he would construct a new gaming machine.

Hadn’t that been his goal for his next gaming machine? To assemble it himself from the best parts?

Enzo was surrounded, as expected, and coming up behind him, Chris could see his left hand work furiously, then his right, then his left. He liked watching the faces of strangers, impressed by Enzo’s gift. While painting with both hands might be a gimmick, the quality of the paintings was undoubtedly real. Chris marveled as the surprising colors were quickly forged into something memorable, a murky-green Arno, flowing past pink flowers emerging from what seemed to be a paint splotch, requiring only lines and order to give them meaning.

He waited and realized he might never have an opportunity as he did at that moment, with only six or seven observers crowded around, and he did not want to wait hours until Enzo finished his shift. Over a few minutes, he worked his way into the front of the crowd and made sure to make eye contact during one of the times when Enzo looked up.

Chris smiled.

Enzo grinned back but suppressed it, feigning indifference. “Oh, hello, Carriss. What brings you here?”

“Yes,” Chris said, stumbling. “I wondered if you might have free time after work. To celebrate with me.”

“I see.” The right brush flew across the paper. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

Chris balked, unsure how to answer.

Enzo looked around the small audience, making eye contact with several of his guests. “The last time he was here, he asked me out on a date and then, hours later, explained to me over wine, it was *not* a date. So I wish to be clear this time.”

A woman with frizzy hair, wearing a sundress, said, “He did this over wine?”

“Yes,” Enzo said, returning his attention to the painting. “I brought us a bottle of wine, good wine, to celebrate our date. I took him to my favorite spot along the Arno.”

“*You* brought the wine?” The man who spoke was mid-thirties and wearing khaki shorts and a patterned button shirt, hairy arms wrapped around a large camera. He took Enzo’s picture intermittently.

Chris could see Enzo’s hint of a smile, though he attempted to appear “lost” in both paintings’ construction.

Enzo said, “I only wish to be clear if it is a date. I was confused the last time because he said, ‘*it’s a date.*’ But later, it was not. Maybe my English is not so good.”

The camera man said, “Oh, it sounds like a date.”

A lady in the group turned to Chris. “Why did you say it wasn’t a date? He’s so handsome. *Look* at him.”

Chris laughed, feeling humiliated and punished, but in a friendly way. He deserved this, he suspected.

“I am here to ask you out on a date,” Chris said, blushing. “I apologize for any confusion last time, but this is me asking you out on a date.”

Enzo said, “Ah, a *date.*”

He resumed painting.

The woman with frizzy hair said, “Where? Where are you going on this date?”

Without looking up, Enzo said, “Yes, where, please?”

Chris laughed. “I’m not sure. A restaurant of your choice. For dinner. My treat.”

The camera man said, “That sounds vague.”

Chris glanced around the piazza, hoping to see a restaurant name he might use but he only saw the handsome, dignified buildings dressed in warm pastels, the milling tourists, the vendors barking their wares, and the sun beaming over all, proud of itself.

Enzo said, “I enjoyed our last non-date. Should I go? What do you people think?”

Several murmured yes, and there were two who Chris could tell seemed very uncomfortable. One man walked away.

“He’s cute,” the same woman said, evaluating Chris. “Take off your glasses for a second, sweetie. There’s a reddish tint to his brown hair, which is nice. Cute face with a button nose. Glasses, hon. Dresses well.”

Chris removed his glasses.

“Well, look who has such pretty eyes,” she said. “I vote yes.”

Enzo said, “This is true. He is handsome in a very American way. Yes, I will go on a date, Ca-riss.”

He looked up and smiled, and Chris smiled back, relieved. Though he was sure Enzo would say *yes*, to ask someone out in front of a small crowd was no small thing.

“You could do better,” the camera man said.

Enzo said, “Now, now. We are done teasing him. Meet me here tonight at nine, and we will have our date. We will go to my favorite rooftop bar.”

“Where is that?” The speaker was someone in the crowd who had not spoken up. “Is it the Red Garter on Via de’ Benci? Is it popular?”

Enzo’s eyes remained fixed on the painting. “It’s very exclusive. Nine p.m.”

“Shall I bring wine?” Chris asked in playful challenge.

“No,” Enzo sighed. “I will. Again.”

The two men snickered at poor, long-suffering Enzo, and the khaki man offered to take their picture together. He promised to email Enzo a copy. They protested gently until the woman with frizzy hair said, “Don’t you want a picture of your first *real* date?”

They relented and Chris knelt to be at face level with Enzo, who sat on his bucket.

They smiled for the camera and then for each other.

When Chris returned later that night, he wore a new shirt. A new *Italian* shirt, cream-colored like so many of the stucco buildings he passed in the dark. In darkness the buildings wrapped themselves in a more drowsy shade, exhausted by the wind picking up speed down winding streets, the constant clatter of tourists, and long days in the unexpected sun.

Chris felt fearful walking through the city, not enough to prevent his going, but exceptionally mindful that crime exists in beautiful cities. He stayed on well-lit *strade* and walked behind groups when he could, avoiding the narrow and twisting streets that felt inviting during the day. Despite mysterious sources of illumination from somewhere down their crooked beginnings, he resisted the urge to walk into those shadows.

Enzo was not in his spot. The other painter sat on a bucket, fast-talking tourists. Chris could appreciate that each painter must have his or her own style to sell, their own gimmick or draw. A small crowd stood around him.

Enzo walked from the fountain, approaching slowly in a long-sleeved hunter-green shirt tucked into his jeans.

“*Ciao, bello.*”

Chris felt like an Italian-wannabe responding with the same but he said, “*Ciao.*”

They fell in walking side by side, Chris following Enzo’s lead. Enzo looped his arm through Chris’s and it made him feel safer. He had seen other men walk this way and from it learned that Italian men were downright affectionate with their pals in public. Nobody considered it gay.

They walked arm in arm. Chris resisted the urge to ask where they were headed. He discovered it didn’t matter. He had spent the rest of the day anticipating this hour, seeing him, wondering how much Enzo felt about the

date. Now that the moment of being together had arrived, talking seemed like the perfect way to ruin the moment.

He listened to Enzo's shoes scuff against the cement and when they neared strangers on the sidewalk, Chris impolitely eavesdropped on their conversations, wanting to hear their slice of life. With Enzo's arm looped in his, he did not fear the streets and their jagged-toothed shadows. He doubted Enzo was a martial arts expert, and they might weigh almost the same, but it didn't matter. He felt safer.

He listened to the sounds of the Florentine night.

"You passed a test," Enzo said.

"I did?"

"Yes. Silence test. Can this man walk in silence with me. You passed."

Chris said nothing. Stared ahead.

Enzo shook him gently. "You passed."

"Yes," Chris said, trying not to smile. "But if I talk now, I'm afraid you'll reduce my score."

Enzo said, "Good. Because I have much to say and I do not wish for interruptions."

Enzo did not speak for the next full minute. Finally, he said, "I do not have anything to say."

Chris laughed.

Enzo laughed.

Chris teased Enzo for failing to bring the wine.

Enzo said in a serious voice, "I did not forget. The wine will meet us there."

When they arrived at the Church of San Lorenzo, Chris hardly recognized the rough-hewn structure as a church, let alone a basilica. The sloppy brown waves of stone covering the front resembled rows of planted dirt, captured in a field sown vertically instead of horizontally. Staring at the plain, almost disfigured front, it gave the impression the parishioners thought better of religion and sealed up the church. Still, it was a wonder of Renaissance construction inside, its perfect symmetry and fabled interior columns.

"It is beautiful," Enzo said, staring up. "Ugly, too, but it is a monument to all the artists who never completed their visions, to all the glorious works yet to finish."

Chris liked that perspective. “I suppose so. Michelangelo worked on the attached Medici chapel. That never got finished.”

“No. He also had designs for the front. Glorious designs.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yes. The mayor of Florence in 2011 proposed to complete Michelangelo’s vision and build what he had drafted. The plans are very complete.”

“Obviously, it didn’t happen.”

“No, there is no change in this city,” he said. “It is a disadvantage. Everything must be preserved. There is no room for writing new history, new chapters. Too much church of old.”

“Church of old?”

“Worshiping the past. Church of old. Trust me, Ca-riss, I am proud to be a citizen in a city of heroes, insane artists who created new visions. I love it. But they did not spend their days worshiping the old even when they incorporated classical design. They thought new thoughts. Pursued new directions revealing truths nobody anticipated. They were church of new. Now, Firenze is church of old.”

Chris took his Enzo’s hand. “Did you want to see it changed or stay the same? I’m assuming stay the same.”

Enzo said, “I do not know. I would have liked to see Michelangelo’s vision. But I like the monument to unfinished art, too.”

Chris said, “I like this. Just as it is. I think it looks like someone plowed a field on its side.”

“Very true.”

Enzo led them up the steps and Chris found his body resisting slightly. “I think the church is closed.”

“Yes.”

Enzo pulled out his phone and texted someone. While they waited on the front steps, Enzo wrapped his arms around Chris, who stood one step lower. They said nothing, watching the meager piazza walkers. An older woman with a cane. Young chattering boys, their words bouncing off the nearby stone surfaces like balls. Young lovers holding hands, walking very slowly.

A heavy door behind them creaked open, startling Chris.

“Come.”

Enzo disappeared into the shadow, the space between the door and frame and Chris wanted to scream at how quickly the darkness swallowed him up, it was frightening for him to be standing here and now—

“Hurry.”

Chris stepped into the darkness.

Without lights, Chris saw nothing for a moment.

He could hear Enzo’s breath.

Softly, Enzo said, “Ca-riss, this is my friend. Chiara. Chiara, this is the American with misfortune. Ca-riss.”

“You are so affected,” she said. “Why do you pronounce his name that way?”

Enzo’s voice whispered, “I like it. I think it’s sexy.”

Chris said, “I like it, too. It’s nice to meet you, Chiara. My name is Ca-riss. Or, *Chris*.”

Their voices never rose above a whisper.

“You want me to make your name sexy, too, Caaaaariiiiiiiiiis?” she asked.

If they smiled at these jokes, Chris could not see.

She said, “So, Ca-riss, have you two kissed? Is Enzo a good kisser? You must tell. All the *Firenze* girls are dying to know.”

“You are a bad, bad woman,” Enzo hissed. “Be gone, you witch! Fly on your broomstick and do your dark witchery!”

She said, “It’s accounting.”

“*Witchcraft*,” Enzo hissed.

After a few quiet exchanges about logistics, they parted, she up a side aisle, striding away in the dark, and Enzo took Chris’s hand and led him toward the center nave.

Chris pulled back in almost horror. “*No. We can’t.*”

This was a dark like he had never known. When Chiara slipped away, her footsteps were silent, her shadow merged into the deep dark and she was gone. *Gone*. Chris almost feared she might have been a ghost. At that second he realized how dark the physical world had become.

“We can,” Enzo said. “Security activates at eleven p.m. We have until then to go have a drink upstairs. Very nice views of the city.”

Chris wanted to stall for time. “How do you know Chiara?”

“We were artists together in school. We are friends. She works with numbers for her day job, professionally. She does side work, contracted through another firm who does the books for San Lorenzo. Some complicated work relationship but here she is. Why are you resisting me?”

“I don’t know. Give me a minute. Stop.” Chris looked around. “We shouldn’t be here.”

“No,” Enzo said. “Though you would be surprised how many people have keys to this church. It’s alarming, really. Legacy keys, special permit keys. City officials are honored by secretly giving them keys to the church. Chiara tells me the most frightening stories. We will not be caught and if caught, we will be chased out and scolded. No more.”

“Give me a minute,” Chris said, speaking softly. “I need to—to get my bearings or something.”

The darkness.

Far above him, he could see the tops of those fabled grey columns meet the domed ceiling, miles and miles away.

He gasped.

He walked a foot or two, still holding Enzo’s hand, not daring to let go or he risked being swallowed forever by these many shades of dark. Up top, near where the columns met the domes, stained glass touched the night sky, and an ethereal glow wafted, a colored hallucination, dangerously weak. As he gazed down the enormous nave, his eyes found the only light source, two weak glowing lights on the altar, scrawny matchsticks far, far away. Of course, for all he knew they might be lighthouse beacons. This darkness devoured the light. Distances were distorted by darkness.

Chris felt he couldn’t breathe.

“It’s overwhelming,” Enzo said. “I forget.”

Chris squeezed his hand and they walked toward the nave with small steps. Chris felt he might die if he took big steps, that he might disappear into hell in this choking darkness, cold space, the forest of vanishing columns and

imperceptible walls. He might die in this nave. Suffocate from emptiness and illusion. He felt terror. This space was so alien, so unlike anything he had ever experienced, that he did not know if the space scared him or it was the sheer newness of these sensations.

Enzo squeezed his hand.

Or maybe this was heaven, the grey columns far above touching white-crested foamy architecture splashing on heaven's shores. The impossible smoothness of each column. He experienced the intense symmetry, the mathematical grace, without calculating it. He felt the beauty of numbers and order crisscrossing inside him. The silence of eternity, screaming out one name.

The conflicting feelings overwhelmed him, throwing him into chaos, as life-changing emotions ripped through him. He felt he finally understood how small he was, how nothing, a self-aware blade of grass standing in this tic of time. He felt unnerved and undone.

He turned to Enzo and pulled the almost invisible man into his arms, weeping against his shoulder as quietly as possible.

"Yes," Enzo said quietly. "Yes. It has that effect, *amore mio*."

They stayed like that until Chris could breathe. They walked through the nave in silence, not daring to whisper.

Up until they left a few minutes later by a side chapel Chris could not decide if this was heaven or hell.

Their ascent to the second floor, the convent, terrified Chris. Traveling the broad stone stairways guided only by Enzo's lighter made him feel like a time traveler. Outside of the light's glow lurked the 1400s. Disease and rotten meat, unjust lives meeting unjust deaths. He feared that they would get trapped in the past. It could happen in a building laced with Renaissance magic. He felt that to be true.

"Don't worry," Enzo said.

Clearly, he felt the fear in Chris's grip.

"I'm freaking out," Chris said, terrified and joyful at the same time. "I can't believe I'm standing inside this building. I'm sneaking around the Church of San Lorenzo."

"We have entered the convent now."

“Still, it’s sneaking around.”

“Is it still sneaking around if the accountant knows we’re here?”

They chatted in quiet voices, which felt less of a violation outside of the main chapel.

They reached the top floor and walked a long, wide hallway, heavy doors appearing on both sides, every few feet. At the far end on the right, Enzo opened a heavy door to an unlocked room, which somehow disappointed Chris. All that was missing from the night’s adventures was someone picking a lock. Inside, the abandoned administrator’s office seemed at odds with the stone masonry. The modern desk and meager wooden chairs had been pushed to one side, opening the room for more congenial gatherings. A small halogen lamp tucked away somewhere was called into service. Enzo turned it on, shielded under the desk, and used the light to extract alcohol bottles from the bottom desk drawer.

Chris went to the window and found the strings to pull the blinds.

“Not yet,” Enzo said. “Wait until we have our drinks and I turn off this light. What do you want? Wine or hard drinks? Good vodka. Rum. We have orange juice. We have a mini-fridge plugged in.”

“Who uses this?”

“Friends. We keep it stocked.”

When they were well supplied with hard liquor, Enzo directed Chris to the window and turned out the halogen. Lights out, the double blinds went up.

Through the wide window, Florence was revealed.

Chris clutched his mouth to prevent his jaw from stretching further. The red rooftops absorbed the gleaming moonlight, a pearly cream-color so rare it would have gained Michelangelo’s approval. The hundreds of buildings, nestled together, penned in the city, like white-backed sheep, touching by necessity and yet trying to honor each other’s privacy. They turned on each other at all angles, nervous, quiet neighbors.

Chris wanted to scream, the insanity of such beauty.

They stood in silence, perhaps another silence test, but Chris hardly cared if it were. He heard Enzo’s drink clink against the ring on his pinkie and remembered who brought him. A warmth came over him, a desire to kiss him, though he knew it would be a mistake.

In the meantime, *Firenze*.

Chris stared at the rooftops as if counting them, memorizing them, trying to capture the moon like so many tributes before him in song or prose. He could even see silver beams gleaming along the Arno, snatches of the river glimpsed between buildings.

“I can’t stand it,” Chris said. “How do you live in this kind of beauty without going mad?”

“*Firenze* is a little mad,” Enzo said in a doubtful voice. “I do not think you are wrong in your assessment.”

“It’s staggering.” Chris stared wolfishly at everything in his vision.

They spent a full drink’s worth of time pointing out landmarks to each other, Chris asking “What’s that?” most of the time, and Enzo doing his best to remember every intersection. He knew most of them, proving himself as a true art historian.

Chris closed the blinds so Enzo could flip on the lights and pour more drinks.

“You’re not worried people will see us, even with the lights on?”

“No. With the blinds down, no. And people standing in the window in the dark are not visible with the blinds up. We drank here in high school. We verified this ourselves.”

“Your friend did accounting here during high school?”

“No, she and I had not yet met. I knew someone else. A guy whose friend had a key.”

“Good god, I had no idea this church was so slutty. Giving it up to half the city at night.”

Enzo stepped closer and raised the blinds so they could see the city again. “I see. You think that our churches are slutty and throw themselves at every tourist who shows up in our piazza, eh?”

The distance between them could be measured in inches.

“Is this what you think, Ca-riss?”

Despite wondering about kissing Enzo for most of the afternoon, now that the actual moment had arrived, Chris found himself surprised—surprised to be here, in the moonlight, ready to kiss the attractive man with caramel eyes.

Chris smiled and touched Enzo's face. "I really like you. I won't lie, I am very attracted to you. But we live on different continents. You can't date someone that far away."

"My last boyfriend was an American."

"And it didn't work out."

"Because he cheated on me. I was monogamous and he was not."

"Yeah, but *separate continents*. That's a lot of distance. Don't you want to see your boyfriend more than twice a year?"

"I am not planning for our years ahead," Enzo said. "I do not know this future of twice a year. I am standing here now. I am not a slutty church. I like you, too."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know," Enzo said. "But that will change. Why not take this chance? Why not call it a date? Why not kiss in the moonlight?"

"Because it will hurt, and not in the future, but in a month and a half. And I have to start looking for work. So, I can't be mooning over a man I loved, someone who dropped me off at the Florence airport and said 'Have a nice life.'"

"You get a better rate if you fly out of Rome."

Chris chuckled. "I know. I'm just talking. I like you. But I don't want to leave with a broken heart."

"I thought you had *already* decided to leave with a broken heart. Fly home? You were very saddened by your theft, if you remember."

"I know," Chris said. "I decided to stay. I'm staying. I should get my iPhone by tomorrow afternoon, so I can text you."

"Text me, but not date me. Not kiss me in the moonlight."

"I want to," Chris said. "I hope you can respect how I am trying to be honest with you. I like you, and I almost cried when you handed me my police report number. I was so grateful. Obviously, I trust you enough to sneak around famous churches where we could go to jail for life if we're arrested. Now that I'm thinking rationally again, that may not have been a smart move on my part, but I *like* you. So I'm here with you. But I'm conflicted. This isn't a two-time-zones-apart relationship. We're so far apart. I don't see it ending well."

“You are not wrong,” Enzo said. “With my American boyfriend, I went into it believing he might be my soul mate. I hoped he was. And he was not. Do not think I do not understand the challenges. I know. I have grieved. But. *Amore mio!* It is *love* which offers us its hand. How can you refuse the dance?”

“It might be love,” Chris said. “But how do I know I’m not just lonely? You’re incredibly nice and I need someone to stand next to because I’m scared and alone. What if I don’t know what I need right now?”

“What if you are an American on vacation and I am your Italian love story you can tell all your friends when you get back home and then go out to fancy clubs in tight-tight pants. While Enzo mopes for you.”

Chris smiled. “You would mope.”

Enzo said, “I might. It depended on whether or not you were a good kisser.”

Chris chuckled.

Enzo said, “I understand your fears. I do.”

Chris said, “Thank you. I am going to kick myself later for denying this moment.”

“We are wasting all this beautiful moonlight. So creamy.”

They watched the world beyond the glass window.

Enzo said, “I knew it was making you nervous, walking past all those blocks and no police station. I was playing with you. I teased you.”

This confession, the playfulness of it, made Chris feel brokenhearted. “Sometimes, I wish I could let go more, be more relaxed. I’m a computer programmer. I like order and creating order. At the same time, I know that it’s not always good to be too much one way, so I try to be more adventurous. Spontaneous. I promised myself this two month trip to Italy because I knew it would stretch me, and teach me things. And who knows? Perhaps I would meet and kiss a cute Italian boy.”

“Do I qualify?”

“You are *overqualified*, Enzo. But standing with you here, you’re a real person. Not just a cute Italian boy. You are thoughtful. You’re clever. You have a life. I don’t think I could kiss you and be too casual about it. I like you too much.”

Enzo sighed.

Chris tried to speak without his voice cracking. “You painted me looking beautiful on one of the worst days in my life.”

Enzo touched the glass pane with his fingertips, a gentleness that made Chris’s heart leap. He wished those fingertips were touching his face.

Chris said, “You changed my life with that painting. I decided to stay in Italy because I kept staring at the painting and thinking how I wanted to be that man, to be that brave and strong in the world. I’m really lonely and scared right now. I stare at that painting every day. To give me courage. The courage to walk across town to you tonight. The courage to keep going into the same Internet *caffé* two or three times a day, even though they look at me funny.”

“It’s hard.”

Chris wiped away a tear. “I’m just emotional right now.”

Enzo clinked their glasses together and they took another sip.

They stared at the night.

Chris said, “It seems like you don’t have a problem going after love. I admire that. I am too rigid.”

“It’s not easy,” Enzo said. “I have bruises. You Americans. With your accents.”

“My accent?” Chris said with surprise. “Whose sexy voice keeps growling out the word Ca-riss?”

They smirked, pronouncing the name in an exaggerated manner in different ways.

“Caaaaaaa-riiiiiiiiiiiiiisssssssssssssssssssssss...”

“Car-iiis!”

After a short silence, Enzo spoke. “My grandmother used to yell at my grandfather, trying to convince him they had to intervene in some family business, he should call his brother, things like that. He yelled back.”

Enzo paused. “She used to yell at him, ‘you have to love like the Medici.’”

“What did that mean?”

“I never knew. I asked her several times. She said it was an old saying and he knew what it damn well meant, and then he would yell back and she would tell him Veronica needed someone to step in—they liked to fight.”

Enzo said, “And have sex. I caught them twice.”

“Oh god.”

“Yes,” Enzo said. “It was not what a young man wants to see of the woman who bakes his *schacciata*. Riding him like that.”

“Okay, *enough*.” Chris laughed harder. “I almost spit up my drink. What is *schacciata*?”

“It is a bread with raisins. The closest my grandmother came to making us sweets.”

They stared at the city as if they had not been studying it for the past hour. Chris devoured it, commanded himself to freeze this view, make it the background image on his brain for the next year or two.

“Do you think we should leave?”

“Chiara will get us. She will come at ten fifty so we have plenty of time.”

“Okay.”

They were quiet.

Chris said, “Did you ever find out what it meant, to love like the Medici?”

“After she died, I asked my grandfather. I thought he might tell me. He did not. Not for two years after her death. Her death changed him and in some ways for the better and some ways for the worse. He never yelled as much, as if it weren’t as much fun without her. It was nice, the not-yelling, but we missed the strength that came with it, the way—together—they filled the house with their presence, their dance. Then, one day, he told me.”

“Yes?”

Enzo smiled. “He said, ‘the Medici were passionate.’”

Chris waited in silence until enough time had passed to be clear the story was over. “That’s it? Be passionate?”

Enzo tipped his glass in Chris’s direction. “Pearls of wisdom. *Mio nonno*.”

He repeated the punch line, sharing his reaction, the face he made when he realized this was his grandfather’s contribution.

They chortled themselves into silence.

“I thought about it many times.” Enzo picked up the thread. “The Medici were plotters. Bullies. Manipulators for their own ends. They are hard to admire

but even harder to deny. They advanced the Florentine way into the world. They loved this city and its people fiercely. All Florentines have a complicated history with the Medici. We love them. We are not always proud of them. They are our old family.”

Chris reviewed what facts and life histories he could remember of Cosimo, Lorenzo the Magnificent, and their less industrious namesakes who fucked the city good.

“They were selfish, yes. But they believed in Florentine beauty as something worth building. They invested in the people around them. Perhaps to love like the Medici is to believe fiercely in your clan, the power of your people to create beauty and love. Yes, sometimes that love is selfish, the love you want for yourself. And sometimes, you want others to experience the love, the gift of it. You build for yourself. You build for your family, your clan. You build together.”

Chris wanted to kiss him.

“To risk building a future,” Enzo said softly. “Knowing you might break your heart in the process.”

After a short silence, Chris licked his lips. “I like your answer better, Enzo.”

Enzo laughed. “I told this to my grandfather once, that I had a theory of what grandmother meant. He was losing his sense of who he was. He still had many good days. But less than in the past. I explained my Medici theory and he looked me in the eye and said in response, ‘That woman.’”

Chris’s heart beat faster, mesmerized by the light bouncing off Enzo’s brow, his soft sideburns.

Enzo considered this and frowned slightly. “I think he knew my words. He was trying to tell me I was right.”

Chris closed the remaining foot between them with confidence, communicating his intentions to Enzo. They both leaned in. He felt Enzo’s lips touch his own and the sensation felt warm and perfect, the salty taste of him. He felt home.

The Florentine moon beamed its mad approval.

Day 10

Chris brought prosciutto sandwiches to Enzo for lunch. He wanted to explain, again, that dating was a bad idea. Chris would return to the United States and then his heart would be broken. But seeing Enzo's spontaneous smile made him feel warm inside. He forgot his prepared speech.

Day 12

Enzo linked his arm through Chris's as they stood before the Florentine Cathedral.

Chris said, "Do you get tired of coming here?"

"I do," Enzo said. "And I don't. I can draw this façade in my sleep, every angle, every perspective. I see it, yes, but I try to discover something new about it, every time I am here. This is one of the greatest art museums in the world, so I cannot truly every grow sick of it. It inspires. But I paint this quite a bit every day."

"Well, thank you for coming. And for taking the day off work."

Enzo kissed his cheek. "I needed a day off. And today is new boyfriend day."

Chris squeezed his arm. "I like new boyfriend day."

Instead of going inside, they walked its exterior, looking at corners and sharing bits of art history that they remembered.

"One man died," Enzo said. "Only *one* while building Brunelleschi's dome."

"That's amazing."

Enzo described the color choices he made when painting Il Duomo's shadow, the shade of clouds against the dome, and Chris loved every rich description, learning how Enzo made colors obey his will. Enzo described the art he made in his free time, and while they sat, Enzo pulled out his old phone and showed a few photographs.

Eventually, they made their way to the front façade once again.

Enzo nodded at a line of children holding hands, entering the church. "That's me. Every year in school. Trips to visit Mary of the Flower."

Instead of going inside, they walked down the steps, being silly, exchanging stories about grade school trips and childhood marvels, the small events that began to shape them. They walked the exterior in the other direction and discussed how many people still believed the exterior façade was Giotto's design. Enzo was impressed Chris knew about the 1876 construction.

“I read it in a book. A book written by a retired art history professor. She has a great writing style. Funny but still very academic. It’s well researched.”

Enzo said, “Nice.”

“She said when Cosimo rejected Brunelleschi’s outrageous designs for the Palazzo Medici, he told the very angry architect ‘Envy is a plant one should never water.’”

“She is well-quoted. I have heard that before, but it is not common knowledge.”

They talked about how Chris liked her writing style and wit so much, he changed his trip dates by two weeks. She would be in Florence during the last days of his trip, speaking at the Uffizi Gallery. He wanted to explore most of Florence and then ask her questions.

Enzo said, “We should go see her.”

Chris’s heart flipped to hear Enzo plan ahead, to know that he thought of them dating beyond this day or weekend. Maybe they could not know about forever, but it made Chris hopeful that his new Italian beau also gazed into the future.

“I’d like that,” Chris said. “Again, thank you for coming here on your day off. In the short time I’ve known you, it feels like a huge honor to come here escorted by you.”

Enzo smiled. “I do not mind, honestly. Il Duomo is like a grandparent you love. You know all the stories. But you like hearing the stories, seeing the treasures in the house. You see your grandparent as she was in her wild youth, those crazy tales. Some days you notice a new detail, light from a new angle, and pleasure comes. So, it is good to revisit regularly. Get new perspective.”

Chris said, “That sounded a little rehearsed.”

“It was. Tourists ask all the time how I feel about the church.”

Chris said, “Ha. Knew it.”

Enzo continued. “They appreciate my painting and say very politely, ‘You must get tired of painting that dome.’ They are kind to think of me so I try to tell them the truth, the truth of the relationship. Firenze is very proud of Il Duomo, but the interior is less exciting for us. There are other treasures to be marveled at here. But yes, I have explained this many times, so my answer is not so fresh.”

“It sounded fine,” Chris said. “And sincere. But the grandparent metaphor was very smooth.”

“Agreed. I am very smooth.”

“Oh, yes. Especially when you are asking a crowd of people whether or not to go on a date with me.”

They tittered over the funny exchange.

“I got you very good, American.” Enzo laughed hard. “You were very quiet for a moment.”

Chris blushed all over again. “Yes. You got me.”

They entered.

The great emptiness of the cathedral surprised Chris, though he was surprised he felt surprised, because the church of San Lorenzo in staggering darkness was the emptiest interior he’d ever experienced. He recalled how he had hallucinated that night—believing he was in heaven or hell. He better understood the hold the church had over people.

That night.

The night they kissed.

Their first kissing, a good ten minutes of kissing before Chiara interrupted and the three scurried from the building, racing to beat the security measures’ activation.

That night.

Chris leaned over to Enzo and said, “I’m happy I kissed you.”

Enzo said, “I am, too.”

They wandered the interior for an extended time, quiet, touching, letting their arms and hips bump each other comfortably. Visiting niches containing famous relics, ones so important they received paragraphs of devotion in important books. Chris thrilled each time, even if he didn’t love that particular work. It was like being impressed by celebrities.

When they witnessed a stained glass window by Donatello, Chris gasped. Enzo chuckled and Chris silenced him. “Quiet. This is staggering. It’s *Donatello*.”

Chris reviewed his mental list of places to visit inside the cathedral, a long list, requiring probably more time than a single day would accommodate.

Andrea del Castagno's painted equestrian statue, the Dante painting by Domenico di Michelino, and others.

Enzo said, "I was hoping we would go to lunch after this, but I may have to eat the head of a cherub if we stay much longer."

"Cherubs taste terrible," Chris said. "And security will attack you."

"Definitely. You see how they eye me when we get close to the works? They know I am Italian. Italian men are considered the greatest threats."

"No. You're making that up."

"It's true. Americans don't go to Italian Renaissance buildings to go crazy. You do your crazy at home. Churches and museums are where Italians go to be crazy, ruining art."

"Or chiseling off noses." Chris referenced the mad geologist who attacked Michelangelo's Pieta and chiseled off several pieces, including Mary's nose.

"Mary's nose has never been returned," Enzo said. "Did you know that? Someone in Italy has Mary's nose on their mantle."

"That's really creepy," Chris said.

"Yes," Enzo said.

Chris said, "Do you think they are proud? Do they tell the story to their kids about stealing Michelangelo's nose? Describing how they happened to be present when a crazed geologist used a hammer to damage the art? Do they end the story with, 'And *that's* when your father said, honey, grab that schnoz.'"

Enzo laughed. "Yes. I like your story."

They held hands, admired the beams above them, admired each other, and left the interior, feeling very much in love. Outside again, studied Ghiberti's famous doors, claimed to usher in the Renaissance interest in classical proportions and beauty.

Enzo said, "Cherub's head."

Chris said, "No baby eating. These are the Gates of Paradise. Give me another five minutes."

"I will give you ten because I like your thick glasses. You look good in your green pants and yellow shirt, too."

Chris blushed and leaned in to kiss Enzo.

When they parted, Enzo said, “You are a very sexy American nerd. This I like.”

Chris said quietly, “I’m glad.”

They discussed stylistic differences between Ghiberti’s and Andrea Pisano’s first set of doors. They discussed the gold, the process of making it, and eavesdropped on a tour guide’s explanation, hearing her interpretation of the stories until she led her flock to the next site.

“She pronounced Uccello’s name in a funny way,” Enzo said. “I could not determine her accent. She is not a Florentine.”

“She did a good job with the door’s history.”

“It was okay,” Enzo said, grumbling.

Chris laughed. “We need to get you fed.”

They ate at one of Enzo’s favorite restaurants, a red-checked tablecloth restaurant. Chris thought he was in a delicious movie, his new friend ordering in Italian, asking how fresh the mussels were and other detailed questions in Italian about dish preparation that Chris never could ask. He delighted in Enzo handling the wine, consulting him on flavors he appreciated and then ordering what he thought would best suit the meal. He didn’t know why he found that as sexy as he did, the presumptuousness of Enzo’s simply handling it, but he did. The entire time, rich, savory smells wafted near him, changing direction and intensity with the breeze.

They stared at each other throughout lunch, surprised by the excellent tastes, delighted to have a reason to look into each other’s eyes, sharing such intimate conversation about food. They ate slowly, taking their time, touching hands.

At the end of their meal, Chris said, “I feel like I’m having sex with this tiramisu. I’ve never tasted anything like this.”

“This is not sex,” Enzo said. “I will let you know when it’s sex.”

Chris laughed and said, “I’m sure you will.”

Enzo said, “Let’s spend the rest of the afternoon making love. I want to nap. Wake up and then make love with you.”

Chris said, “Okay. Let’s do it.”

“It’s going to rain today,” Enzo said. “We should be naked and in bed when it does.”

“Not until I finish this tiramisu,” Chris said. “I swear, I have never tasted anything so creamy in my entire life.”

Enzo flashed a sultry smile. “You will.”

Chris found himself blushing.

When they had finished the dessert, Enzo smiled at Chris while he spoke to the waiter. “We will need one tiramisu to go.”

They made love all afternoon and were later awakened by the soft rumblings of thunder, followed twenty minutes later by the pounding rain against the orange and red rooftops, tinkering, hammering, vibrating a thousand unique voices. Wrapped in each other’s arms, they tried to describe the sound to each other until they finally remembered the tiramisu.

They fed it to each other in small spoonfuls and listened to the storm.

Day 15

On Ponte Vecchio, they meandered through the shops, gazing at silver rings, admiring the intricate gold designs. When shopkeepers tried to cajole Enzo into a purchase for his American friend, he would answer them in Italian and say, “*Dipingo per i turisti in Piazza Santissima Annunziata.*”

Once they understood he was a street painter, they left him alone, focusing their sales on Chris. He also resisted their seductions. They finally broke down when arriving at a gelato stand, and Chris purchased them a fig gelato to share.

Two dozen white flags with Florence’s customized symbol, the fleur-de-lys, flapped noisily in the wind, reminding visiting guests unobtrusively to consider the parent sponsoring this beauty, *Firenze*.

“Do you ever come here?”

“No,” Enzo said. “Too touristy. No offense intended.”

“None taken. I am a tourist.”

They walked by the section of bridge with padlocks still bound to them, and Chris nodded. “You ever lock a padlock on the bridge with a former lover? Seal your fate?”

“No,” Enzo said. “They fine you heavily these days. This bridge was not meant to sustain the weight of so much metal. For a while, they reported it on the news every night, the growing concern. Then, it was outlawed.”

Chris was secretly pleased that Enzo had not given his heart this way.

“I would not,” Enzo said, “lock my heart on a bridge like this. Not even symbolically.”

Chris was not pleased to hear this. “Oh?”

“No. The future is too important to lock down. Too much is unknown. This is what I have learned from previous relationships. You do not know if you will be together. Nobody does. My last love was the love of my life, I thought. Yes, I overlooked some flaws in him I did not like but only because my heart thudded so hard around him. Yet, he was not the one. I was wrong. I do not wish a man to make a lifetime promise he cannot keep.”

“Does that mean you’d never get married?”

“I do not know,” Enzo said. “If I am honest with you, Ca-riss, I do not. When I am with a lover, I am devoted in relationship. But to marry is to promise your future days, days you cannot know or give until they are present.”

This troubled Chris, this declaration.

Enzo said, “Do not be sad. I am not one-night-Charlie. But I cannot promise you what is not mine to give. We do not know our future selves. We do not know who we become. We only know who we are now. We must love with these bodies, with these thoughts, and with this heart we share, right now. The future will come.”

Chris said, “Thank you for saying that. I understand. But at some point, don’t you want to plan a future with someone?”

Enzo said, “What good is a plan if the future does not come? I *did* plan a future with someone. He cheated on me. Multiple times.”

Chris nudged him with his hip and offered him the gelato. “The Medicis planned.”

“Yes, and their plans were constantly rewritten by fortune, shifting alliances, wars. Gout. Did you know the powerful butcher’s guild had dominated this bridge and the shops along it until 1442?”

“No.”

“It’s true. This first, oldest bridge connecting Florence was the source of their power. And do not think their power was limited to selling greasy intestines to peasants. They influenced the city. They allowed prostitutes and assassins to work this territory. They goaded Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici into improving the bridge, making it more illustrious. Cosimo did. He hired Giorgio Vasari to create the corridor to Palazzo Vecchio and Palazzo Pitti. Very political undertaking, very tricky for Cosimo to manage. But the butchers wanted it done. And the first thing Cosimo did when it was completed was to exile the butchers and make it only available to gold merchants. This was not the future they planned.”

“Cosimo did not like rivals to his own power,” Chris said.

“Exactly. He resented their nudging him and he punished them.”

They walked a bit further and then stopped near another jewelry stand selling watches. They picked up a few, looked at them briefly, but for Chris, the conversation did not feel over.

Chris said, “I am not a guild of butchers demanding you reconstruct Florence for me.”

Enzo said, “No. I just meant... one never knows about the future. We must live for the love we have today.”

Chris said, “Is that what you think it means to love like the Medici? To be ruthless and break promises?”

Enzo said, “I do not know what the phrase means.”

They walked in awkward silence, commenting on items for sale until other topics came easily again.

Day 18

The restaurant Enzo selected for their fancy dinner was not one Chris would have chosen. The exterior was plain. A few tables with mismatching chairs stood outside the restaurant, almost requiring pedestrians to step out of their way to avoid participating in the diner's conversations. The large glass window boasted large black letters trimmed in gold, *Trattoria da Ginone*. The letters could use a touch-up. Glancing inside, the restaurant was only half-full. The sweet-herbed aroma curling through the open door convinced Chris to trust his date.

Chris waited out front.

When he saw Enzo approaching, he walked two steps closer and then stared. A gleam from Enzo's neck promised a silver chain necklace, one Enzo threatened to wear, to show Chris he could "clean up." His hair was wet and slicked back, exposing the top of his forehead, a slight widow's peak that would have gone unnoticed under his Caesar cut. He beamed a broad, almost bashful smile in his final steps to Chris. He wore brown slacks and a light rose-colored shirt, the color of spilled red wine absorbed into a white towel.

Chris's heart thudded.

Enzo kissed him lightly. "*Ciao, bello*. You look fantastic. You're wearing *un*, uh... *cravatta*."

Chris said, "Yeah. Neck tie."

"Neck tie. I like it." Enzo leaned closer. "Very sexy."

The owner led them inside, and through a door to the back to the garden seating.

Chris gasped. Illuminated by strings of light, crisscrossing above floppy, green potted plants, another fifteen tables appeared, many occupied, as if this were the location of the *real* restaurant. The scene was as romantic as he would have wanted, quiet conversations over low-burning candles, the smell of rich foods, and the occasional burst of laughter followed by gorgeous Italian voices, over-speaking each other, some brilliant joke or story cascading to an end.

They sat by a fountain—a slab of rock more like—with a meager trickle of water pouring into a pool below. On the pool, a fresh lily floated.

Enzo nodded to it. “I requested this table specifically. This fountain is old. It is from a Roman bath. It is powered by a spring below.”

Chris, cried, “*No!*”

“It is.”

Chris spent the next three minutes staring at it. “In America, you could never touch anything this old. They would never let you. There would be miles of fence around this and laser security. And I can... I can touch it right now? Like this?”

“Like this.” Enzo smiled. “You are touching the ancient world.”

Chris’s eyes filled with tears. *Roman*. He touched ancient Rome!

Chris ordered what their host recommended and Enzo ordered a Florentine steak, which he promised would make Chris cry once again. They feasted on scallops marinated in ginger to be gently dipped in an artichoke mint cream. An ordinary Caprese salad tasted like nothing Chris had ever put into his mouth. Never had he tasted basil so aggressive. He closed his eyes when chewing it, attempting to remember the way the taste overwhelmed him.

“How is your computer?”

Chris was forced to rejoin his dinner guest. He opened his eyes. “Amazing. It’s done. I finished it today.”

“I thought you finished it several days ago.”

“I did. But there were upgrades and small changes, performance issues I wanted to enhance. I have been online for the past few days, which has been like drinking water after being trapped in the desert. I mean, I can’t tell you. The guild, my guild, really pulled together for me.”

“Your clan,” Enzo forked a scallop, cautiously dipping it into the cream. “They love you.”

Chris smiled.

Chris had originally been hesitant to explain his World of Warcraft guild, not because he was not proud of them or the work they did together, but to outsiders, explaining game mechanics and the kinds of skills brought to bear could bore someone.

Enzo did not seem to mind. He asked questions. He wanted to know.

At first, Chris thought he was being polite but Enzo explained his fascination. He did not want to participate in online life, not much anyway, but he understood it existed and he did not know anyone as invested as Chris in those relationships.

“I thought you might think my guild and what we do is stupid,” Chris said.

Enzo picked up his wine glass. “It is. It is the height of ridiculous.”

Chris paused, fork on the way to his mouth.

Enzo said, “You log in and play for many hours in a row with people you do not know in the real world. I would not do this. And yes, perhaps I would have thought this ridiculous except they mailed you a computer, piece by piece. They mailed you instructions and videos and tools you would need. They love you. They need you. This is a clan of people who are dedicated to each other. There is nothing ridiculous about that.”

Chris said, “Good save.”

They talked about the guild’s upcoming campaigns and the new app Chris downloaded this morning for cataloging vacation photos. Enzo shared his adventures that day in the piazza, customers who said amusing things or made outrageous demands.

When the waiter brought them dinner, they were laughing about Enzo’s challenge painting a family of six into an already-finished street scene. Chris’s tender but crispy suckling pig garnished with wild turnips and rosemary brought food into his awareness he did not know existed. Enzo’s sizzling steak teased out a meat lust Chris had never seen.

Touching the water as it dribbled from the Roman bath, Chris knew he had never been happier.

Day 23

They had fallen into patterns, good patterns, they said.

Chris worked with his guild in the morning, repaying his perceived debts doing jewelcrafting and creating potions, giving them away pro-bono. He built his teammate's gold coffers.

He strolled in the late morning, took lunch in places Enzo recommended and then visited spots in the city all afternoon. He would often meet Enzo after six and they would enjoy happy hour together, sometimes making love in Chris's apartment, and sometimes just spending time together until Enzo had to return home. Family obligations.

On those nights, Chris walked back to his apartment, humming to himself.

Chris suggested to Enzo he would like to meet his mother, but Enzo said, no, she was not ready.

Day 25

Chris bought their train tickets to Siena because he did not want Enzo to bear the burden of planning every aspect of their dating life. Buying tickets made him nervous, but he studied the signs, practiced what he wanted to say to the ticket seller, and waited in line. He had allowed two hours for purchasing tickets and was surprised when the chore took almost that long.

Enzo was not surprised. Over a meager dinner of cheap sandwiches and fresh fruit, Enzo shrugged when he heard about the delays and long lines. He said, “Italy.”

Day 27

The train chugged along the Italian countryside, and Chris felt he glowed with excitement. The trees were Italian, the small homes were Italian, the grass and wildflowers close to the track: Italian and *Italian*. He couldn't stand it. He was in love with someone who cared for him. Someone who returned his feelings! Of course, he had not broached the topic or used the word "love," but he felt it and he recognized it, the way one recognizes an amazing butternut squash risotto. One bite, and it is obvious—this is special.

Chris stared at the countryside, the collection of homes clustered together, as if protecting themselves from the elements. He could not see a nearby town. No electrical lines, either. Did they have power? Did they work in accordance with the sunlight? Or were these homes abandoned? He wanted to ask Enzo.

But Enzo snored lightly, his head against Chris's shoulder and Chris could live with the lack of answers rather than wake him. He watched the countryside zoom by and thought, *Perfetto*.

A long walk was required from the train station to the town, and for the last half-mile, they walked the perimeter of the city's stone encasement. Chris marveled, having never experienced a true medieval city before, still barricaded and ready to defend itself from advancing troops. Every stone was ancient. Every step had been trodden by people who lived before him, the 16th century, the 13th century. Hell, this footpath into the city was walked by people in the tenth century. Feelings of deep connection and desperation to know *everything* about the people who lived here swam in bee patterns around Chris, making him dizzy.

He wanted to know about the window in that stone building over there, the stone he currently touched in the brick wall. Where did it come from? Who moved it here? When was the wall built? He asked Enzo a few cursory questions and Enzo responded vaguely, sometimes answering, but more often he said, "I do not know."

Chris stopped asking. He didn't want Enzo to be his tour guide. He wanted him to be his date.

"Enzo, you seem distracted. Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said. "I am nervous. About my spot in the piazza. I should not have taken off a second day so close to the first."

“Yeah?”

Enzo sighed. “My schooling starts in August and I must leave and secure an apartment in July. I know I am leaving in the middle of tourist season. Our piazza is highly desired among artists and all are vying for my physical spot and time. To secure this, if I am not present, someone may try to take the spot permanently before I leave in July. I need the money I make to survive next year. School will be expensive.”

“And this pays well?”

“*Si*. Very well.”

“Tell me more. I want to understand.”

Chris admitted to himself that he had not realized how much of Enzo’s job was truly *work*. It was easy to picture Enzo as a carefree artist who painted gorgeous watercolors under the blue skies and yellow sun. The image in his mind was picturesque. But through Enzo’s explanations, Chris learned how much of a dedicated economy centered around tourists. Despite the lack of office setting and middle managers, there were rules to this economy, a tightly sewn community.

He felt bad for suggesting the day trip to Siena. It was selfish.

Enzo appreciated the apology but insisted he wanted to come. His right hand had been stiff lately, so it was good to take another day off. He needed it, too.

They entered Siena and Chris gasped.

The city was packed as tightly as Florence, as if the buildings had at one point stampeded together to seek refuge inside the enclosed city walls. They stood cramped, end-to-end, waiting. The four- and five-story buildings were not as white, not as colorful as Florence, either. These were made from hard-scrabbling bricks, brown walls and brown roofs, interior city walls of the same dark hue. Despite being able to see several recognizable chains, including a Gap, and a Banana Republic, Chris could not shake the feeling of standing in a town that time had forgotten. The stone architecture dominated all, even the modern conveniences.

They could see the Torre del Mangia rising in the Campo and Chris knew they would make their way there eventually. Chris wanted to visit the seven sites prioritized on his app. He promised Instagram followers a walking tour. Enzo suggested they wander the streets and allow themselves to get lost.

They wandered.

They shared impressions of buildings, commented on the unnatural chill three feet after stepping out of sunlight. Together they wondered about the people who lived here six hundred years ago, eight hundred. They speculated on previous job situations, family life, and young lovers' favorite spots.

When they were good and lost, wandering down a cobblestone street with only two old women at the far end arguing, they kissed.

Later in the day, having visited John the Baptist's arm, Nicolas Pisano's famous cathedral pulpit, Renaissance frescoes by Ghirlandaio, and St. Catherine's decapitated head, they decided to rest in the famous piazza, staring at the tourists, the traffic, the fan-shaped space that served as the town center. Even the Mangia Tower's red brick, smooth and tall, seemed aware of its blue-collar surroundings.

Enzo suggested a few items for lunch and asked Chris to purchase them, simple items. When Chris asked why they didn't go together, Enzo said, "I am working on dinner."

Chris merged into the crowd, wandering happily, dazed. He found a shop and purchased a thick slab of cheese and a round loaf of bread. Two bottles of water and half liter of cold prosecco. The shopkeeper did not speak English, but through nods and Chris paid what he owed and emerged into sunlight again.

When he eventually returned to the piazza, he could not find Enzo, not at first. He gazed around patiently, assuming his return. He watched the tourists take photos and recalled how happy he felt right before his laptop was stolen. Were there thieving children working the crowd today? Perhaps yes. Perhaps not in the busiest piazza. He looked around for suspicious children, more out of curiosity than any lingering resentment.

In doing so, he spotted Enzo, sitting on a bucket, painting. A small crowd had begun to form near him.

Chris laughed and approached.

"I am earning us dinner," Enzo said without looking up. "Some of these fine people will not visit Florence and would like to see Il Duomo. This good fellow, Pietro, was willing to let me spend a half hour painting with his materials in exchange for half of the profits."

Pietro looked at Chris with a bored expression. "*Ciao.*"

Chris smiled.

Enzo said, "Did you buy us lunch?"

Chris opened the packages, feeling very domestic, setting up lunch on the cement. They shared their lunch with Pietro, who kept an eye on the crowd entertained by Enzo's fast work, and eventually made several attempts to speak to Chris in Italian.

When Enzo had painted a dozen Florence settings and left the remaining ones for Pietro to sell, they scaled the tower and Enzo repeated Siena's history as remembered from school. They climbed higher and higher above the rooftops, above the air that was above the rooftops and Chris marveled. So many centuries of humanity had clomped up and down these stairs, these solid stairs, so confident in its powerful construction. They passed archer's windows and Chris took photos for his guild's hunters, skilled with bow and arrow.

"Arrows were fired from these slits," Chris said. "Real arrows."

"Not very successfully," Enzo said. "Siena always fell."

When they reached the top and all of Siena lay before them, the tousled mess of buildings and domes, spikes and ordinary brown buildings, Chris felt he might explode from beauty and love, full of cheese and the delicious, hard bread. Enzo stared at the city while Chris stared at Enzo.

The thick lower lip, the curl of black hairs of his forehead, his straight nose and expressive eyes. The curve of his face demanded a finger stroke of appreciation.

"I would like pears tonight for dinner," Enzo said, still gazing off into the distance. "We must find a *ristorante* with caramelized pears, perhaps as a dessert. Maybe beef medallions in a pear sauce."

Chris said, "I love you."

He had not meant to say it. He did not know if he would say it. He did not know if he *could* say it.

But there it was, the words floating away from the tallest defensive tower in the city.

Enzo said, "How do you know?"

Chris said, "Because I did not want to say it aloud. It's too soon. I do not know enough about you. But the words came out of me without my consent. I could not stop them. That's how I know it's true."

“Yes,” Enzo said. “I know that feeling.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” he said. “For I am also a man in love.”

They held each other and watched the afternoon sunlight bake the city as if the rectangular buildings were giant loaves of bread.

Day 32

Enzo and Chris fought about Rome.

Chris wanted Enzo to accompany him for the week he had planned, for part of the week, and Enzo insisted he could not leave work. The time he took away to go to go to Siena had consequences, just as Enzo anticipated. An up-and-comer vying for Enzo's late-July spot had taken residence, and refused to leave the next day. The artists of the piazza rallied behind Enzo and forced out the insurgent, but they let Enzo know they would not do so again.

"Your guild is not supporting you," Chris said.

"They are supporting me as much as they can, me being a short-timer. They do not wish to aggravate this Matteo. He has skill. He works well with tourists. He might be in the group come July and they do not wish him an enemy. I cannot leave my spot any more days. I must make money."

"I will cancel my trip. I won't go to Rome."

"No," Enzo said vehemently. "You must. You must go. You will regret skipping it."

"I won't."

"I will regret your skipping it," Enzo said. "You must go. You cannot change your plans just because you are in love with someone. You must go forward with who you are."

This made Chris feel bleak, as if Enzo were attempting to communicate his intentions about their relationship.

"We will run out of time, soon," Chris said. "Don't you want us to spend as much time together as possible?"

"Yes," Enzo said. "But I must work. I must. You must go to Rome. You are in Italy for two months, you must go see the Sistine, the Colosseum, and many other wonders. We both know Florence is better. But you must visit Rome."

They argued and grew impatient with each other for their lack of flexibility, but they did not say words they regretted. Chris could not shake the nagging feeling that Enzo did not want to see him. That their love affair was doomed, even if Enzo didn't consciously admit it. When the day eventually came that they would separate, beginning their long-distance relationship, Chris could see Enzo ending what they had so recently begun.

And what they had, Chris knew, had made him happier than graduating college. Happier than solving impossible code problems. Happy than getting a legendary staff few clerics ever see. Happier than new iPhone release dates.

He fell in love in Italy and although he could not stay, he did not want to leave.

Enzo saw him off at the train station, holding his bucket of art supplies on the platform while the train headed south.

Day 35–42

Chris threw his coins in Trevi fountain. He gaped at the Pantheon and consulted his Roman Tourist app for details on its construction. He witnessed the famous finger of God almost touching the famous finger of Adam. He walked the Spanish steps. He ate carbonara. He witnessed death monuments, celebrated in sculpture and frescos. He stood in line for an hour to see Michelangelo's Pieta. He was mesmerized and dumbfounded on multiple occasions.

In the evenings, he walked the crowded Roman streets, wishing Enzo walked at his side.

Day 43

They made love for five hours, resting in short periods, but the time apart had fueled their passion, their physical need, and with each orgasm, Chris cried out, "*I love you.*" Enzo whispered Italian into Chris's ear until he fell asleep.

Day 46

They had made a plan for the evening of the art history professor's talk. Enzo would deposit his painting supplies at Chris's rented apartment, and from there they would make their way to the Uffizi.

As they hurried toward their destination, bypassing tourists and locals strolling for restaurant options, they hurriedly discussed their respective day's events.

"It's completely unexpected," Chris said. "It's never happened, this type of gaming strategy."

"And where will they move this shield to? The one you seek?"

"We don't know. We don't know what's happening. We've been planning our raid of the Shield of Damatos for months. Last night, one of our shamans and a warrior in the guild saw the same exchange. Two orcs talking about moving the shield to protect it from us. Blizzard has never done anything like this."

"Blizzard?"

"The company behind the online gaming system. Our server lords, we call them. This is impossible"

"Not impossible, perhaps."

"You don't understand. There's no information on this. No other guilds are talking about it. In their discussion boards, one guild talked about 'the event' related to the Shield, but they were very cryptic and haven't responded to our emails."

"You are upset about this."

"We've been practicing the mechanics for months. If Orcs move it, it could mean a totally new raid encounter, which means months of late nights, re-learning tactics for a new boss. This totally fucked up our plans."

"Plans change."

Chris's head turned sharply to catch Enzo, see if there was a double meaning, but apparently there was none. While he had been very happy with his homecoming from Rome, Chris was aware his time in Italy would draw to a close, much sooner than he wanted.

He remembered his third day, the day he wanted to fly home. He glanced at Enzo and thought, *thank god*.

The two men found themselves with a small crowd waiting admittance.

Chris said, "I thought we'd be late."

"In Italy," Enzo said, "everything starts late. We are right on time."

As they took their seats on metal folding chairs, Chris looked around, surprised. "I don't see a lot of tourists."

Enzo said, "No. Tourists want to see things. They want photos. They do not want to listen to someone discuss a book."

The author of Chris's guidebook, Dr. Meredith Pretti, was a tall and slender woman in her sixties, a grey bob curling atop her tweed shoulders. She looked regal, a true academic, possessing a sharp gaze that moved among the crowd as she spoke, as if targeting individuals for her comments. She clicked through a PowerPoint presentation and discussed the uniqueness of this buttress, that fresco, how this competition in the mid-1440s influenced a generation of artists. She frequently made wry insider jokes, most of which Chris understood. She called Giorgio Vasari a "gossip queen," and the crowd tittered. A few of her jokes fell flat as the sedate audience did not quite share her occasionally ribald insights. Enzo laughed into his hands.

Chris's heart felt grief.

He did not want to lose this man.

They had only dated for a short while, but he loved him, loved him in a way that caused him pain during his week in Rome. The gleeful glance from Enzo confirmed what he had known for weeks. He didn't want them to break up. At the same time, he couldn't trust an inter-continental relationship would last. This could not end well.

During the question and answer period, Enzo stood and asked her a question in Italian. She answered in Italian, and several audience members clapped politely.

She clapped her hands together in a half-bow. "I've been studying Italian for thirty years and I still question my case endings, so thank you. *Grazie*."

After the event, she was immediately surrounded, older people in long coats who put their arm on hers to ask a question, to make observations, and in one

long-winded comment eventually translated by Enzo and whispered in Chris's ear, a man described how his travel to work had changed over the years due to a growing tourist population.

After he finished, Enzo and Chris approached. They made sure they were the last ones.

"That was a helluva an odd man," Dr. Pretti said. "Did you hear that? Either my Italian is terrible or he was describing his daily trip to work in the 1970s."

"Your Italian is fine," Enzo said. "He is angry about traffic."

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, you would know if my Italian were off. You tested me."

Enzo smiled. "I did. Many art historians come to Florence to tell us about our great city. Most do not do us the courtesy to learn Italian, and understand the details in our native tongue. You did. You speak well."

She sniffed, as if she were insulted by his insinuation she might be one of the lazy horde but tipped her head in his direction anyway, a non-verbal acknowledgment of his compliment.

Chris could keep silent no longer.

"My name is Chris Spaulding. I'm a huge fan. I read *An Art Lover's Guide to Florence* in college and then I reread it again in the weeks before I came to Italy. I rescheduled my trip so I could meet you."

"Oh," she said, "What a strange honor. I've never had anyone schedule a trip around a speaking engagement. Of course, I only get three speaking engagements per year."

Chris nodded, unsure how to continue the conversation.

"Come with us for a drink," Enzo said. "Let us buy you a drink. You must be thirsty."

Chris said, "I have a dozen questions I'd like to ask you."

She looked around the speaking area. Other than an older couple, struggling with their coats in the corner, they were alone.

Chris said hastily, "If you have other plans, like a reception or something..."

She barked out a laugh. "I think you overestimate the popularity of art history lectures. I could use a fat glass of white wine. Let's go."

They decided on a well-lit pub two blocks away, crowded with diners but with available seating at the bar. Most of the places he visited with Enzo were quieter, out-of-the way locations with excellent food and minimal foot traffic. Chris had forgotten the appeal of a crowded restaurant, neon lights, and a bustling staff, darting among tables like birds hungry for crumbs.

The three decided to share a bottle of wine, and Enzo flirted with her, pouring for her, praising her, telling her he admired her speaking style. Enzo held Chris's hand while praising her brooch, a peacock with a bejeweled fantail.

"I bought this on the butcher's bridge," Dr. Pretti said.

"Ah, Ponte Vecchio," Enzo said. "It seems very nice quality."

"So you know the bridge's history?"

Enzo said, "Of course."

She picked up her glass and said, "I was testing you."

She traded stories with the two of them, gossiped about artists, and local politics from four hundred years prior. She grilled Chris regarding his visits throughout the city and seemed to approve of how he spent his time. He asked her the detailed questions he hoped to, thrilled to hear her responses.

"Il Gigante?" she asked.

"Yes," Chris said, excited by his second glass of wine. "The David's got a nice cock."

Enzo laughed and coughed into his hand.

She waved the comment away. "It's small. Eternally floppy. Useless. But that *ass*. I've always dreamed of caressing it." After a pause, she said, "We should break in."

They laughed and planned their imaginary heist.

After the second bottle of wine had been ordered as well as tuna carpaccio, she turned to them and said, "So what's going on here. You two. How long have you dated?"

They explained the details of their recent courtship—including the first date that was not a date—and Chris felt relieved that Enzo seemed just as eager to describe the love that they had found.

"And where do you see this going?" She tipped her glass toward her lips. "You go home in a week or two, yes?"

Chris said, "Yes."

"What then?"

They two men looked at each other, almost guiltily.

"Uh oh," she said. "I've stepped in it."

"No," Enzo said. "We are unclear."

"No, we're not," Chris said. "I'm not. I want us to stay in a relationship."

She raised her eyebrows. "From the United States?"

"Yes," Chris said with soft defiance. For the first time, the idea sounded absurd to his own ears.

"Distance is not the issue," Enzo said, placing his hand on top of Chris. "But we plan differently for the future. I want us to date until we are not in love and then break up, if we must. I do not want to promise a future I do not know."

"I want us to stay together," Chris said. "And I think the way you *stay* in love is to plan a future together."

"I see," she said and did not say more

Enzo said, "Tell me, *professoressa*, what do you think it means, to *love like the Medici*."

She said, "I'm not familiar with that phrase. Is this another test?"

"No, no. But I'd like to know what you think. If you were to guess."

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe it means to always make sure to father a few illegitimate kids to use as leverage threatening your legitimate heirs. Well, no, that can't be it. Lorenzo never acknowledged any of his bastards."

"But to *love like the Medici*."

She looked from Chris to Enzo and then around the restaurant. "This. This night. This restaurant. Old Cosimo would have loved this, people eating and laughing, celebrating Firenze. He would have liked that there were discussions of art, architecture, and then drinks afterward. Of course, only two respectable drinks and then home to the family. Maybe it means to take advantage of this world and all the beauty for its citizens. Right now. We are loving Firenze just like the Medici."

This led to a conversation of Medici stories and the palazzo Chris visited many days earlier. He told her the story of Enzo's insistence he see it, so they would have something to discuss on their first date.

“Which was not a date,” Enzo said.

When the tuna carpaccio had been devoured, Enzo asked Chris’s permission to speak with the *professoressa* in Italian. He wished to ask questions about art school, about advancement in the arts, and he wished to do so in his native tongue to ensure the right nuances in his probing questions.

Chris agreed immediately, happy to zone out and stare at the crowds, which kept growing as the night grew later. Heaping piles of steaming mussels passed them, colorful pasta creations, and a river of red sauce on various noodles streamed past. The clientele laughed loudly, talked fast, and drank much. He enjoyed watching them while Dr. Pretti and Enzo talked shop.

After a half-hour, Enzo squeezed the back of his neck and suggested perhaps they should not overtire the professor.

“If that’s a crack about my age,” she said sharply, “I can drink you under the table.”

“No doubts,” he said humbly. “I do not dispute this.”

When the bill came, Enzo took it and she thanked them both for the lovely evening and wrinkled her face. “What do you boys do for work?”

“I am a street artist until my internship starts.”

“Unemployed. I just finished college and will look for a job when I get home.”

She muttered under her breath and snatched the bill back from Enzo. She plopped down her gold card. “It figures I would be invited out for drinks by the two poorest schlubs in Italy.”

They protested, tried to insist she was their guest, but she waived away their claims.

As they parted in front of the restaurant, they thanked her over and over for her generosity, apologized for making her pay, and she twisted her lips.

“Knock it off,” she said. “Let me do what little I can to encourage young love on a night built for lovers. Have a good night, gentlemen. And thank you for the evening.”

Then, earnestly, she said to Enzo, “Tell him. He deserves to know.”

Chris did not know what she meant and he waited for Enzo to bring up the topic, but on the walk back to Chris’s apartment, he did not.

Enzo undressed, throwing his clothes around the studio apartment, talking to himself in Italian.

“What’s that, babe?”

Enzo said, “Nothing. I am rehearsing something I must say to my mother tomorrow. She wishes me to fix a sink. What do I know of fixing a sink? I must pretend to try to fix it, and then convince her we must hire a plumber.”

“I’d still like to meet her.”

“No,” Enzo said, “you would not. She would not like you. I told you. The last man to break my heart was an American. She has a bias now.”

Chris had heard this rationale for not meeting his mother. Enzo had said introductions would be made ‘next time he came to Italy.’ In other words, Enzo wanted to wait and see if the relationship lasted. To Chris, this felt like another failure in the relationship test.

Instead of focusing his frustration on Enzo directly, Chris found himself irritated by the professor’s final message. *Tell him*. Tell him what? Had Enzo used the ruse of speaking freely in Italian to discuss their relationship with her? To ask her advice? To confide that he planned to end it?

“I’m checking online messages,” Chris said.

Enzo slid between the sheets. “*Va bene*.”

Chris unlocked the safe where he kept his iPhone. These days, when he did not actively anticipate using an app, he left the phone locked up. He didn’t need the replacement stolen, too. He collected the newly-built gaming station from its hiding spot between the two mattresses, after grumpily asking Enzo to slide over.

Enzo frowned. “What’s wrong, babe?”

Chris said, “Nothing. I’m just tired.”

He turned on the computer and while it booted, he checked his phone. He was shocked to see badges indicating forty-five new text messages and ten voicemails. By the time he reached his Inbox, flooded with panicked cries for help, he knew the drama behind the messages. His heart raced.

After a few moments of silence, Enzo said, “Are you coming? I wish to fornicate with my American lover.”

Chris said, “I can’t.”

Enzo said, “Fornicate was the first English word I learned to indicate *fuck*. Can you believe it? I used to say ‘fornicate you,’ to childhood friends, showing off how much English I already knew. All the good words.”

Chris dashed off an email response, told others to wait for his input. He would join them within minutes. When he finished, he moved to the edge of the bed, trying to put aside his earlier irritations as he did not wish to create that fight right now.

“Enzo,” he said, “I have to work. All night. The Shield of Damatos is being moved. *Today*. It’s 7:00 a.m. in the United States. Orcs are moving the shield at 2:00 p.m. The whole guild is mobilized. People are calling in sick for work. We’ve got to stop the move or acquire the shield in transit, or something. We’re still creating a battle plan. I’ll be up all night working on this.”

Enzo sat up. “This is important to you.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. World of Warcraft doesn’t work like this. Blizzard has never released a version that worked this way. This is something completely new, something nobody anticipated.”

Enzo hesitated. “I wish to discuss our relationship. I want to talk about our future.”

Chris’s insides twisted. “I can’t. Not tonight.”

“My love,” Enzo said. “It cannot wait.”

Chris pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes. Why now? Why *right now*?

“Enzo, I love you. I want to have this discussion. But they need me. They need me *right now*. All night. We’ve been working on the Shield of Damatos for months together.”

Enzo sat up in bed. “I love you too, Ca-riss.”

“Tomorrow,” Chris said. “I want to have this conversation with you, Enzo. I do. But tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Enzo said at last. “You must support your guild.”

Chris felt guilty as Enzo said that, reminding himself that the shield was fiction and his relationship was real. But the people involved in the guild were not fiction. They mailed him computer parts. When he felt his most broken and betrayed, they mounted a campaign. Now, they needed him.

Enzo quietly dressed.

Chris said, "Leave your painting supplies here. Pick them up before work tomorrow."

"No," Enzo said. "You will be sleeping. I will take them home."

Chris said, "Can we see each other tomorrow? After you finish painting?"

"Yes," Enzo said. "Come by around 6:00 p.m."

"I will. I will. Is it safe to leave? Should you stay? You can sleep, but..."

Chris knew he would be talking on his headset all night. He would need to talk loudly, talk over others, bark out commands at times.

"It will be safe for me. Nobody will mug a painter for his paints. And once they see me, they know I will not have money on me."

"But you do have money. All of today's money."

"Yes, I suppose I do. I will leave it here. You will bring it to me, tomorrow?"

"Yes," Chris said. "I promise. I do."

Chris felt desperate and lonely. He felt the relationship was walking out the door with Enzo. "This is insanely important. I wouldn't normally do anything like this. You know I am in love with you."

Enzo said, "I know."

And he was gone.

Chris felt terrible.

He felt even worse when he woke up the next evening at 8:00 p.m. The campaign to stop the shield's move had been successful and lasted until 2:00 p.m. Florence time. Chris collapsed on the bed for a nap before meeting his lover. When he awoke, he discovered he had blown off Enzo by two hours.

Chris's flurry of text messages to Enzo were met with one quiet response. *Meet me tomorrow at the Arno, our spot. I will come after work.*

Day 48

When he logged on, he discovered the guild was still celebrating, discussing strategy that worked and details that did not. They marveled how Blizzard Entertainment kept this kind of plot twist under wrap. Chris received accolades for his rapid healing, preventing at least three cataclysmic wipes. He led a team of feral druids and two shamans in a side attack that cleared a way for their newest paladin to punch his way through and grab the shield. Chris was instrumental.

But he could not celebrate.

Like a grizzled war veteran, he accepted the praise with false cheer. Yes, it was amazing. Yes, it was the most triumphant thing the guild had ever experienced together. It couldn't have happened without Chris, which meant it could not have happened without the guild's campaign to SAVE THE PRIEST. He participated as much as he could with sincere gratitude.

Had he not trashed his burgeoning relationship, Chris felt he might have celebrated with more gusto.

Chris spent the day muttering to himself, arguing, making himself frustrated. He walked Florence, beautiful Florence under dazzling sunlight, unaware. He shuffled along cobblestones streets, but now, many of these were familiar walkways he trod with Enzo and bore ghosts of pleasant memories. After remembering he had not eaten in a full day, he tried buying a hunk of bread and cheese for lunch, but that was their lunch in Siena. At one point he realized his wallet was available for the snatching right in his back pocket. He hadn't even noticed.

He did not intend to end their relationship. The guild simply had to come first. He could not turn his back on that online family for... for love. Chris forced himself to admit that after wanting to feel it, all of it, he turned his back on love. He had been the one complaining about not planning a future together, but when Enzo said, "Let's talk about our relationship," Chris kicked him out. It was as good as ending the relationship himself.

But did he? He asked for one night to himself. Yes, it was the night Enzo apparently wanted to tell him something, but it was one night. *One night!* Could Enzo not see the desperation, did he not understand the importance of his guild? Was their relationship so fragile that they could break up over a single delayed conversation?

Chris decided they would break up over other reasons. The distance. Their relationship perspectives regarding the future. What it meant to be committed. Those were the reasons. The delayed conversation—and blowing off Enzo after promising to meet him at 6:00 the previous day—those were just the fuses to light the bomb.

Chris stewed and muttered to himself all afternoon, angry at Enzo, angry at himself. Wanting to escape this foreign city and fly home to familiar comforts, simultaneously terrified his time in Italy would soon come to a close.

Chris passed the old buildings, the ones he now recognized as friends, and watched tourists eat gelato, squeal over landmarks, and photograph each other incessantly. He passed a dark salmon building next to a yellow squash-colored establishment, both obviously repaired several times and yet still missing stucco exterior in strategic places, as if designed intentionally to look distressed. The glimpses of reddish-orange rooftops with their pottery tiles reinforced the beauty and made him sad.

He would be dumped by the Arno.

Chris showed up early, eager perhaps, for the deed to get over with. In the spirit of reconciliation, he purchased a bottle of wine, expensive enough to communicate “This matters. You matter.” A bouquet of red roses. Though it was a bit melodramatic, Chris was feeling melodramatic.

Enzo who loved him. Enzo who sketched him happy and brave. Enzo who volunteered to assist in his police report, though he already knew there would be no hope for his recovered items. Enzo who kissed him in moonlight and made love with tiger silence, punctuating the intensity with an occasional sentence in Italian, communicating lust and desire, no translation needed.

At 6:15, Chris decided that Enzo had decided to ‘teach him a lesson’ by simply not showing up, payback for the previous day. It was rude. It was childish. He wanted to cry, a feeling that hadn’t overtaken him in weeks. But at 6:20, Enzo came into view, trudging by the Santa Croce, carrying his bucket in one hand and balancing the two painting boards in the other. Even now, Chris did not understand how Italians—anyone really—could pass Enzo on the street and not turn their head to gasp at his handsomeness.

After watching those excruciating final one hundred yards, finally, *finally*, Enzo arrived at the bridge.

Enzo smiled. “Ca-riss. How are you? Well-rested?”

“Yes,” Chris said. “And I must apologize for that. I’m sorry. I am so sorry—”

Enzo waved him away. “It is nothing. I was sure you would not come.”

“What?”

“I knew you would be tired from being up all night. I did not think you would come. It is all right. I brought us some wine. But I do not have cups.”

Chris puzzled over Enzo’s mood, which did not seem overly distraught or angry or even distant. He wasn’t sure how to proceed.

“I have cups. And these.” Chris presented the roses cautiously. “I brought these for you. An apology.”

“They are quite lovely. But we are not rich men, Ca-riss. You did not need to do this.”

Chris’s eyes filled with tears. “I did. I’m sorry about the other night.”

Enzo stepped closer. “No. No tears. Not until we have wine, like civilized people. Even in plastic cups. And I believe we should kiss. We have not seen each other in two days. Kiss?”

Chris assented, though he was more nervous about this one than their first kiss. Was this a good-bye kiss? Did Enzo want one last kiss as a memory? He did not understand how to interpret this casual demeanor, but he decided to follow Enzo’s lead. The kiss was warm and tender, extended the way lovers kiss. The beauty of such a beautiful kiss made Chris melancholy.

They picked up their wares and walked to a section of the bridge less populated than where they currently stood. They walked in silence.

The sun beamed off the surface, the green that would eventually flow into the Ligurian Sea. The Florentine buildings napped on its banks, disfigured with age and their own checkered histories. They would never be quite alone at this spot, not with so many taking photos of the Arno and walking its banks, but they found a spot quieter than others and left their belongings leaning against the stone wall. Chris opened his bottle of wine and Enzo approved of the label before pouring them both a generous cup.

While Enzo spent a moment admiring the sky, the view, the people strolling the banks, Chris prepared himself, prepared what he wanted to say.

Enzo said, “I wish to talk to you about us. I have something to tell you. I have news.”

Chris interrupted. “Wait. Stop. Don’t do this. Don’t break up with me. I have a theory on what it means to love like the Medici.”

Enzo said, “Ca-riss—”

“No, let me speak. The Medici were not quitters. I think it means to not give up, especially on what you love. You keep fighting for it. When Cosimo was captured by his enemies and sentenced to death, what did he do? He befriended his jailor who helped him escape. He fled and then returned, a year later, to establish the Medici dynasty. He didn’t quit. He didn’t give up on what he loved just because it was hard.”

“Okay, Ca-riss.”

Chris paused. “Okay what?”

“Okay, let us not break up.”

Chris blinked. “That’s it?”

Enzo waved his cup lazily across the bridge. “That’s it. I was not planning on breaking up with you today anyway, so, yes, okay. I accept your proposal to keep dating.”

Chris felt enormous relief flood through him.

“But I have conditions.”

Chris felt the enormous relief leave him.

“I interpret the phrase differently,” Enzo said. “I see the Medici with incredible drive. They wanted to rule *Firenze*, and they did. They let nothing stand between them and their dreams.”

Enzo paused and sipped his wine.

“My art internship begins in August. I leave my work in Firenze in late July. I have worked very hard, all through school, to achieve such a prestigious placement. I completed years of training here in *Firenze*. I wrote papers. I have done many pieces of art, of which you have seen only a fraction. This is important to me. I want to succeed. I have dreams, too.”

Chris waited for the rest.

“Should we date? Yes. But Ca-riss, some weeks I will be very busy with art. I will be focused on school. I will not have time to Skype or I will be tired and only talk for ten minutes. I want this internship to succeed.”

“Of course.”

Enzo looked at Chris with his serious, caramel eyes. “I worried. I worried you might not understand putting one’s dreams ahead of the love. You want to sacrifice everything to love, Ca-riss. But I worried you would not understand sometimes a man putting his own needs first. But you did, the other night. You made helping your guild more important than the conversation with Enzo.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No,” Enzo said. “No apology. I am happy you did so. I have been worried you would not understand when my art takes over my life. But you *do* understand. I told you I must talk about our relationship and you said, ‘no, not tonight.’ Like a true Medici, you prioritized a military campaign. You turned to your clan first. This I respect. This gives me hope.”

“Wait, was that a test? Were you... did you really expect us to talk about the relationship that night?”

“It was not an intentional test. I did not plan this. You said you needed to work online all night, so I decided to push against you. See if you would choose your guild. I hoped you would.”

Chris reeled.

Enzo said, “Maybe to love like the Medici means to love fully and still attain the goals you make for yourself. To let that love support the goals instead of letting love erase what you want in life.”

Chris pondered this.

“Did you win the shield?”

“We did.”

“Good. Over dinner, you must tell me about this struggle.”

Chris nodded. *They weren’t going to break up.* But more importantly, Chris realized, is that he finally understood a little more of Enzo’s approach to love and relationships. He might never get the promise of tomorrow from Enzo. But Enzo would always be true with his today.

Chris poured them both more wine. The sun pulled lower into the west.

Enzo said, “Distance does not bother me, like it bothers you. You think because we are continents apart, I will cheat. I will fall out of love. Not Enzo. I know a good fish when I see one.”

Chris frowned.

Enzo frowned. "I think I mean fish catch. Good catch. I knew."

Chris smiled. Something felt right. The knot in his stomach unclenched.

"How?"

"The day your things were stolen. You approached Tank to ask for help."

"Who?"

"The artist in the piazza who was closest to you. Your items were stolen and you asked him if he saw anything, which he did not. This is because he is an oaf and he does not look around. He paints very well. But he is an oaf. And my friend. Later the same day I met you, he told me of your pleadings. That his customer asked you to wait until he finished, and you were rude."

Chris blushed.

"Then, you apologized to her less than a moment later, which surprised Tank. He mentioned this in passing, attaching little value to it. But I knew. I knew a man having the worst day, a very terrible day, is likely to be rude. That is understandable. But to apologize for that rudeness, less than a minute later, this is rare. To show forgiveness when one has been so recently been abused. I knew you were special."

Chris felt hot tears escaping him.

"I will not cheat on you because you leave Italy," Enzo said, stepping closer. "But I do not want to promise away a future I cannot read. I do not want to be cheated on again. I want you to break up with me if you fall out of love. I do not want a promise for forever. I want you to promise to end things with me if you do not love me. And I will treat you with the same respect."

Chris wiped his face and raised his cup. "To breaking up."

Enzo said, "No. To treating each other with respect."

Chris nodded and they both drank.

Enzo moved to stand at Chris's side and they put their arms around each other, watching life along the Arno.

"Oh," Enzo said. "I am ashamed to bring this up. News I told the art history *professoressa* but did not tell you."

Chris thought of the Dr. Pretti's words, *tell him*. He was surprised he did not feel dread.

“I have never told you where I am attending school for my internship. I deliberately kept this from you. I wanted to see how our relationship developed.”

“Okay.”

“I wished to speak to *la professoressa* because she is from a college in Illinois, where I will go to school.”

“Illinois?”

“Yes. I will attend the Chicago Art Institute’s international internship program.”

Chris’s heart flew out of his mouth. “Chicago is only a few hours away from Iowa. Like, four hours.”

Enzo smiled. “I did not know about us, what would happen with us. I wanted to feel more sure of our love before I told you. I did not want you planning our future.”

“You’ll be close,” Chris said with excitement. “*Close!*”

“Yes,” Enzo said. “For the next two years. And I will be very busy. And you will be busy. I meant what I said. I do not want promise of future. I wish for us to be in love, but we must proceed with our life goals.”

Chris felt giddy.

The day his computer and gadgets were stolen, he felt kicked in the stomach, the air forced out of him. In this moment, knowing Enzo would be physically closer than he dreamed possible, he felt as though the air had been returned and forced into him, making him drunk on air, on love, on Florence, on the smooth shiraz they shared in plastic cups.

“After I said do not plan our future, I must be red-faced and say, do not make plans for tomorrow night,” Enzo said, gazing across the water. “I wish you to meet my mother. She will make us dinner. And if you are willing, I ask you to teach us to Skype. She is angry I am leaving and she insists I use the computer after I go.”

“You think she is ready to like me?”

“No, she will not. She dislikes Americans now both because of my last boyfriend and also because I am moving there. But she will pretend to like you.”

Feeling choked up, Chris felt he couldn't say many words. "It's a date."

Enzo nudged him with his hip. "Are you sure? Are you sure you won't change your mind, midway through?"

The sun dropped lower on the horizon, dipping behind ramshackle structures, homes or businesses that might last another thousand years near the Ponte Vecchio. Or maybe not. Time would tell.

Day 61

Once buckled into his window seat, Chris called Enzo. Chris tried to keep his emotions in check, not wanting to make a scene before the plane mates with whom he would spend the next fourteen hours.

“You did not look at it yet,” Enzo said.

“I did not.”

“I know. I would be able to tell in your voice if you had. Thank you. You kept your word.”

“May I unfold it and look at it now?”

“Wait until we are off the phone.”

While the last of his plane mates boarded and found their spots, Chris lowered his voice and spoke. “I’m in love with you.”

“Yes. This I know. I am in love with you, too.”

They did not speak for a moment, listening to each other’s silence, until the overhead announcement asked patrons to put away their cell phones, or at least put them in airplane mode.

They made their quiet good-byes.

Chris unfolded the sketch.

In colored pencils and with great care, the sketch showed them kissing, the rooftops of Florence and a fat moon in the background. Chris’s jawline and face were shaded with greater detail than Enzo’s, reflecting the artist’s desire to capture the feeling, the look, the details of his beloved. At the bottom, where the artist’s signature ought to be were the words, “*Con tutto il mio amore.*”

Chris knew enough Italian to recognize the words. *With all my love.* He stared at the sketch, tracing its soft outlines for most of the flight back home.

Epilogue

Many years later, their youngest daughter found them sitting on the back porch during a quiet hour before dinner, sipping prosecco and watching rock climbers scale the ocean cliffs in the bay. She interrupted their conversation to ask what it meant, *love like the Medici*. They confessed they did not know. Or rather, they did not always agree on the answer, but they liked to discuss it. The phrase gave them a reason to discuss love.

Chris said, “Your father seduced me with that line.”

Enzo said, “It was our first date.”

“Technically, our second date.”

Enzo said, “Your daddy has a terrible memory. Our first date was *not* a date. He explained it to me.”

Then they kissed. And they kept kissing.

She said, “Ewwww,” and fled for the house’s interior.

Her name was Lorenza.

She was ten.

The End

Author Bio

EDMOND MANNING has always been fascinated by fiction: how ordinary words could be sculpted into heartfelt emotions, how heartfelt emotions could leave an imprint inside you stronger than the real world. He is the author of [King Perry](#), [King Mai](#), [The Butterfly King](#), [Filthy Acquisitions](#), and contributor to the bear anthology, [A Taste of Honey](#).

In addition to fiction, Edmond enjoys writing nonfiction. You can pick up a copy of his Indie-publishing-finalist-award winning book, [I Probably Shouldn't Have Done That](#).

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