



THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

...In the church, Anthony took her arm and pushed her against a stone column, hiding them from the entrance and partially obscuring them in ancient shadows.

“What...?”

He blocked her protest with his mouth, tasting chocolate, cherries, and heat. He pinned her against the stone with his body, devouring her mouth, attacking her ruthlessly with his tongue and teeth. Christine didn't hesitate to respond. She never did.

But she didn't want to kiss him. She wanted to fight him. She wanted to hurt him. She wanted to take her shot, and she didn't want to pull any punches. Her lips were rough, harsh, and unyielding. Anthony grabbed her shoulders, pulled her forward, and then pushed her into the column, hard enough to get her attention. Christine responded by digging her nails into the back of his neck, but she softened beneath him, allowing him to kiss her with a bit of tenderness, even if he didn't mean it. He plundered her mouth until his chest tightened and he needed to step away from the way she smelled, and felt, and tasted.

Christine rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand, wiping away the smeared lipstick. He gently touched his bottom lip with the tip of his tongue—it felt sore, even bruised.

“Going to fuck me on the altar?” she spat out. “What would your dear old mama say?”

Anthony's fists curled at his side. He knew he would never do it, but he thought he *could* fuck her on the altar. Could do it easily, right that second...

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

BY

PEPPER ESPINOZA

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

Amber Quill Press, LLC
<http://www.amberquill.com>

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be transmitted or reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief excerpts used for the purposes of review.

Copyright © 2006 by Pepper Espinoza
ISBN 1-59279-564-1

Cover Art © 2006 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*I'd like to dedicate this book to my husband,
as well as my friends Vivien and Phillipa,
for their unwavering support.*

CHAPTER 1

He found her in Florence, but for once, he wasn't looking for her. She was strolling southeast through the *Piazza Della Repubblica*, and he was standing in the center of the square, fending off two beggars— young women holding pathetic-looking children. He sensed her before he saw her, her name slipping from his lips as he turned around.

“Christine.”

“Anthony,” she said, touching his shoulder.

The peasants, understanding they'd lost his attention, faded away to reappear in front of another unsuspecting, wealthy tourist. Anthony could not look away from her. “You dyed your hair,” he blurted, shocked by the replacement of her red-gold curls with straight, black tresses.

She laughed, touching her head self-consciously. “They told me in Rome this is the style now...”

Rome. Anthony had heard from The Circle that she was in Italy,

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

living like a vagabond. If she was, she was the most stylish vagabond he had ever seen. Finely styled hair, expensive manicure, Gucci glasses, bag, and shoes, a mink coat... Rome had been kind to her.

"It's very nice," Anthony said, waiting for his brain to fully process her presence. He still felt a little jet-lagged, and she could easily be a figment of his imagination, a delusion fueled by alcohol, exhaustion, and loneliness.

"I'm glad you like it." She still smiled pleasantly. "What are you doing here? Italy seems a bit too exotic for you."

"Yes, well...I'm here on business."

"Oh? For how long?"

"A week." Anthony braced himself for the current that would carry him away from his senses. Christine would either smile and walk away, leaving him disappointed but in his right mind, or she would take his arm, rest her cheek on his shoulder, and he would still be swept away. Then left spent, exhausted, and broken when she twirled out of his life again.

"Do you live here now?" Anthony asked, hoping to keep the conversation rolling—to put off the final conclusion.

"In Florence? Oh no, I have been staying in Rome but..." She flicked her hand.

But she was moving on. He understood.

When Anthony thought about it—allowed himself to think about her—he traced the source of their joint problem to the fact that neither could walk away. Run away, fly away, hide away, yes. But they never walked away from each other. Now would be a perfect time—polite small talk over, they could nod cordially, turn opposite directions, and part ways without hesitation.

But he didn't move.

She pointed across the square. "I am getting gelato. Do you want to join me?"

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Did he *want* to join her? He never wanted to join her. Did he have a choice? He never had a choice. “I was just about to get myself a cone,” he lied.

At the corner of the square, a guitar player took requests for coins, and the music drifted through the piazza, over their heads, toward the sun. A merry-go-round sparkled with children’s laughter; an old woman with a huge bouquet of balloons eyed the two of them as they passed. Christine moved as gracefully as a song, her shoulders back, her chin lifted to the sky. It wasn’t a grace that anybody could develop. She’d been born with it. The sharp tips of her heels snapped against the cobblestones.

The Gelateria was empty—maybe Italians didn’t eat ice cream at eleven-thirty in the morning. Anthony didn’t know.

“*Buon giorno*,” the old man behind the counter greeted.

“*Buon giorno*,” she returned, speaking in rapid Italian that Anthony couldn’t follow. He had to rely on the Italians’ ability to speak English to survive this little trip.

“You still like mint?” She handed him a cone topped with green gelato. He accepted it, watching as she paid. He could already feel the sting of her nails on his back, and her tiny, sharp teeth against his neck.

He focused on the gelato, while she looked at him with mischievous brown eyes that matched the color of her cone.

“Business, huh? Nicolas is letting you handle his Italian accounts now?” Her tone implied she couldn’t believe it. He wondered how long he could tolerate this dance.

“I handle most of the accounts now,” he said mildly.

“Well. Nicolas is getting old,” she allowed.

He decided to ignore the implication, focusing instead on the cherry red color of her lips; they were more like chocolate the last time he saw her. And they were wrapped around his cock.

“And who are you doing now?” he asked cordially.

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Christine smiled. “You don’t know him.” She tossed her cone away indifferently. “I’m going to San Lorenzo.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Confession?”

“I’m a tourist this week.” She wrapped long fingers around his wrist. “Have you seen the sights?”

Anthony had a job to do, an account to settle, and not even half the time he needed to do it right. He didn’t care about the churches, the museums, the art... Nicolas was old but not stupid, after all. Yet he didn’t raise a single protest as she dragged him out of the shop to stumble along the uneven cobblestones and through the thin winter crowds. She glided over the crooked rocks as though they were as smooth as glass.

Anthony’s heart sank with the certainty that he would not be able to find his hotel again as she led him through the narrow, unfamiliar, maze-like streets. He studied her as they walked. She had gained a little weight, filling out nicely. His hands itched to grab her ass, curl his fingers into the soft flesh, while she wrapped her long legs around him.

She held out her hand when they reached the steps of a church. “I need money for admission,” she told him when he didn’t respond to her silent gesture.

Frowning, he pulled a handful of coins out of his pocket. He wasn’t surprised the Italians charged to get into churches—they could squeeze blood from a block of marble. Christine gave the attendant their money, and they stepped inside the great church. It was surprisingly large, cool, and empty. He followed her without interest, instead lost in his own thoughts.

He had met Christine in a church, one much smaller with much worse art. Her legs had been long, smooth, and bare beneath a short, lacy hem. She had stared back when she caught him staring at her.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed, her eyes lifted heavenward, devouring the painting and architecture.

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Anthony shook his head. What was he doing in a church in Florence with Christine? Hadn't he just been sitting on a plane in Germany? Wasn't he, moments ago, on a short lunch break from a long meeting that was a total mess and bordering on complete failure? A meeting, incidentally, he was due back to in less than fifteen minutes.

Suddenly, Anthony took her arm and pushed her against a stone column, hiding them from the entrance and partially obscuring them in ancient shadows.

"What...?"

He blocked her protest with his mouth, tasting chocolate, cherries, and heat. He pinned her against the stone with his body, devouring her mouth, attacking her ruthlessly with his tongue and teeth. Christine didn't hesitate to respond. She never did.

But she didn't want to kiss him. She wanted to fight him. She wanted to hurt him. She wanted to take her shot, and she didn't want to pull any punches. Her lips were rough, harsh, and unyielding. Anthony grabbed her shoulders, pulled her forward, and then pushed her into the column, hard enough to get her attention. Christine responded by digging her nails into the back of his neck, but she softened beneath him, allowing him to kiss her with a bit of tenderness, even if he didn't mean it. He plundered her mouth until his chest tightened and he needed to step away from the way she smelled, and felt, and tasted.

Christine rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand, wiping away the smeared lipstick. He gently touched his bottom lip with the tip of his tongue—it felt sore, even bruised.

"Going to fuck me on the altar?" she spat out. "What would your dear old mama say?"

Anthony's fists curled at his side. He knew he would never do it, but he thought he *could* fuck her on the altar. Could do it easily, right that second. She didn't give him the chance. Christine turned on her heel and walked calmly out of the church.

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

He felt himself being torn in two directions as he watched her go. He wanted her. He always wanted her. Every time fate crossed their paths, he needed to have her, felt like he would die if he didn't. And if he followed her, what would he be walking away from?

Everything. She wasn't worth that.

Christine paused at the door, looking back at him. She was surrounded by golden light—the first time he'd even seen the sun since his arrival. Her body glowed, and when was the last time he really saw her?

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, resisting the urge to make the sign of a cross. *Jesus Christ, would it ever end?* His feet took him to her, carried him across the shining marble floor.

"My hotel is only..." she started.

"No." He pulled her around the corner of the church.

"We can't here," she protested weakly.

The alley was empty, yet that could change any second, and probably would. But if he had been listening to reason, he wouldn't have followed her out of the church, or followed her to the church. Or acknowledged her at all...

Christine ducked away before he could wrap his arms around her, stepping out of reach. "My hotel is around the corner."

Anthony sighed. "Lead the way."

A large open-air market lay in the path between San Lorenzo and her hotel. Booths flashing brightly colored scarves, hand-made leather coats, leather bound books, T-shirts, and garish souvenirs for tourists lined the streets. People were everywhere, blocking their path, loitering in the middle of the road, gawking, pointing, bartering. He could lose her in the crowd, and she wouldn't even notice until she reached the hotel. Yet another chance to turn around and walk back to his real life. Yet another opportunity he passed with a mingled sense of frustration and anticipation.

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

The hotel *wasn't* far, tucked down a small alley. With a burst of relief, he recognized where they were. Not far from the train station. If he walked back to the station, from there, he could find his way back. He liked to pretend he had an escape route from her. It made the whole situation seem less fucked up.

When they climbed the stairs to the first floor lobby, they were greeted by the curious eyes of what seemed like two dozen young men and women. They stared at him while he waited for Christine to get her key from the front desk, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"He's pretty cute," one commented in a clear American accent without lowering her voice.

The girl beside her shrugged. "Yeah, he's not too bad. You just like his blue eyes."

"They're nice."

"Besides, he's with her. And don't you have a boyfriend?"

"That doesn't mean I'm blind," she protested. "By the way, Alessandro wants to take me out to drinks tonight."

"Don't go."

"Why not?"

"He thinks you're a whore."

Anthony looked away from them. A school group, perhaps, on a short tour of Europe. They made him uncomfortable in some way he couldn't quite define. Perhaps it was their youth. He didn't remember being that young, and Christine had lines around her eyes and lips. They thought he was cute, but he thought if he tried to pick up one or two of them, they would laugh and tease him and flaunt all the sexual power infused in their tight bodies.

Christine held up the key triumphantly and took his hand. He could feel their curious eyes on him as they climbed the stairs, could hear the hushed giggles, the flutter of magazine pages turning. He checked his watch, imagining eight men in suits and ties sitting around a black

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

mahogany conference table, impatiently waiting for him. He'd give them thirty minutes before they called his hotel, and another fifteen after that before they called Nicolas.

Christine stopped outside room 207 and unlocked the door. She looked up at him, her eyes wide and unusually naked—unusually vulnerable. Those eyes stung his heart. He'd been driven through the streets of Florence by lust and the memories of it. But now he saw the girl he'd fallen in love with twenty years ago on a bright Sunday morning, and she was all he could see.

Anthony took her hand, gently bringing it up to his mouth. He kissed the knuckle of each finger, barely touching his lips against her skin. Still holding her hand, he opened the door. He inhaled deeply as she brushed against him, intoxicated by the sweetly familiar scent of her hair.

They stood in the room silently, within touching distance, but not making any contact. A purple past swirled between them, almost thick enough to touch, almost thick enough to keep them from touching.

"I missed you," she finally whispered.

The small concession was enough to make Anthony move. He folded his arms around her, holding her tightly against him, and kissed her deeply. It was like kissing a completely different woman. She didn't resist him at all, didn't fight him. She melted beneath him, wrapping her arms around him, responding to his mouth with passionate sincerity.

"Say you missed me, too," she said against her mouth.

"I missed you," he breathed, pulling the coat from her shoulders. They let it fall to the floor without a second glance. His hands worked frantically, desperate to get beneath her clothes and touch her soft skin. He pulled her sweater over her head and unsnapped her bra. "I missed you, I missed you."

They tumbled backward to the bed, Anthony still undressing her as

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

they moved. Christine stretched out in front of him, as sleek and smooth as a cat in the filtered sunlight. He pulled her lacy thong down her thighs, following the path of his fingers with his lips.

"I missed you," he murmured against her thighs like a prayer. "I missed you." He licked the sensitive skin of her inner-thigh, tasting the salt-sweet spice of her skin. "I missed you." What he *meant* was *I love you*, and they were the last words he could speak now.

He pulled himself back up her body, seeking her lips again. She stretched beneath him, lifted her hips, rocked against him. He moaned as he felt her moist warmth through the material of his pants, and his cock throbbed with long-held desire. He promised himself as he unzipped his pants that he would take the time he needed to reacquaint himself with her body, that he would know every inch of her with his lips and fingertips.

But he didn't have time for that luxury. Not until later.

Anthony's cock was hard, slick, and ready for her. Holding himself up with one hand, he used his other to pull his wallet out of his pants and pulled the condom out with his teeth. He kept it there for her, always expecting her around every corner. He tore the wrapper open and rolled the rubber on, his hand shaking slightly.

Their sighs echoed each other as he pushed into her. She wrapped her legs around him, holding him tight. She pulsed and throbbed around him, and he could feel everything, and nothing ever felt like this. He tried to function like a normal adult without her, like he wasn't tied to Christine. But no woman, no drug, no drink, nothing, ever felt like her tight body.

She felt like where he belonged.

"God, Anthony...God..." She moaned, arching her back. He buried his face against her neck, biting and sucking her skin until she gasped, breathless. He slid his lips down her throat, wrapping them around one of her nipples, pulling it between his teeth.

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Christine scraped her nails down his back, leaving ten lines of sharp pain that didn't hurt at all. Her dark hair framed her face, a direct contrast to the white pillow. She kept her eyes wide open, watching him boldly. He felt like he could drown in their flashing depths as he thrust into her faster and faster, gaining speed and momentum, losing control, the lines of their bodies blending until they were seared together.

He reached between their bodies with one hand, sliding his fingers down her stomach. He brushed one finger against her throbbing clit, gently flicking it, barely touching it. She gasped, her body tensed, and her eyes were wide and demanding. She didn't have to speak for him to know everything she needed. Her fingers flexed, digging deeper into his flesh. He knew there would be small rivulets of blood flowing down his ribs soon.

But he wouldn't give into her so easily. Not without receiving something in return.

"Tell me," he rasped. *Tell me what I want to hear.*

Christine shook her head, black wisps of hair falling into her face.

Anthony pulled out and slammed into her, as hard as he could. "*Tell me. It's all I need...you know it...you know it...give me what I need...*

"You're...you're the only one...the only one I want..." she gasped, struggling for air, struggling to make her mouth form the words. She wouldn't say it, he knew, but she would get as close as a person could. "Think about you...think...all the time...You know I want you...Anthony...only you..."

It wasn't exactly what he wanted, but it would do. He caressed the very tip of her clit and she jolted, squeezing around him so tight he didn't know if he would be able to move. Blood raced up her skin, suffused her face, made her cheeks glow bright red. Her eyes were glassy and desperate and hungry. He didn't want to end it, but he knew he wouldn't be able to last much longer.

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Anthony applied more pressure, rotating his wrist slowly, deliberately. She jerked forward with every rotation, creating a new rhythm with her hips. Her walls contracted, and he could feel the top of his cock brush against that sensitive, fleshy spot inside her.

Her breath caught in her throat as he lost his. Neither stopped moving, electricity making their flesh jump and quiver and contract, then every inch of his body erupted. She arched her back, moving completely off the bed. He wrapped his arms around her, smashed her chest against his, sat up, and pushed into her one final time.

Anthony's senses were super-alert in that moment. He was aware of every beat of her heart, every moan from her lips, her hair covering his arm, her soft skin, the laughter from the street below, somebody walking by their locked door, a phone ringing in the next room. He released his breath in a long, ragged sigh, resting his head against her shoulder. She buried her head in the crook of his neck, her arms and legs around him in a vice grip.

Eventually, when their breathing evened, he lowered her back to the bed, disentangling himself from her. She stretched and looked at him with sated, heavy-lidded eyes. Anthony sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing his eyes. It felt like his hands and feet weren't attached to his body.

"You can lie down," she said when he didn't move for long minutes.

"It's always the *now what* that kills me."

"You make it so hard."

He looked at her from the corner of his eye without moving his hands away. "It's not me, Christine. I can't think of anything easier in the world."

She lifted his shirt and gently rubbed his back. It stung where she had scratched him, but her fingers felt cool, even soothing against the wounds. "So you're leaving then?"

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Anthony knew she was disappointed, but he had to give her credit for attempting to mask her feelings behind a lighthearted tone. Like she couldn't care less if he zipped up his pants and left the room.

He lay down, stretching out on the bed with his back to her. She leaned against his back, putting her head on his shoulder, draping an arm and leg over his body. It was her favorite position.

"What have you been up to, Tony?" she asked around a yawn.

"I already told you. Working. I've been working."

"Every day?"

"Yeah."

"All day?" She curled her fingers around his.

"There's nobody, Christine."

"That's not what I was asking."

"Yes, it was."

"Why haven't I heard from you?"

He could have asked her the same thing, but he didn't say anything. She knew why, and if she didn't...well, she knew why.

"It's good to see you, Anthony." Her words were laced with sleep. He almost heard her eyes falling shut. "Really good."

His heart twisted a little, his stomach felt heavy, his eyes were gritty. He remained as still as a statue until he felt her fall asleep. He wanted to turn around, gather her up in his arms, rest his lips against her hair, watch her sleep, and pretend for a while that it was commonplace.

She turned away from him in her sleep, curling around herself. Anthony took the opportunity to stand up and sneak away from the bed. She didn't stir. On impulse, he opened the doors of the large armoire—perhaps he was simply curious about how many mink coats she actually owned—and didn't know how to respond to the utter emptiness that greeted him.

Anthony prowled around the room, looking for clues. It wasn't

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

hard. The room was very small and very empty. He hadn't noticed it when they first entered, but it didn't look like anybody was staying there. The only clothes were the ones he had torn off her body, and the only bag was her purse sitting on the nightstand. The bathroom was bare as well, but he knew her better than that. She usually had half a dozen bags holding all the mysteries of her femininity—make-up, lotion, hairbrushes, gel, and about a million other things that confused him.

Without feeling too much guilt, he rifled through the contents of her purse. She had a tube of lipstick, mascara, a pack of gum, and her wallet. Her wallet had her passport and a credit card, but she didn't have any cash on her. He noticed the card was about two weeks from expiring.

Troubled, he stood over the bed, watching her sleep. What was going on here?

CHAPTER 2

Anthony didn't take his eyes off Christine as she slept through the afternoon. She slept as though she hadn't been sleeping for a very long time. Anthony suspected that was the case. She looked so young, her cheek felt so smooth when he caressed it, that he almost felt like he was stuck in a time warp...thrust twenty years into the past.

Their first time was still as real and fresh in his mind as their most recent. They had both been hormone-soaked kids, grabbing each other with desperate hands, their bodies slick with desire, their mouths hungry. They had been in a park, after dark, and the wet grass had been soft under his back as she rode him, her breasts bouncing in his face.

Anthony couldn't remember if she had been seeing anybody at the time, but he'd been engaged to a nice secretary named Tina—a fact he always seemed to forget as soon as Christine touched him. He remembered they went to the movies that night and made out in the back row. He had slid his hands down her pants, into her panties,

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

thrilled at the electrified, silky flesh...thrilled at the fact that he could touch her at all...thrilled at the way she moaned in his ear. He knew without a doubt that he needed to fuck her...that he *would* fuck her.

They couldn't go to her place because she still lived with her parents. They couldn't go to his place because he knew Tina would be there. They were frantic in the car, and it was his good luck that the roads were nearly empty. Finally, they found a park with a broken fence and they snuck in, the moonlight barely strong enough to light their path. Behind some trees, blocked from sight, they fell on each other.

Anthony remembered specifically that she wanted to be on top. He had positioned himself between her legs, the tip of his cock brushing against her wet lips, a mere second from thrusting into her, when she shook her head. "No, not like this."

He shook his head, confused. "What do you mean?"

Christine, none too gently, shoved him onto his back. Her eyes glittered in the moonlight, and her smile made his balls tighten. What had that smile been? Charming? Mischievous? Playful? Deceptive? Excited? Predatory? He certainly felt like her prey when she straddled him and impaled herself on his cock without warning, without a word.

Christine had looked primal, with her head thrown back, and moans turning to growls to shouts. Did he love her before that? He didn't know, but he knew he worshipped her like the pagan goddess she was from that moment forward.

Now her eyes fluttered open and she said his name softly, pulling him from his memories. "You're still here, then."

He nodded. Why did she seem so surprised? He never left her when she was sleeping. "Get dressed. Something nice. I'm taking you out tonight."

"Oh, Anthony, you don't have to do that."

"I want to."

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

She shook her head. "I'm not hungry...really. I'd rather stay in with you."

Anthony took her hand and pulled her into a sitting position. "Nonsense. When was the last time I treated you to oysters and champagne?"

"Anthony, I..."

He released her hand and turned to the closet, pulling the doors open without warning. "Let's pick something out together."

Christine looked away, holding the sheet modestly against her chest, using it as a shield.

"Where are your clothes, Christine?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Anthony," she said softly.

"I do. You have no clothes, no bags...and no money. Am I right?"

"Maybe you should go," she snapped.

"Am I right, Christine?"

She seemed to shrink in front of him, pulling her knees against her chest and curling against herself. Moving into a defensive position, like a turtle. She looked at him with resentful eyes. He knew he had her cornered, but he didn't take any pleasure from that.

"Mind your own business," she muttered.

"What's going on here, Christine?"

Christine sighed, closing her eyes. She almost looked like she was falling asleep again. Silence spun around them like a sticky web, and he decided to wait her out. He didn't have to wait long. She raised her head, but she didn't open her eyes.

"I'm out of money, okay?" She opened her eyes wide now. "I'm broke. Are you happy now?"

"Completely broke?" he asked, shocked. How could Christine be broke? She was wealthy in her own right, not too mention her great family wealth and all the men lined up to shower her with gifts.

"It's all gone," she said miserably.

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Anthony sat down heavily, as shocked as if she had lost all *his* money. "How?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think about it."

"You want to pretend it never happened? Is that why you're in Florence?"

She snorted. "No. I'm in Florence because..." Her breath caught. "Because..."

Now he could hear the tears in her throat. He wouldn't know what to do if she cried, mostly because he'd never seen her cry.

"Because...?" he prompted.

"Because I can't afford a ticket home," she said softly. And then, so quietly he could barely hear her, "And I don't have a home to go back to."

"Oh...Christine...darling..." He reached for her, but she shook her head, trying to scoot out of reach.

"Anthony...I..." She took a deep breath. "I don't know what to do." Her voice cracked on the last word, and the tears erupted. "I don't know what to do."

Anthony pulled her toward him, wrapping his arms around her. She didn't try to resist him, only obediently tucked herself against his body. He stroked her hair as her tears soaked his shirt.

"Oh, honey, don't cry," he said, pressing his lips against her forehead. "Don't cry."

Christine sniffed loudly and her sobs quieted, but tears still flowed freely from her eyes. "Anthony..."

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you," he said softly. "You know that." He meant to reassure her, but his words seemed to frighten her. She pulled out of his arms and jumped from the bed, taking several steps away.

"No."

"Christine, what's wrong?"

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

“I’m not going to let you... I’m not going to accept your charity.”

Anthony stood up as well. “It’s not charity. What are you going to do? Wander the streets of Florence? Take up with the beggars?”

“I’ll think of something, but I don’t want you to think I owe you something.”

“Christine...”

“I know you, Anthony. I know you, and I know what you’ll do. You’ll trap me because you did me a favor.” She backed up into the door, putting the entire room between them.

“I’m not going to *trap* you.”

“And I didn’t come looking for you, either. I don’t need *you* to save me. I can figure something out,” Christine said, her voice filled with desperation. Tears still sparkled and fell from her cheeks.

Anthony approached her slowly. “I know. I know.” He held up his hands and smiled slightly. “Don’t think I ever forget.”

She watched him warily as he approached. He half expected her to open the door and bolt, with or without clothes. When he reached her, he put his hands against the door on either side of her, effectively trapping her there. She looked up at him with hard, defiant eyes, and Anthony realized he had never seen her so scared. Her fear almost frightened him, but mostly it broke his heart.

He dipped his head and tenderly kissed one tear from her cheek, then another, and another. He followed the tears down her cheek to her lips, and then her chin, and then her neck. Each kiss was targeted, soft, brief. She breathed hard, her chest rising and falling rapidly. He followed a trail from her neck to her nipple, curled his tongue around it, and sucked on it until she whimpered.

Anthony stepped back and tore off his clothes. He didn’t give her room to run past him. Once naked, he pressed his body against hers and kissed her again. She resisted, closing her mouth to his and trying to turn her head away. He gripped the back of her head, digging his

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

fingers into her scalp, making it impossible for her to move.

“Open your mouth, Christine.”

She compressed her lips into a thin line. Anthony studied her, his eyes tracing every line around her mouth, the exact shade of her skin, the first wrinkles beneath her chin. Why was she acting so childish? Did she *need* him to take charge and remove the burden from her shoulders by force? Because she would never accept his *charity*, never accept anything as a gift.

With his other hand, he roughly tugged on her hair. Christine’s mouth parted in surprised pain, her eyes widening. Anthony didn’t miss his chance. He kissed her hard, his tongue plunging into her mouth, his lips forcing hers to remain parted. She moaned, pressing both hands against his chest, but she didn’t have the strength to push him away. He took a step closer, pinning her completely.

His hands fondled and stroked her body as he deepened the kiss, chipping away slowly at her resistance. He had never mounted a full-scale assault on the wall she had erected between them, but he did so now, using every weapon in his arsenal. His mouth was strong, forcing a favorable response from her, creating sparks of desire. His hands were dominant, confident, as they caressed her. He knew every sensitive spot, every hungry inch of her, and he wasn’t shy to use that knowledge.

Anthony started at the junction of her neck and shoulder. He only needed to apply a little bit of pressure to the skin to make her jump. He massaged it with his thumb and forefinger and she swayed, leaning against him to keep from falling. He had discovered that spot one evening when she asked him to massage the knots out of her back. He remembered how she begged him not to stop.

“Oh God,” she whispered now, grasping his arm and attempting to hold him in place.

Anthony stopped, but only to move onto the next secret spot. He

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

took her right hand and rubbed her palm. She wasn't as sensitive there as her shoulder, but it was still enough to make her whimper. He looked up at her from beneath his eyelashes, watching her stare at him.

"Oh," she sighed when he pressed his lips against her palm and gently nipped the skin with his teeth.

Anthony bypassed her nipples, aiming instead for the taut skin just above her belly button. She jumped at the first contact. His fingers curled against the skin and pressed into her flesh. He sank to his knees and scraped his teeth across her stomach. She whimpered and buried her fingers in his hair, holding his head against her. He licked the marks his teeth had left on her pale skin, delicately running the tip of his tongue over the light pink lines. Once he soothed the abrasions, he ran his teeth across her stomach, and licked the heated skin again. He alternated hard and soft, sharp and smooth in this way until her knees dipped and she put her hands flat against his back to brace herself.

Anthony peppered kisses on her thigh, his cheek brushing against the soft, wet curls between her legs. He could tell she was ready for him, her body unable to resist his ministrations, but he wasn't quite finished yet. He gently lifted her foot, smoothing his other hand down her muscled, shapely calf. His thumb found the point on the back of her foot, the responsive spot above her heel.

Christine gasped. "You're going to make me fall."

"I won't let you," he murmured. He placed her foot on the ground and picked up the other one. As he rubbed it, he slid his lips down her foot, kissing each toe in turn. When he finished, he gripped her hips and spun her around, then worked his way back up her body with his mouth, being sure to pay extra attention to the soft skin behind her knee, nibbling on it delicately.

When Anthony reached the gentle curve of her ass, he ran his tongue along it and cupped both cheeks, kneading the perfectly supple flesh. Without releasing her, he slowly rose to his feet and pressed his

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

chest against her back. He thrust his hips against hers, his hard cock poised to enter her. She thrust back against him, but he didn't know if that was a voluntary or automatic reaction.

He brushed her long hair away, exposing her neck to his mouth. Christine arched her back, tilting her head, her svelte body softening and responding to him completely. He guided his cock between her legs, slowly sliding into her, filling her completely. He held himself there without moving.

Anthony slid one hand across her hip and around to the front of her body, where he cupped her damp pussy and slid two fingers between her lips, finding her clit and pressing it softly. He wrapped his other arm around her chest, where he fondled one of her breasts and rolled her nipple between his fingers.

She jerked against him, trying to force him to move inside of her, but he remained still. Her muscles flexed and relaxed around him, her body twitching with desire and anticipation. "Anthony, what..."

He pulled her tightly against his body, burying himself deeper in her flesh. He rubbed her clit until he felt her tense around his cock. Then he stopped until she relaxed. As soon as she did, he rubbed her again, winding her up tighter, and then stopped, allowing the frustration to build.

Anthony knew that if she could move, she would be thrusting against him furiously, building the friction and the tension and the pleasurable pain until they both ignited. He wouldn't allow it, though. Neither would get a reprieve. Every time she tensed around him, jolts of electricity bolted from his balls to his eyes, making him lightheaded and wonderfully uncomfortable. He wanted to fuck her so hard she wouldn't be able to walk, just drift to the floor and curl up there and wait to recover.

Instead, he used his fingers to make her crazy and desperate and ravenous. He would use his clever fingers in such a cruel way until she

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

begged him with words as well as her body. Every time he massaged her, tension suffused her body and pushed her closer to the edge that he wouldn't let her quite reach.

Christine ended the torture just as he thought he would snap. "Anthony...*please*..."

"Let me help you," he said in her ear, his breath making her hair flutter.

"I don't want..."

He lifted his finger away, ending the pressure and waited for a few seconds before touching her again. She jumped and moaned and tried to jerk her hips, but he didn't give in to her desires.

"Let me help you," he repeated.

"I..."

"Don't run away from me, Christine," he warned.

"Why do you have to be like this?" she cried, frustrated.

"I don't have to be like anything. I can give you everything you need, Christine, if you would stop fighting me."

"It's not that easy," she whispered.

"It can be."

"Yes...yes...fine..." she finally conceded. Anthony rewarded her immediately, pulling back and slamming into her. She cried out with relief, pushing against him. She braced herself against the door with both hands before he unleashed himself, holding nothing back as he moved faster and harder.

Christine came quickly, pulsating around him like a thunderstorm, but he held himself back, biting his tongue so hard it nearly bled. He wanted this to last as long as possible, wanted to make her come as many times as he could. His fingers worked furiously between her legs, caressing her clit as fast as he could. It took a little time to build up to the second orgasm, but once he got her to that point, it set off a chain reaction. He couldn't keep track of when one orgasm ended and the

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

next began.

She shouted, pounding her fist against the door, completely unconcerned about who might hear her. He didn't care either. All he cared about was the pleasure rolling, ricocheting, echoing, reverberating, and pounding in her body. He could feel it as if all the boundaries between their bodies had been eradicated, leaving nothing but sweet mellow light diffusing in their flesh.

Despite his best efforts, he couldn't keep up the pace endlessly. The final orgasm that tore through her body ripped through his as well and turned his muscles to liquid, his legs to rubber. He swayed forward, unable to support his own weight, and leaned against the door. She couldn't even do that. She collapsed to the floor, gasping for breath.

Anthony could feel a smile spread across his face, a genuine smile. Something warm in his chest spread through his body, making him tingle, and he almost wanted to laugh. The sensation was so alien that it took him a few moments to catch on. He was happy. Actually, honest-to-god, undeniably happy. He looked at Christine from the corner of her eye, but her eyes were closed and she wasn't paying any attention to him.

"Christine?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "I need some time alone," she said in a dull tone.

He pushed away from the wall and stepped back to the bed. She slowly pulled herself to her feet, and he watched as she stumbled into the bathroom without looking back at him. He heard the distinct click of the lock, and sighed. His eyes felt as heavy as his limbs and he knew he needed a quick nap.

But he also knew she would probably flee the second he closed his eyes. The happiness evaporated, leaving in its place nothing but a cold, empty feeling. How many different times would he chase her down, corner her, only to have her flutter away before he could capture her?

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Anthony pulled the wallet out of her purse, tucking it far under the mattress before collapsing on the bed. Even if she did try to run, she wouldn't get far without her last credit card and her identification. Then he would have to wait her out.

His concern drifted away as he listened to the shower behind the closed door and imagined the water flowing down her body. Despite his exhaustion and satisfaction, the thought of her lithe body flexing, soapy, and wet made him hard again. He would have loved to shower with her and carefully scrub every inch of her—first with a washcloth and then with his tongue.

His dreams of her were so vivid that when he woke up, he almost believed she was curled in the bed with him. But she was gone.

CHAPTER 3

Anthony waited all night for her to return, blankly watching MTV—the only English channel he could find. He didn't even know what he was looking at. Every time somebody walked past the door, he perked up and held his breath, waiting for Christine to open the door. But she never did.

When the sun crept past the curtain, he roused himself out of bed and dressed. He needed to eat despite his lack of appetite, and he needed to get back to his hotel and call Nicolas and make sure he had a job to go back to. He needed to start the process of putting his life back on track—a process she had forced on him countless times before.

The girls they had run into the day before were all in the lobby, eating their complimentary breakfast, blurry eyed and tired. They all watched him curiously as he passed through the lobby and stopped at the front desk.

“Did Christine Cook check out of her room last night?” he asked

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

the concierge.

“No, sir.”

“Thanks.”

“Would you like some breakfast, sir?”

Anthony was about to refuse, but he didn’t seem to have the energy. He only nodded and picked up a scone and a cup of coffee from the sidebar. One of the young ladies slid over and made room for him at one of the tables. He accepted the seat with a nod of thanks.

He had her wallet and she hadn’t checked out—which meant if he had the patience to wait her out, he would be rewarded. He mechanically spread jam on his scone and took a bite, but he didn’t taste it at all.

“Are you okay?” The young lady besides him asked. “You don’t look very good.”

“I’m fine,” he said absently.

“I’m Ashley,” she introduced herself. She was cute, but not pretty, and nowhere near beautiful. Her narrow face was heavily made-up and framed by a stylish haircut. He guessed she was around twenty—half his age.

Anthony smiled politely, automatically. “Nice to meet you.”

“Let him eat,” her friend said, bringing her cappuccino up to her mouth. “You can take a break, can’t you?”

Anthony gave her a grateful look. She smiled in return.

“I was just being friendly, Rae.” Ashley huffed and turned back to Anthony. “Where are you from? We’re from California.”

“Me, too.”

“Ashley,” Rae said in a warning tone.

Anthony stood up, leaving his coffee untouched and his scone only half-finished. “Well, it was nice meeting you, but I’ve got to go.”

“So soon? Here, would you like some of my hot chocolate? They give us so much.” She offered the small pitcher to him. “It’s very

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

good.”

Anthony’s battered ego appreciated the attention. He wondered if he could somehow invite her back to his hotel and give them both what they wanted. But he was tired of always going down that road. He felt too old, for one thing. He sat back down and lifted his coffee cup.

“Let’s cut to the chase...Ashley. What exactly do you want from me?” he asked smoothly, using the same tone he took with particularly difficult clients.

She looked a little flustered at his question. “I just...”

“I’m not interested in games right now.”

“I’m not playing any games,” she protested.

“No? So if I asked you to bring your hot chocolate up to my room, you would?” He calmly took a sip from his coffee.

“What?” She gaped at him.

“That is what you were getting at, right?”

“No.” She threw her napkin on the table and jumped out of her seat, obviously offended and mortified. He watched her storm away with a small smile tugging on his lips.

“That was mean,” Rae commented, her smile matching his. “But she deserved it. You came in with that woman last night, didn’t you?”

Anthony looked up. “Yes.”

“I saw her leave last night.”

“Did you see where she went?”

“No, but she was pretty upset. Looked like she was crying.” Rae shrugged. “She didn’t say anything, just left.”

Anthony sighed. “I should as well. Except...”

“Except?”

“I don’t quite know where I am.” He smiled sheepishly. “I wasn’t really paying attention yesterday, and I’m not sure how to get back to my hotel.”

“Well, I’m no expert about the streets of Florence, but maybe I can

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

help,” she offered.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to impose.”

Rae smiled. “No imposition. I don’t have anything else planned for the day. Let me run to my room and grab my coat, and I’ll meet you down here.”

Anthony smiled gratefully and watched her go. He didn’t plan to lure her up to his room, but if things went that way... Of course, sex with random strangers had never helped before.

Rae returned soon, not only with her coat, but a map as well. “Let’s go,” she said brightly.

“Lead the way,” he said, standing. He followed her downstairs to the front door and out into the street. She took a deep breath and smiled at the Florence morning, obviously enjoying the cool air against her cheeks and in her lungs. Anthony felt cold, inside and out.

“What’s the name of your hotel?” she asked, holding the map open in front of her.

“Hotel Republica,” he said after a moment of thought.

She laughed. “Are you serious?”

“Um...yeah. Why? Is that a problem?”

Rae shook her head. “Not at all. But you know, it’s just around the corner.”

He gaped at her. “Are *you* serious?”

“Yep, follow me.”

In less than five minutes, they stopped outside a large building with a huge sign flashing *Hotel Republica*. Anthony shook his head. “I could have found it myself.”

Rae nodded. “Yeah.”

“But I appreciate your help.” He offered his most charming smile—the smile he used when he was particularly lonely in clubs where nobody spoke English. A smile like that made words redundant.

Rae arched an eyebrow, and he could tell with a sinking heart she

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

was singularly unimpressed. “You should have tried this trick with Ashley. She would have been impressed.”

“It wasn’t a trick.”

“Right.” Rae folded the map and put slid it into her purse. “I hope you find your girlfriend, Mr...”

“Anthony.”

“Mr. Anthony.”

“No, I mean...” But she was already gone, moving down the uneven sidewalk. Anthony sighed and watched her until she rounded the corner. “Real smooth.”

There were twelve messages waiting for him at the front desk. He flipped through the slips of paper as he climbed the long flight of stairs, but they were all variations on the same theme. *Where the fuck are you? And, Call me as soon as possible, asshole.*

When he let himself into his small room, he debated whether he should call Nicolas at all. He could lose his job, but he had some money saved up, and it didn’t matter. Nothing seemed to matter much lately. But responsibility and self-preservation eventually triumphed, and he dialed the number from memory.

“Who is this?” The old man snarled into the phone.

“Anthony.”

“Anthony, you bastard, where the fuck have you been?”

Anthony held the receiver away from his head in a vain attempt to save his hearing. “Something unexpected came up.”

Nicolas was so silent that Anthony thought they had been disconnected. “Nicolas? Are you there?”

“Something unexpected came up?” he asked in a menacing tone.

“Look...look...I know I messed up...”

“Messed up? Look, you fuck-up, this was the most important account in Italy and you know it was hanging by a thread...well, congratulations, shit-for-brains, it’s gone now.”

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Anthony tried to sound reasonable. “Nicolas, the thread was frayed long before I got here.”

“Don’t you take that tone with me! I’ve been doing business since...” His tirade was interrupted by a long coughing fit, so violent it made Anthony wince. He closed his eyes. He could easily picture Nicolas in his cavernous study, sitting behind his dinosaur of a desk, papers and books spread out in front of him, doubled over with traces of blood on his lips.

“Sir?” Anthony tried tentatively once the coughing fit subsided. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he growled. “I just need a drink.” He sipped noisily from his glass that could as easily be whiskey as water. “There, good as new.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anthony, I am having my secretary change your flight. I want you in front of my desk tomorrow afternoon at three. She will contact you with your new itinerary, do you understand me?”

Anthony studied Christine’s wallet. “I understand.”

“We’ll talk more tomorrow,” Nicolas snapped before slamming down the phone.

The receiver slipped from Anthony’s numb fingers into the cradle. He wasn’t afraid of facing Nicolas face to face. Nicolas swore and shouted a lot, but ultimately, he needed Anthony and he knew it. It was the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that upset him so much.

The phone rang moments later, startling him. It was Nicolas’s secretary, informing him that he would be flying out of Florence at 7:00 A.M., he had a connection in Frankfurt at 10:00 A.M., and he would arrive in LAX at 12:30 P.M. Did he have any questions? Anthony assured her he understood and he had everything under control.

Mechanically, he stripped his clothes away and walked into the bathroom. In the ugly yellow light, every bruise and scratch Christine

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

had left him stood out as plain as day. He ran his fingers over the marks on his chest, but they didn't hurt. He had a large hickey on his neck, and he didn't even remember when that happened. Wasn't he too old for a purple hickey right below his jaw? Far too old. Did she have a matching purple bruise?

Anthony showered before packing. Forty-five minutes later, he was ready to catch a cab to the airport. With his bags resting near the door, he tucked her wallet into his pocket and left the room, hoping he'd find Christine at her hotel. If not, he'd turn the wallet over to the front desk, and bide his time until she crossed his path again.

He didn't want to let her go this time. She couldn't keep running forever. But what magic words could he use to keep her by his side? He'd tried every trick he knew, and nothing ever worked. Even now, with her life in shambles, she was too frightened to give in to their love, to turn herself over to him.

The hotel lobby was empty this time, the flock of girls swarming the streets of Florence, no doubt. The clerk smiled at Anthony, nodding as though they were old friends. "You're looking for Ms. Cook, no?"

"I am. Is she here?"

"I am," Christine said from behind him. "I've been waiting for you."

Anthony took a deep breath before he turned to face her. This was it, then. No more of this game. She didn't want him, and he supposed after twenty years of pushing him away, he could finally accept that. The thought of her penniless and helpless in a foreign country made his heart ache, but she was resourceful. She'd figure something out.

"Where did you go?" Anthony asked, avoiding her eyes. The lobby separated them—a space of about ten feet—but she seemed much farther away.

"I had some thinking to do." She smiled sheepishly. "And I got lost without my map."

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

Anthony matched her smile with his own wry grin. “It happens to the best of us.”

“Do you want to come upstairs?” she invited, tilting her head. Anthony could tell she was struggling to remain polite, a bit distant, and friendly enough to avoid a fight. “We can talk there.”

Anthony pulled her wallet from his pocket, setting it on the counter behind him. “I didn’t come here to talk. I wanted to return this.” Unfortunately, she blocked the only escape route, so he couldn’t make a grand, final exit. He was afraid to walk by her. If she grabbed his arm...

Christine shook her head, her shoulders slumping. In the tired afternoon light, she looked her age—his age. “I’m getting old and foolish, Anthony. This would never have happened to me when I was twenty-five. It’s only now...I’m chasing after something that doesn’t exist.”

The unexpected, stark honesty took Anthony by surprise and had a strong affect on him. He sighed, understanding that he wasn’t going anywhere. Not yet. He pointed to the dining area—now devoid of hot chocolate. “Why don’t we have a seat?”

“Can you tell me what happened?” he asked, once they were seated facing each other.

She lifted her hands helplessly. “What can I say? He played me first. I probably deserved it. I was so busy running from...from everything, that I ran right into his arms. Of course, it was a trap. But I didn’t notice at the time.”

“Why were you running?” Anthony asked. It was the question he always meant to ask her. Why did she run? Why did she run from him? Why did she run from the life he wanted to offer?

Christine studied her fingers with downcast eyes. She didn’t answer.

“Let me take you back to the States,” Anthony said, taking her

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

hand. "Let me take you back home. It's not charity. I won't expect you to stay with me. I know better than that by now, anyway."

Christine winced, though Anthony didn't know what he had said to upset her. "Anthony...I...overreacted, and I'm sorry. Nothing ever comes for free in this world, and I just couldn't...but I know that you wouldn't do anything to hurt me. Though why you'd want to help me now, I can't imagine."

Anthony frowned, expecting some sort of trick. "So...you want my help then?"

"If you're still offering."

"What about..." Anthony shook his head, realizing he didn't want to know. "Never mind."

"What?"

"My plane departs tomorrow morning at seven. Should I arrange for another ticket on that flight, or would you like another time?" Anthony asked, his voice neutral, slipping into business mode. This couldn't be treated as anything other than a business arrangement. He couldn't put himself on the line again.

"Tomorrow is fine. It's not like I've got anything keeping me here."

They lapsed into a long silence, neither touching nor looking at each other. Christine broke it first, with the last question he expected her to ever ask. "Do you still love me?"

Anthony caught his breath, but he tried to hide his surprise, hoping his eyes didn't betray him. Any other time he would have denied that he had *ever* loved her. Admitting emotion was a sign of weakness, and in his struggles with Christine, no weakness could be allowed. But he sensed the rules had changed at some point. Maybe she wouldn't use his words against him. But even if he dared to claim such a feeling, was it true? Did he love her?

Closing his eyes and bracing himself for the worst, he muttered, "I never stopped."

THE STREETS OF FLORENCE

“Remember that house...the one you used to talk about?” she asked, her voice soft, even hesitant.

“Yes.”

“I’ve been thinking about that lately and...”

He had heard it all before, but he still thought she was serious. Even if she left him as soon as they landed in LAX, he knew that at this moment she meant every word she said. Maybe she had changed. Maybe she was a different person. He wanted to touch her.

“Why don’t you come back to my hotel room with me. It’s bigger. We’ll call the airport and get you a ticket,” Anthony said, standing.

She stood as well, taking his arm. “Thank you, Anthony. I could always count on you.”

Anthony studied her face sadly. She looked like a wild cat, submitting momentarily for the promise of food, and maybe safety. How long could she be tied to one man, to one house, to one country?

“I love you,” she added.

He laughed without humor. “Don’t say it if you don’t mean it.”

“I mean it right now.”

Anthony took her hand. It was all he could ask for.

PEPPER ESPINOZA

Pepper Espinoza lives in southern California with her husband and her cats. She has spent the last year working as a full time author, and intends to start graduate school in the fall.

You can learn more about Pepper by visiting her website:

<http://www.pepperverse.net>

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

THE GOLD STANDARD IN PUBLISHING

QUALITY BOOKS
IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SUSPENSE/THRILLER

SCIENCE FICTION

PARANORMAL

ROMANCE

MYSTERY

EROTICA

HORROR

WESTERN

FANTASY

MAINSTREAM

HISTORICAL

YOUNG ADULT

NON-FICTION

BUY DIRECT AND SAVE
<http://www.amberquill.com>