



Brindisi Bedfellows

Jamie Craig

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Chapter One

Christian hated the bastard. He hated his big, brown soulful eyes that silently begged him not to be angry. The big, brown soulful eyes he could happily stare at for hours, just to watch the way the shining depths changed in the light. Christian hated his firm lips that pulled into an apologetic smile when he answered the door, entreating Christian to understand before he said a word. He hated the muscled body that deserved to be worshipped by a mob of minions, Chris first among them. Christian especially hated the bastard's broad shoulders that had sagged with the weight of his confession.

He pulled the envelope out of his jacket and tossed it onto the bar. He hated the envelope. He hated the fact it contained two non-refundable plane tickets, and a three-week itinerary for a holiday he wouldn't, couldn't, take now. He hated what it represented—three weeks of solitary drinking. He hated drinking alone.

Christian gestured for another drink. Most of all, he hated himself. He hated himself for falling in love with a man who had never been emotionally available. He hated himself for loving a man who didn't know what he wanted, who never knew what he wanted. He hated himself for building his world around a person who didn't deserve it.

Christian hated himself because if Andrew walked through the pub door at that minute, he'd forgive him for everything.

The beer couldn't touch the ache in his stomach, but he kept drinking. When he woke up that morning, he had been confident he'd be ending the day in Andrew's bed, preparing to start their holiday a night early. It never occurred to him he'd be drinking by himself, drowning in warm beer at the end of the bar. It never occurred to him he'd have nothing to look forward to except lonely night after lonely night, with nothing for company but the memory of Andrew's last words.

I'm really sorry, but you know, I never stopped loving her. I never lied to you about that.

He hadn't lied. Not once. Lexie had left him. Lexie had divorced him. Lexie had been the one to end the relationship, against Andrew's will. Christian always knew that.

She really needs me now.

Christian had tried to point out Lexie always needed something. She was incapable of taking care of herself, because she knew Andrew would be there to bail her ass out of any problem.

You should still go to Italy, Chris. You deserve it. You haven't had a proper holiday in five years.

Six. But who was counting?

Call me when you get back. We can talk.

What was there to talk about? Everything had been said. Including an outburst Christian would always regret. Because it was undignified. Because it was unnecessary. Because no outburst could change things.

I love you, Andrew. More than that bitch ever has. She's only capable of loving herself.

Andrew had asked him to leave then.

The bell above the door chimed, and Christian looked up automatically. He couldn't

see the man's face from his vantage, but he would recognize that swagger anywhere. Trip Watson. Andrew's best friend. The last person, besides Andrew, Christian wanted to see. He put his head down, focusing intently on the pool of beer at the bottom of the stein—how had he finished it already? It was childish. He knew Trip could see him, even if he studiously avoided eye contact. Christian only hoped the other man had no interest in talking to him. He usually didn't, after all.

"Guinness. Pint."

The order to the barkeep was done nearly at his elbow, and when the black leather jacket appeared in his peripheral vision, Christian gritted his teeth against the sound of the stool creaking.

"Looks like you need another." Before Christian had the chance to stop him, Trip was ordering another beer, long fingers pulling out a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket at the same time. "Bit early in the day for you to be getting pissed, isn't it? Don't usually see you in here until after the rest of us are arse over tit."

Many things about Andrew had always perplexed Christian, not the least was his friendship with Trip. What did the two of them have in common? What interests did they share? How could Andrew be around him for more than five minutes without punching him in the nose?

"I needed an early start to get all my drinking done," Christian muttered. He watched as Trip lit the cigarette and took a long drag. "Can I have one of those?"

Without a word, Trip tapped another out of the pack, holding the tip to the one dangling between his lips. Once it was lit, he passed it over, his black eyes bright and astute. It took him only a moment to slide the pack across the bar, too.

"From the look of you, don't think one is goin' to cut it," he said. "You all right?"

Christian inhaled deeply, coughed smoke, and inhaled again. It had been years since he quit smoking, but the nicotine rush was still familiar, comforting even. A sharp retort came to mind—it would be just like Trip to rub it in. His question could be a set-up. Christian studied Trip's face for a second through the haze of smoke and dismissed his initial response for a simple question.

"You haven't talked to Andrew tonight?"

The interest in Trip's narrow features immediately disappeared, and he turned back to pick up the Guinness sitting in front of him. "Got it. You two had a bit of a knockdown. If I were you, I wouldn't get too fussed. Andrew's a big girl's blouse when it comes to fights. I'll wager he walks in here before the night is through, begging you to forgive him for whatever it is he did this time."

"Lexie." Christian gestured with his cigarette. "He did Lexie this time, and I don't think he was feeling very repentant."

Mention of Andrew's ex-wife made Trip stiffen. "No, he didn't. He's not that bloody stupid."

"I wish there was another explanation for what I saw." Lexie in nothing but one of Andrew's t-shirts, her long legs crossed elegantly as she watched them from the couch, a cigarette in one hand, a drink in the other. "But Andrew removed all ambiguity for me when he told me he was still in love with her."

Trip was never a hard person to read. He was the sort who put everything he felt out there for the world to see and damned if he was going to care what anybody thought. Most of the time that made him irritating as hell. Now, it made it simple to see the

disbelief shining in his dark eyes.

Slamming his pint back onto the bar, Trip fished around in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone, hitting a number and putting the phone to his ear. His fingers drummed along the counter while he waited, and the muscles twitched in his tight jaw. Distantly, Christian heard the sound of a voice, but the sudden whiteness of Trip's knuckles around the phone said it wasn't Andrew who had picked up.

"Put the wanker on," he snapped. A shadow darkened his eyes at the reply. "Then you go drag his arse out, you daft cow, because I've got a few choice words for..."

He yanked the phone from his ear to stare at the display. Angry shock rippled across his face the split second before his hand curled around the phone and slammed it to the counter.

"Son of a bitch!"

Trip's anger seemed to deflate Christian's, like there was only so much energy for rage in the room, and Trip sapped it all. Now he just felt hollow. He stubbed the cigarette out calmly and took a deep swallow from his beer.

"It won't do any good to call him, you know. His mind is made up. Lexie is the one for him. All of the trouble in the past was just a mistake. She never really meant to smash his heart into a million places and piss on the remains."

"Lexie's the worst thing that ever happened to him," Trip spat. "Thought he'd finally sussed that out, especially since he started seeing you. What the hell did she do this time, to make him take her back?"

Christian shrugged. "I don't know the details, but you know Andrew's savior complex. He thinks he can save her from herself. Fix all the poor choices she's made. He loves her the most when she needs him."

Trip rubbed his hand over his face, pushing back the long strands of his dark hair. "Only problem with that, the bitch is a bleedin' parasite. She's goin' to use Andrew to get back on her feet, and as soon as she's bored or distracted by something shiny, she'll be off. And damn it, Andrew fucking well knows this!"

Christian fucking well knew it too. This wasn't the first time Lexie had breezed into their lives, but it was the first time Andrew literally shoved Christian out the door to get between her legs. And he didn't need to sit there and be reminded of the fact that Lexie, for all her baggage and, no doubt, STDs, was more attractive to Andrew than Christian was.

Maybe that was it. Maybe Andrew had been looking for a way to end things, and like a gift from heaven, Lexie fell in his lap. *Oh god.*

"I think I need something a bit stronger than this," Christian muttered.

That penetrating gaze was back on him. "You know what you need?" It was on the tip of Christian's tongue to say he knew exactly what he needed, but as usual, Trip barreled on with his own answer. "You need to get out and prove to Andrew you don't need him. Don't sit here feeling sorry for yourself because he's a git who's handed Lexie his balls. Show him you're better than that."

Andrew shutting the door in his face had been the most surprising part of the night. Trip offering a pep talk like he actually cared was a very, very close second. But Chris might have misheard or misunderstood. The alcohol made his brain fuzzy, and the pub was growing louder by the minute, as more and more people crowded in to start their weekends.

“Why do you care?” The question came out more sarcastically than he intended. “I mean, I really want to know. Why?”

Trip took a good long swallow of his Guinness before answering. “Because it pisses me off that Andrew thinks he can play people like this,” he said. “I mean, yeah, you and me haven’t exactly been bosom buddies, and frankly, I wasn’t sure what Andrew saw in you when you two started up. But fact is, you’ve never been anything but good for Andrew, and he’s a complete idiot to do this to you.” He snorted. “Not to mention it’s fucking insane that he did it with Lexie, of all people.”

Christian turned Trip’s words over in his mind, and after a few seconds, they began to make a lot of sense. “You know what? You’re right. I have been nothing but good to him, and this is how he treats me. Fuck him. You know what I’m going to do?” He held up the envelope that didn’t seem quite so hateful now. “Go to Italy. Have some fun. Not think about him at all.”

Trip clapped him on the shoulder, flashing him an impish smile. “That’s the spirit. Go find some strapping Italian bloke and shag him senseless. Nothin’ like a holiday fling to tell the ex to fuck off.”

It was easy for Trip to say. He could walk into any room anywhere in the world and leave with the best looking guy in the place—even if that guy had been as straight as the day is long up to that point. The self-confidence, the lean, hungry features, and a tightly muscled body even Chris had noticed made that inevitable. Christian suspected despite his big talk now, he’d putter around Italy by himself for three weeks, growing increasingly depressed and petulant.

“You know,” Chris said, a little surprised the words were coming out of his mouth, but plowing ahead anyway. “Andrew paid for half of this trip, and he’s not getting any of his money back. It’d be a shame if a perfectly good ticket went to waste.”

The cock of Trip’s head and the calculating gleam suddenly appearing in his eye made Chris want to take it all back, but all he could do was sit there while Trip’s gaze flickered to the envelope Christian still held. “Andrew would bloody hate that,” he mused. “He always had these queer ideas about keeping you and me apart. Like I was goin’ to corrupt you or something. He’d hate to hear I showed you all the best parts of Italy.”

Christian never really minded that Andrew rarely wanted the three of them to do things together, because he certainly wasn’t falling all over himself to spend time with Trip. But now that Trip mentioned it, he knew it would be a thorn in Andrew’s side. He could almost hear the shocked outrage now. *Trip? You gave my ticket to Trip of all people?*

“I have a few of his credit cards, too.”

Trip grinned. “Well, now he’s just begging for it. We’ll have to hit some of the specialty shops. There’s a gorgeous leather shop in Rome you’re goin’ to love.”

Specialty shops? “Why do I have the feeling you aren’t talking about leather coats?”

He leaned forward, his arm warm against Christian’s. “Not scared, are you?” His thick lashes ducked as he glanced down Christian’s lean body. “Cause you certainly don’t need to be thinking you can’t pull it off, luv.”

Christian almost gaped. Was Trip flirting with him? Was *Trip* flirting with *him*? Any other time, he would have immediately put the space of the pub between them, if not an entire city block or two. Not that there had been another time. He wasn’t Trip’s type at

all.

Knowing he wasn't Trip's type made it better. He was just trying in his own unique way to make Christian feel better. And if Chris was honest, the effort was appreciated.

"You think I can? Nobody's ever told me that'd be a good look for me."

"With those long legs? We get you in leather, and you'll have half the blokes in Rome salivating at your feet." His eyes were dancing when they met Christian's again. "By the time we get back to London, you'll be all, 'Andrew *who?*'"

Christian warmed at the thought. It was stupid, but somehow, Trip was doing more to help than the Guinness was.

"You would know more about how to get Italian blokes to salivate than me, I suppose. Any other helpful hints?" Chris asked, wondering if that would count as flirting back.

He tried not to jump when he felt Trip's knee press into his leg. "Why don't you leave that to me?" Chris recognized the silken tone of his voice; he'd heard him use it more than once before when he'd been chatting up a fresh conquest. "Give you my word, Chris, I won't steer you wrong on this."

This was wrong. Trip was already steering him wrong. Inviting him to Italy had been wrong, and letting Trip touch him, even casually, was wrong, and the slow heat spreading through him was wrong.

He nodded. "All right. I'm yours to do with as you will." His eyes widened as he realized what he said, and the smirk on Trip's face told him there'd be no graceful way to backtrack.

"Let's make this interesting then, shall we?" He plucked the envelope from Christian's hands, opening it up to slip out one of the plane tickets. "You can do with me as you will, too."

They were still talking about wardrobe choices, weren't they? It was hard to track, especially since the beer kept appearing in front of him, as if by magic. He held his hand out to Trip. "It's a deal."

A brow shot up at the offering, but after a moment of bemused contemplation, Trip took it. His skin was warm, his grip firm, and the deliberate way his thumb stroked the back of Christian's made Chris blink in disbelief. It could've been the beer clouding his thought processes—hell, this whole encounter could very well be the product of a drunken haze Chris was going to regret come morning. But the sudden clasp of Trip's hand around the back of his neck, and the sharp tug as he pulled Chris closer made him think not.

"Let's show Andrew what exactly he's missing out on," Trip murmured in his ear. "I'm bringing my camera. I want a shot of you in leather with a bevy of blokes gagging for a taste."

Goosebumps spread down Christian's neck and arms. He tried to tell himself it was just the unexpected physical contact—the fact that Trip's mouth was less than a bloody inch from his ear had nothing to do with his reaction. His mouth was not cooperating, so he could only nod and imagine Andrew's face when he saw the photograph with a bevy of blokes.

Trip released him, finally, and leaned back, but Chris still felt the imprint of his hand, warm on his skin. He needed some air.

He pushed himself to his feet, swaying a bit. "I think I'm going to hire a taxi and go

home. Got an early flight tomorrow.”

Tucking the ticket he’d taken into his coat pocket, Trip nodded. “I’ll be there with bells on,” he said. He smirked. “I’ll wait until we hit the beach in Italy before taking ‘em all off.”

“What do you...” Christian stopped as he realized what sort of beach Trip was referring to. He was almost scandalized, and decided it was best to smile and nod. It wasn’t like Christian had to accompany him there, after all. “Right. Bells on.”

He lifted Trip’s cigarettes and turned on his heel, weaving between his fellow drunks to reach the door. Once he was outside, the fresh air didn’t seem to make a difference. But at least now that Trip was out of his sight, he could think clearly.

About Andrew.

No. He wasn’t going to do that. He hailed a cab and resolved to keep his thoughts on Trip. And Rome. And Italian leather. Somehow, that seemed safer.

Chapter Two

What the fuck was I thinking?

Christian asked himself that when he woke up and realized a herd of elephants was dancing a softshoe in his skull. He asked himself that when he realized the second plane ticket was missing. He asked himself that when he checked his voicemail, hoping to hear Andrew's familiar voice, and his email, hoping for any sign of Andrew at all. He asked himself that as he paid the cab driver outside of Heathrow.

He asked himself that as he stepped into the terminal and saw Trip waiting in a pair of dark glasses. The previous night was a blur. He remembered the confrontation with Andrew—no amount of drinking would abolish that memory, unfortunately—and he remembered seeing Trip in the pub, and he remembered Trip taking the envelope from him. Why had he done that? What prompted him to take the second ticket?

Christian thought about asking him, but that would involve speaking. The sound of his own voice made his brain vibrate. So he bought a tin of aspirin and chewed the pills, then bought a bottle of water to chase the bitter taste out of his mouth. His stomach rolled, but he hadn't been hung over to the point of puking since university, and he refused to give in to the impulse now, on general principle.

He settled in the seat next to Trip because it seemed like the reasonable thing to do, since they were traveling together and all. The vein in his temple throbbed, and his eye twitched. His muscles ached like he had binged on tequila, but he didn't remember drinking tequila the night before. He didn't order any at the pub, he was certain, and he didn't have a bottle at home. It was a mystery he didn't have the energy to solve.

Chris hoped Trip wouldn't speak to him, but Trip always had something to say, and was always happy to share whatever thought popped into his head. And he lived up to expectations now.

"So I went and saw Andrew last night."

A splinter of pain went from his temple to the back of his throat. He took another swallow of water before rasping, "What happened?"

"Told him he was a coward for not having the stones to tell me himself. He told me it was none of my business. Then Lexie walked in, I called her a dozy cow, and Andrew took a swing at me." Tilting his head, he pulled his sunglasses far enough down his nose to reveal a vivid bruise at the corner of his left eye. "Realized then if I was too drunk not to be able to duck one of his punches, I was too drunk to talk any sense into him. So I went home."

Christian winced in sympathy. He wasn't surprised Trip had provoked Andrew into punching him. Provoking was what Trip did best. But something he said nagged at the back of his mind. It made sense for Trip to be upset about Lexie's reappearance in Andrew's life—he had no doubt watched this tragedy unfold more than once—but still, something was off.

It was another mystery he didn't have the energy to solve.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, holding out the painkillers.

Trip took the tin and palmed a couple pills, popping them dry before handing it back. "Not any worse than seeing them together again." He leaned back in his seat, his denim-

clad legs stretched out in front of him. Christian's eyes widened when he saw the way the jeans were frayed in the crotch, a flash of red visible against golden skin, and he jerked his gaze away as Trip added, "Just means you get to be the pretty one for a few days."

The pretty one? He knew Trip wasn't flirting. Not like he was...

Oh god, not like he was last night.

Trip had flirted with him in the pub, Christian was sure of it. He couldn't remember the details, but now he could remember the rush of pleasure and shock at Trip's low words. He cupped his forehead and groaned softly.

"Remind me to never, ever drink again. I'm going to be a teetotaler." *Because then I can't do anything stupid. Or consider doing anything stupid. Or get within one hundred kilometers of stupid.*

"You asked the wrong bloke to come with you then." Trip stretched his arms over the back of the seats. As soon as Christian sat back, it would be impossible to avoid contact with him. "Me and restraint aren't exactly on speaking terms these days."

"Maybe this wasn't a good idea," Christian blurted.

Trip's head snapped to Chris, and though his eyes were hidden by the dark glasses, the hardening of his jaw was more than evident. "What? Why?"

"Because... Well, we're not exactly mates, are we?" It had nothing to do with the fact he was sitting stiffly in his seat to avoid touching Trip's arm, because he was scared of how he'd react to the simple contact. "We're going to be at each other's throats when we're not drunk or hung over."

"Who says? We've never had the chance to see how we'd get along, now have we?"

"But you don't like me, Trip," Christian pointed out reasonably. "You said yourself last night you don't know what Andrew saw in me."

"No, I said that's what I thought in the beginning. That was a year ago, luv. I've had plenty of time since to see exactly what it is you do for him."

Christian colored and forgot what he had been saying. *God, am I this easy?* He should have left it there, but the perverse part of him that was very happy for Trip's company pushed for more. "And what is that, exactly?"

Reaching up, Trip took off his glasses, folding and tucking them into his coat pocket. It revealed the thoughtfulness in his black gaze, which now raked over Christian so thoroughly that it was difficult not to shiver.

"Besides the obvious bonus of looking like you do...you've got sense that's always kept Andrew hopping. There's a brain behind those gorgeous blue eyes, and anyone who isn't completely superficial will appreciate that. You're loyal, so much so I'll wager that even after everything, you still had second thoughts about letting me have Andrew's ticket from the second you left the pub last night." He slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out a battered, black leather billfold. Christian watched those long fingers extract a piece of paper and it wasn't until Trip held it out to him that he saw it was a cheque. "So now you haven't let me have it. You've sold it to me. Problem solved."

Christian accepted the cheque with numb fingers, his headache forgotten. Gorgeous blue eyes? Looking like he did? He had never seen this side of Trip, and he certainly hadn't expected anything like it. It wasn't unpleasant. It was very far from unpleasant.

"Problem solved," he echoed. "Thank you."

"Flight seventeen twenty-one, non-stop to Rome, now boarding."

Christian stood. "That's us."

Trip grabbed a beat-up duffel and slung it over his shoulder, following Chris up to the attendant at the gate. He didn't speak as each handed over his boarding pass, and it wasn't until they were queued in the gangway that he closed the distance between them.

"Know what else you did for Andrew?" he murmured. His mouth was at Christian's ear, his hips nudging against his ass. It was the slightest of contact, but Trip might as well have had Chris pressed against the wall for the effect it was having on him. "And I know it makes him a fool for letting you go. Maybe there'll be room for me in that harem you'll be collecting over the next few weeks. I can show you what else I can do with my mouth outside of running it off."

No, Trip, it'll never happen. Never in this life. That's what he should have said. But he was too distracted. First, by thoughts of all the things he happily did to and for Andrew. Things he would never do again. He hadn't really thought about it that way before, but now a sense of what could only be described as mourning settled over him. He really liked having sex with Andrew. But he couldn't dwell on that for long before his mind led him down the dark, winding path that led directly to Trip's mouth. He had no doubt Trip and his mouth were very talented.

Since he couldn't say what he should have, he didn't say anything at all as the queue shuffled forward. Trip stuck close behind him, not allowing even an inch of space between them. And there was no relief once they finally reached their seats. It seemed like Trip was sitting right on top of him.

"Good thing it's not a long flight," Trip commented, glancing pointedly at how awkwardly Chris had had to fold his long legs into the scant space separating the seats. "You goin' to want to get up and walk the aisle once we're up?"

"No," Christian declined. "I think I'm going to try to sleep off some of this headache." He buckled his belt, and shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable. His shoulder was against Trip's, and their knees were touching. He'd have to sleep if he didn't want to focus on that fact.

"There's other ways to get your mind off that, you know."

"What? Sudoku?" Christian asked lightly.

Trip leaned in, his leg pressing more firmly to Christian's. "Was thinking of something a tad less cerebral, actually," he said, pitching his voice lower. "We get up in the air, and then I get you off. Guaranteed to relax you."

Christian stared at him. He wasn't kidding. There wasn't a trace of humor in his eyes. He was genuinely offering to do...something to him. Christian thought he should tell him no, but why? Why tell Trip he wasn't interested? He was single now. Trip was definitely single. They were both adults. And God knew, he needed to relax. Fuck it.

"Well, I would like actual proof you can do something with that mouth besides run it off," Chris murmured.

A slow burn began in Christian's stomach that matched Trip's smile. With the angle of his body blocking the view of the passengers across the aisle, Trip dragged a single finger along the top of Christian's thigh, diverting inward when he reached the hip. "We'll wait until the first wave has used the loo after the seatbelt light is off," he said. He unerringly found the head of Christian's cock in his pants and traced the crown through the fabric. "That'll give us time for you to get to appreciate it."

Christian realized this wasn't a spur of the moment suggestion. Trip had been thinking about this. Enough to plot when the best time would be. And he probably

wouldn't be content to simply plan a blowjob in the loo. Christian caught his breath as Trip traced the head of his cock again, applying just enough pressure to make his stomach clench. God, if this was the result of Trip's devious plots, then he was all for devious plotting.

"I hope you're flexible. Those restrooms are barely enough for one person."

Trip chuckled, and the tip of his tongue appeared to swipe across his lower lip. "I bend in all sorts of interesting ways, luv. Lucky for us, we've got three weeks for me to show you."

Christian could hardly wrap his mind around the notion of three weeks of mindless sex with Trip. Of course, there were arguments against this. This wasn't safe, no-strings-attached holiday sex, if only because when they returned to England, Trip would still be Andrew's best friend, and he'd...well, he'd be moving on with his life. Things could get messy.

Trip's thumb went over his erection again.

Yeah, things were about to get messy.

The captain came over the intercom, announcing their upcoming departure, and Trip settled back into his seat, flashing a brilliant smile at the flight attendant when she walked past. Chris had no idea how he appeared so casual about what they were going to do when he couldn't stop thinking about it. Then again, sex in an airplane bathroom was probably pretty tame on the list of Trip's sexual escapades. He'd probably done it dozens of times.

Chris turned toward the window to watch the passing landscape. It was too hard to see Trip's strong profile without imagining what it was going to look like from above, with Trip's mouth wrapped around his cock. He folded his hands in his lap, trying not to think about his raging arousal.

Trip hummed under his breath during take-off, some mindless melody Christian didn't recognize. It was probably something currently on the charts; when it came to contemporary trends, Trip was infinitely more in touch than he was. His fashion photography put him at all the London hotspots, though Chris thought he should probably be a little grateful Trip was self-employed. It meant he could drop everything at the drop of a hat for an Italian holiday.

The small ding of the "Fasten seatbelts" sign getting turned off made Chris jump. Next to him, Trip chuckled.

"Might have to do this twice," he said, in a voice meant only for Christian's ears. "You're more wound up than I thought."

Christian swallowed. The ten minutes that passed before Trip finally unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up crawled by. The ten seconds it took before Trip cast him a wicked smirk over his shoulder as he headed for the restroom took even longer.

Chris forced himself to wait several more seconds before unfastening his own belt and following down the narrow aisle. Many of the passengers were already asleep, and those that were awake had mp3 players blasting in their ears. He doubted anybody noticed his trek to the restroom. Of course, why would they? It wasn't like he had a big flashing sign around his neck, announcing his intentions.

He tapped on the closed door, and the occupied sign turned as Trip unlocked it. Chris opened it enough to slip inside, then quickly pulled it shut behind him. As soon as he was inside, Trip's hands were on his cock, rubbing him with one while he unzipped

Christian's trousers with the other.

"Been thinking about this since last night," Trip murmured. As soon as the offending garment was undone, he slipped his hand inside, warm and dry as he palmed the length of Christian's shaft. "Had half a mind to offer you a ride myself when you walked out of the pub, just to get an invite into your flat when I got you home."

"That probably would have worked," Christian admitted breathlessly, and he would probably agree to anything at that moment, as long as Trip didn't stop. He dropped his head back, closing his eyes as Trip stroked him. But as he did so, he saw Andrew's face. Shaking his head, he opened them again. He wasn't going to do that. He was with Trip. He was going to be *with* Trip.

Sliding his hand down further, Trip cupped his balls, rough fingertips stroking the sac. "Just want one thing before I get my taste," he said.

And then his other hand was coming up, and it was snaking around Christian's neck, molding along his skull as he tugged his head down. There was a moment before their mouths connected, a moment where all Chris heard was the roar of his blood, and Trip was kissing him, soft and slow as the tip of his tongue traced Christian's lips.

Chris hesitated for only a second before parting his lips, his tongue moving to meet Trip's. He held back, responsive but not completely surrendering to Trip's mouth. Until Trip tightened his hold on the back of his head and forced his tongue deeper into Christian's mouth, his fingers flexing and massaging Christian's balls. Chris moaned, wrapping his arm around Trip's tight body, and turned himself over to Trip's thorough assault.

Within seconds, Trip tore his mouth away. Before Chris registered a protest, Trip was moving down his body, guiding Chris' hard cock to his mouth.

His head slammed back against the metal door when Trip sucked the head past his lips, stopping at the crown to sweep his tongue around and around the ridge. Goosebumps erupted along his arms as Trip increased the pressure, and the almost delicate probe into the slit made him moan.

Trip tightened his grip around the base, his satisfied sigh fanning over Christian's stomach. Slowly, he took in more of the shaft, keeping the suction tight, but he only went a few inches before sliding back up, returning to savor the pre-come already dripping from the tip.

Christian slid his fingers through Trip's long hair, resting both palms against the back of his head. Trip lapped at his cock, gathering every drop of the clear fluid before moving forward, drawing his shaft deeper and deeper, his cheeks hollowing around it. Chris wanted to push him, force him to swallow his whole length, but he didn't apply any pressure to Trip's skull.

"Oh god," he sighed, as Trip eased back again. His pulse hammered in his throat, his balls throbbed, and he forgot the fact they were cramped in a tiny airplane lavatory. He forgot everything except Trip's hot mouth, his thorough tongue. "Oh...God. Trip."

The hand around the base of his cock disappeared, slipping around his hip to mold over Christian's ass. It effectively pulled him closer while Trip went down on him again, and Chris glanced down in time to see Trip lower his jaw in anticipation of taking more of his length into his mouth. His own lips tingled as he watched Trip's stretch around his cock. The moment Chris felt the tip nudge the back of his throat, Trip glanced up at him through his lashes.

Those black eyes were dancing, and in spite of the tight suction, Christian would have sworn Trip was smiling. There wasn't time to contemplate it, however, before the muscles in Trip's throat worked and he swallowed down Christian's cock, burying his nose in the coarse hair at the base.

Christian brought a hand to his mouth, biting his fist to hold back his loud moan. As his teeth sank into his knuckles, Trip swallowed again, his throat constricting around him. He knew he had to stay silent—nobody was going to ignore loud moans and shouts coming from the bathroom these days—but Trip was making it difficult. Weak whimpers worked their way past his clenched teeth.

The fingers cupping his ass slid inward, finding the cleft between the cheeks and tracing down. Without breaking the excruciatingly slow rhythm up and down Christian's cock, Trip probed between them until his fingertip skimmed over the tight pucker of Christian's ass. His hands dug into Trip's hair, as hard against his skull as Trip was soft against his hole. Trip didn't try entering him—though it shocked Chris to realize he'd welcome the intrusion gladly—but instead, circled the opening over and over again, just as he had with the head of Christian's cock when he'd first started sucking.

There may have been a few lingering doubts of the wisdom of following Trip, but they were gone. This was a good idea. This was a very good idea. Maybe the best idea he had had in months. Everything about this was good. He pushed his legs as wide as he could in the cramped space, jerking his hips forward. Trip's finger continued to move in maddening circles, the lightest of caresses that only seemed to grow lighter as the suction around his shaft increased. He knew if Trip pushed into his ass to press against his prostate, he'd explode. He reached behind his back to grip Trip's wrist, asking for more with his actions because he didn't dare open his mouth.

A chuckle made his entire cock vibrate.

Christian gulped for air, ready to do more than grab Trip's wrist, when he felt the muscles flex beneath his hand, Trip's finger finally breaching the entrance. His nail scraped across the sensitive flesh, but it didn't slow Trip from pressing in, sinking into his ass at the same time he swallowed Christian's cock.

He'd been wrong about one thing, though. It didn't take a press against his prostate for him to come. It only took a single glance across it.

Christian's cock jerked against Trip's tongue, and he held Trip's head in place tightly as his come filled his throat. Trip swallowed every bit of it. Christian struggled to remain quiet, his throat aching with the force of his silence. Somebody knocked on the door, but Christian barely heard it, and Trip ignored it. He pulled away, running his tongue along the bottom of Chris' shaft, and then swirled his tongue along the crown, tormenting the sensitive flesh.

"Stop... Trip... God..."

Another chuckle reverberated through him. "It's your own bloody fault for tasting so good," Trip murmured. He licked at the tip again, straightening when Christian's fingers pulled at his hair. His eyes were gleaming, and his upper lip shone where it curled into a smile. "And you can be damn sure that's not all I'm goin' to get."

Christian fisted Trip's shirt and caught his lips, claiming his mouth in a hard kiss, his tongue sweeping against Trip's, chasing the taste of his own come. Chris kissed him until he was breathless, but he pulled away gradually, caressing Trip with his tongue. "As long as I get my taste, too," Christian said against his mouth.

“Think that can be arranged.” Another knock came at the door, prompting Trip to tilt his head toward the exit. “Want me to get rid of ‘em so we can have another go?”

It was tempting, but Christian shook his head. “If you can wait a few hours, we’ll have room and time to do this properly.”

Trip grinned. “Only if you agree to getting the leather trousers first. I rather fancy stripping you out of them when I suck you again.”

Christian nodded, almost dazed. “I’ll get the leather trousers first, and whatever else you want.” He tucked himself back in and zipped up before impulsively reaching out to touch Trip’s hair. It was standing on end, and it looked really, really...hot. He pulled his hand back before he gave in to Trip’s invitation to have another go and turned the lock.

“You were right, you know,” Chris said, before pushing open the door. “My headache is gone.”

Trip’s hand stroked down the small of his back before settling at the upper curve of his ass. “Works every time.”

Chapter Three

There was a little voice that resided in the back of Trip's brain. It was the one that spoke up when it thought he was crossing a line, or about to do something really stupid, or sometimes just because it really, really, *really* wanted to brass Trip off. When he'd been growing up, it had sounded a lot like his Nan, the one person in his life who looked at him and saw straight through the façade he presented to the world. She'd called him on a lot of shit back in the day, but after she'd died when he was at uni, the little voice had stopped sounding like her. It simply hurt too much.

The thing of it was...over the years, Trip had become increasingly adept at ignoring that little voice. It had tried holding him back when he'd dropped out of uni in second year to give a go at his photography full time. It had warned him about coming out of the closet to his conservative family by taking a date—a gorgeous Irish bloke he was trying to coax into modeling for him—to his sister's wedding. And it screamed at him every time he fucked around with Andrew, especially when he had still been married to Lexie. So really, was it any wonder Trip was accustomed to tuning it out? His life would've been far different from how it turned out if he'd actually listened to it.

Ever since running into Christian at the pub, however, it wouldn't shut up. *He's hurting*, it said. *Leave him be*.

But Trip was hurting, too. How many times had he watched Andrew turn his life upside down for that ungrateful bitch of an ex-wife? And this time was the worst. Because it had finally seemed like Andrew was being honest about his sexuality. He was dating Chris, and he was coming to Trip more often, and all was right with the world. Sure, Trip had felt a pang of guilt about continuing to fuck Andrew after he'd hooked up with Christian, but those were alleviated by the infrequency of actually seeing the two men together. It was different with him and Andrew, Trip reasoned. They were best mates and had been for almost half their lives. If they chose to fuck each other every once in a while, that didn't have anything to do with who either of them was seeing at the time. That was about a deeper connection.

Which apparently meant dick to Andrew, since he'd leveled Trip after one drunken comment about his whore of an ex.

Getting the invitation to Italy had thrown him for a loop. He'd always liked Christian well enough, even if he thought he needed to be fucked for about a week to loosen up. The man was exactly Andrew's type, too—tall, lean without being skinny, intelligent—and the brilliant blue eyes trying to hide behind his glasses were the icing on the delicious cake. But the thought of putting the screws to Andrew by showing Chris the best time of his life had seemed too good to resist, especially when Christian tossed in the information about having the credit cards. It would hit Andrew where he hurt the most—his pride and his fucking wallet.

Trip couldn't resist.

There was only one problem.

By the time he watched Christian walk out of the pub, Trip was hard as a rock. Flirting with him had been second-nature, but the way Chris responded, blushing and eager, had turned the heat up on it. He was all Trip had thought about all night, and a big

part of the reason why he'd been angry enough to go and confront Andrew when he was drunk off his ass. He was used to Andrew treating him like shit, but Christian deserved better than that.

This trip to Italy was supposed to give Chris a little something back. But even as the little voice continued to nag him about giving Christian breathing space, Trip pushed his advantage, turning up the charm in hopes he'd get a repeat performance of the pub. He ended up getting better. He got reciprocation, and from the sounds of it, Chris was more than willing to let things continue once they were back on the ground. From Trip's point of view, everybody came out of this a winner—Chris got three weeks to try and forget about Andrew being such a wanker, Trip got to indulge in some mindless holiday fucking in order to forget the same thing, and when they got back, Andrew would have to deal with the fact they didn't bloody well need him.

When the plane landed and they rose from their seats, Christian flashed Trip a smile. *All right.* So it wouldn't be completely mindless. When it came to companions, Trip knew he could do a hell of a lot worse than Christian Davis.

The taxi ride from the Rome airport to the city center reminded Trip of the time he got completely wasted and went on a roller coaster. By the time he had disembarked from the ride, he had to swallow the urge to vomit, his face and hands were coated in cold sweat, and he lost ten minutes in an utter blackout. Except the drive to the hotel was a lot less fun than his stint on the roller coaster. Even Christian looked a little green around the gills by the time the cab stopped and the driver demanded twenty euros. Christian counted out the bills with obvious relief on his face, then helped Trip take their bags out of the back of the car.

Their hotel was just off the Del Corso, and seemed to be right in the middle of everything. Chris double-checked the address and led Trip up three flights of stairs to a small lobby. It was warm and inviting, and the man behind the desk look harried and annoyed, even though there was nobody else in the lobby. He showed them their room, reminded them breakfast would be served the next morning at eight, and showed them how to use the phone.

The room was tiny. The lone bed pushed against the wall was also tiny. Christian looked from it to Trip and back again before smiling sheepishly. "Last night when I gave you the ticket, I forgot about this part."

He looked so genuinely embarrassed that Trip decided to take it easy on him. "And here I thought you'd been angling for my body all along," he teased. He dropped his duffel on top of the small dresser and sized up the floor space with a critical eye. "I don't mind bunking on the floor if it'll make you more comfortable. Front desk probably wouldn't mind bringing up a spare duvet."

"You shouldn't have to sleep on the floor." Christian set his bag at the foot of the bed in question. "They might have another room available."

He didn't actually want another room. He wanted to push Chris to the bed and finish what they'd started on the plane. If Trip got relegated to someplace else, the odds of Christian using it as an excuse to brood over Andrew grew exponentially, and the entire purpose for tagging along for the holiday would be wasted.

Taking a step forward put him in touching distance. "What if I said my choice would be to take the bed?" Trip looped a finger through one of Christian's belt loops and tugged him closer. "Well, to take you *in* the bed."

Trip thought Chris might pull away, but instead of putting more space between them, he gripped Trip's shoulders. "If you told me that, I'd probably warn you I'm a restless sleeper. I'd want you to make an informed decision, after all."

"Guess that means I get the inside then." Twisting his wrist, he stroked Christian's burgeoning erection with the tips of his fingertips. "Which is always the fun place anyway. Means I get to climb over you in order to get out."

Chris shifted his hips, pressing more firmly against Trip's fingers, and sighed. He slid his hands down Trip's arms to rest them on his hips. "Then I guess we have an understanding."

That sodding little voice was screaming at him again, warning him about taking advantage of Christian's needy state. *I gave him an out*, Trip snapped at it. *It's not my fault he didn't take it*. He shoved it into a corner of his mind and slammed the door on it, choosing instead to focus on the proximity of Christian's lower lip and how good he'd tasted back on the plane.

"Need a kiss to seal the deal then," he muttered.

There was no resistance when he tugged Chris the rest of the way against his body, and no hesitation when his tongue demanded entrance. Trip swept inside, seeking out the heat of every corner of his mouth, groaning when Christian's fingers tightened into his hips.

"Maybe you should be the one to take me first in that bed," Trip breathed. "Because every time you touch me like that, all I can think about is you pounding into me."

Christian pulled away from Trip's mouth, his eyes widening. Trip didn't know how or why, but it seemed that he had miscalculated. Christian released him and stepped back. He looked embarrassed again, like he *wanted* to do exactly like Trip suggested, but he knew better than to try.

"I think I'm going to go downstairs and get something to eat." Christian rubbed the back of his neck. "You hungry?"

He shook his head. Chris obviously needed his space; Trip had been demanding a lot of it over the past few hours. "Just goin' to freshen up a bit. How about I meet you out front in an hour?" He smiled. "We can go hit the leather shop so you have something to wear when we go out tonight."

Christian seemed to relax at the suggestion. "Oddly enough, discussing leather trousers is one of the few things I remember from last night. We were going to use them to attract a bevy of Italian blokes, right?"

"That's the plan, though I'll bet you could wear just about anything and pull someone." Trip didn't glance back as he headed for the small bathroom. "See you in an hour."

* * * *

The music poured into the street, tangles of bodies already clogging the walks that led to the club Trip had specially selected. Although the night air was starting to cool, the lights and the noise gave the illusion of warmth, the heat rising from the narrow strip of concrete as he dragged Chris across the street and toward the entrance. Anticipation of the hours to come already made his blood hum, and the smile he shot over his shoulder when he felt Christian falter was brilliant.

"Stop worrying," he scolded. "You look bloody gorgeous. You'll have them eating

out of your hand as soon as you step inside. Or whatever other body part you'd prefer them to be eating out."

"I met my last three boyfriends at the market," Christian muttered. "Andrew was buying apples, I remember." At Trip's arched brow, he added, "I just mean, I haven't been out in a club since...well, years."

"Nothing's changed. You like music, right?"

Some of the lines marring Christian's forehead smoothed. "Yes." He tilted his head, listening to the sound spilling from the club. "In fact, I love this song."

It was a surprising revelation. The song in question was new to the charts, though Trip had heard it when the band had been testing it around London. The fact that Christian recognized it at all meant his tastes in music ran a little different than Trip had thought. Yet another thing about the man to keep him on his toes.

"And I know for a fact you like to drink," Trip said, resuming their path toward the front door. "So you're all set. We'll get inside, we'll get some liquid courage into you, and then we'll watch that lovely leather and those blue eyes reel them in."

Christian didn't resist again, following Trip willingly as he pushed through the milling crowd to get to the bar. Trip ordered a couple of shots without asking for Christian's input, then turned to survey the club. There was a healthy combination of what appeared to be natives and tourists, and more than a few of the couples on the floor were men, dancing a little too close, revealing a little too much skin as they moved against each other.

Chris downed his drink in a single gulp then gasped for breath, leaning against the bar. "Little stronger than I expected."

Trip knocked his shot back, barely tasting it as it burned a path to his stomach. "It's just meant to loosen you up." The smell of sweat from all the bodies tickled his nose, and his mouth watered. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Christian try not to fidget in his new clothes and bit back a grin. It didn't matter if he wasn't comfortable in them. He looked even better than Trip had already testified.

The black leather trousers he'd selected hugged Christian's long legs, outlining firm thighs and a tight little ass. Trip had picked out a midnight blue silk shirt to go with them, one that made the color of Christian's eyes pop, even in the dim lighting of the club. He hadn't let Chris shave, either, so even if his dark hair was combed neatly, the shadow along his jaw was enough to counter it. He looked good enough to eat with a spoon, and while Trip knew the goal of the night was to make Chris the center of attention, it was hard not to drag him back to their hotel and keep him for himself.

"I feel loose," Christian said. The song changed, and Chris shifted, his foot moving to the beat, his fingers tapping against the bar. He watched the dance floor with rapt attention for a few moments, more than a hint of longing in his eyes. The boy wanted to dance. That much was obvious.

"Come on." Trip didn't give him the chance to say no, wrapping his fingers around Christian's wrist and pulling him away from the bar. "Dance with me."

Trip found a tiny bit of space on the floor, just enough room for the two of them. Chris watched uncertainly as Trip began to move to the driving beat. He may have hesitated longer, but it was impossible to stand still in the middle of those writhing bodies. Concentration marred his face. He was thinking about this far too much. Trip was about to chastise him and tell him to relax when he finally took a step, then another, his

body seeking out the rhythm even if his brain was still over-analyzing the situation.

Trip's gaze flickered over the long, lean muscles. There were many times when Christian had struck him as a colt learning to walk. Trip had always credited that to being just part of who he was, but here, with the pounding rhythm forcing Chris to join in, he wondered if his original assessment was wrong. Maybe it was simply a matter of shyness, or an embarrassment that found refuge in Christian's long limbs. Because as he began to undulate to the music, the awkwardness vanished, leaving behind a man with an almost sinuous grace.

He reached for him without thinking. Strong fingers found Christian's hip and curled around it, pulling him closer without breaking his rhythm. Trip shifted in the throng so that their bodies were offset, and with his hand seeking a firmer hold around a taut buttock, he started to grind against Christian's thigh.

Trip knew they would attract attention, but he thought he'd have Christian to himself for a little longer. He hoped for a lot longer when Christian pressed firmly against him, his hand gripping Trip's hip. But only a few minutes passed before they started attracting appreciative stares, and their already limited space was further cramped. Trip didn't realize they were forcing Chris away from him until it was too late. One moment their bodies were pressed together, and the next, Christian was twisting against a new partner.

He watched him go with a dash of regret. He didn't need the little voice to tell him it was better this way, even if it was. Because what mattered was that at the end of the night, they were still going to be in the same bed. Chris could have all the fun he wanted. In the end, Trip would get his, too.

Chapter Four

Christian only grasped every other word or so from his very hot, very Italian companion, Giovanni, but he understood enough. Giovanni's English was heavily accented and halting, and Christian's Italian was rusty with lack of use—the last time he spoke fluently was almost a decade earlier, but they were getting by. Christian knew Giovanni was visiting Rome on a short holiday, he attended the University of Florence, and he was studying the Italian Renaissance. He knew Giovanni was a little too young for him. He knew Giovanni had a sinful mouth and gorgeous eyes, and he was absolutely captivated.

Despite the fact that dawn was just around the corner, the club was still full. Christian had a hard time keeping track of Trip. It was a full-time effort, and Chris was splitting his attention between the gorgeous creature at his side, and a very drunk, very hyper Trip.

"It's very loud here," Giovanni said, while Chris was looking over his shoulder. "Perhaps we can...go to...somewhere like my room?"

Christian's gaze was drawn immediately back to Giovanni's, rather beautiful, face. He must have been the sort of person Trip had in mind when he insisted Christian wear leather to attract attention. Hell, Giovanni was the sort of person everybody had in mind when they went to Italy and tried to attract attention. His dark eyes danced with anticipation, and his mouth was already curved into a charming smile. Why shouldn't he anticipate Christian's acceptance of his invitation? Christian wanted to accept with every fiber of his being.

"Excuse me?" A tap on his shoulder.

Christian dragged his attention from his companion to the short American girl tapping his shoulder. "Yes?"

"Is that man with you?" she asked, pointing to Trip. "I saw you two dancing earlier."

"Yes."

"You better get over there. He's about to get his face broke."

Christian looked to Giovanni. He felt they had a deep and abiding connection. Or maybe he was just buzzed and very, very in lust. He looked to Trip. Trip was his...friend? Chris wanted to think that if he was in trouble, Trip would try to help him out. Despite his hesitation, he knew he only had one real choice.

"Thanks," he said to the girl. Then to Giovanni, "Look, I gotta go help him."

"Sure. Sure. I wait?"

Christian nodded, then left the bar and pushed his way through the circle of people to Trip, who was trying to stare down a much larger, much drunker German.

"And I'm telling you, you daft todger..." As if the derogatory term wasn't enough, Trip jabbed a single finger hard into the man's bull chest. "...the fact that we kicked your sorry arses in oh-two is more than enough proof that you know bugger all about wiping your own bums, let alone how to play some decent football."

The other man's face turned a bright shade of purple Christian had only seen on grapes and aubergines, his meaty fingers curling into a fist. Trip didn't back down. Chris couldn't tell how drunk the German was, but there was no doubt in his mind this

argument would come to blows. He had seen it happen before, twice, and in both times, the participants were dead sober. The German grabbed Trip's wrist and squeezed.

"Don't touch me again."

Christian appreciated that he offered a fair warning. Trip wouldn't, but then again, Trip was too drunk to heed the warning anyway. It was still a good gesture, given that Trip probably didn't deserve it at all.

Before Trip took the final step and provoked the German into violence, Christian grabbed his shoulders and pulled him back, out of touching distance.

"If you'll pardon us," Chris said, with his best mollifying voice. "My friend here is very drunk. I'm just going to take him home now. He won't bother you anymore."

Trip glared up at him, but didn't try to break away from Christian's hold. "Bother him? Are you kidding me? He's the one who bloody started it. Called me a nancy boy who didn't know his left foot from his right." His muscles tensed as he turned back to the German. "I was about to show him how well I do know the difference."

The black eye Andrew had given him was now a rainbow of color, and though Christian had to admit it didn't make Trip less attractive, he didn't want to see him sporting a matching bruise on the other side either. Two swollen eyes was not the best way to start a holiday.

"Look." Christian lowered his voice and stepped in front of Trip, separating the two men with his own body. He put his mouth close to Trip's ear, and spoke just loud enough for Trip to hear him over the music. "Why don't you come back to the hotel with me and help me get out of these trousers, yeah?" He thought of Giovanni with a minor pang of regret. *Maybe next time.* "They're a bit tight, you know."

Trip's warm breath fanned across his neck. Had it been that fast and heavy when he'd squared off with the German? Suddenly, Christian couldn't remember. A strong hand gripped his hip, followed by the definite swipe of Trip's tongue over his ear.

"Been waiting for you to say that all night," Trip said. He tilted his head to look past Christian's shoulder at the German standing behind him. "Lucky for you, I'm so damn irresistible."

"Completely irresistible," Christian agreed, gently turning him around. He threw an apologetic smile over his shoulder and began ushering Trip towards the bar. "Let me settle our tab, and we'll be on our way."

Giovanni was still waiting for him, like he promised. Christian fished Andrew's credit card out of his wallet and handed it to the bartender.

"We go now, yes?"

Christian shook his head. "No, I've got to get my friend home before he finds real trouble."

Giovanni looked disappointed, but he nodded. "I see, I see. You take care of your friend. Perhaps we'll meet again tomorrow?"

"Perhaps we will," Christian said, scribbling Andrew's name across the bottom of the receipt.

Trip's mouth opened as if he had something to contribute, and Chris braced himself for whatever remark was about to come. In Trip's state, it wouldn't be good. It would probably even ruin his chances of getting Giovanni to speak to him again, though frankly, he was surprised he'd spoken to him at all.

"Come by at lunch time and take Chris here out to eat," Trip said. "My treat." He

snatched the pen from Christian and scrawled the name of their hotel across the back of a beer mat. "I'm not a morning person and somebody needs to keep our boy entertained."

Giovanni beamed, the disappointment gone from his face. Christian couldn't help but return his smile, though he wasn't sure what prompted the almost giddy feeling bubbling in his chest—the prospect of lunch with Giovanni, or the fact that Trip took the situation in hand and didn't let Chris lose his chance.

Trip stepped away from the bar and seemed to stumble on nothing but air. Chris grabbed him, pulling him back against his chest and wrapped a steadying arm around him. "Don't fall now and ruin that pretty face of yours."

"Can't have that," Trip muttered. His awkward lurch seemed to disorient him a little, and he swayed a bit as they headed for the exit. "It's all I have to offer."

No, it's not. Christian would have assured him of that, but Trip wasn't like him. He didn't need somebody to boost his flagging self-esteem. They made it out of the club and were promptly greeted by a long row of idling taxis. He took Trip to the one at the front of queue, half-leading, half-dragging him over the uneven street. Trip's feet betrayed him more with every step, until by the time they reached the cab, he practically fell into it.

Christian leaned over the front seat to tell the driver their address, and Trip pulled him back against his chest as soon as he finished speaking.

"Bugged up your night," he said. His hands roamed freely down Christian's body, but his attempts to try and pull the shirt free from of the leather waistband failed with his fumbling. "Need to make it up you."

Trip reeked of alcohol, cigarette smoke, and sweat. In the confines of the car, it was easier to smell the booze on his breath and clothes. But his body was solid and hot, and Christian knew from experience how clever his mouth was. He turned his head, his lips brushing against Trip's.

"It's not completely bugged," he murmured. Before he turned the light caress into something more, Trip shoved him away and frantically rolled down the window. The driver glanced at them in his rear-view mirror.

"No puking in this cab!"

"He's not," Christian said quickly, as Trip stuck his head out the window. Chris rubbed his back and waited for Trip to prove him wrong. He didn't, but when he sat back against the seat, he looked a little green.

"Think I might've drunk too much." He stretched a hand out to caress Christian's thigh, but instead of the firm massage Chris expected, his hand just rested heavily, almost like Trip had forgotten it was there. "Have I mentioned tonight what a bloody fool Andrew was?"

Christian looked down at Trip's hand, noting absently that he wanted to lick his finger. "No." Chris had somehow managed not to think about Andrew the entire time they were out. Dancing with Trip helped, and so did flirting with Italian boys. "But a reminder doesn't hurt."

"Andrew's a bloody fool." He paused, a slow frown furrowing his brow. "He doesn't know we're here, does he? We should ring him. Tell him what he's missing out on."

Christian blanched at the idea. He certainly didn't want to talk to Andrew now. The thought hurt too much. And he was trying to be strong. He knew without a doubt that when he heard Andrew's voice, he would forget about having fun, forget about Trip's amazing mouth, forget about Giovanni's obvious interest. He'd forget about everything

except the fact that he was facing an entire lifetime without the person he thought he could spend the rest of his life with.

“No. No, let’s not ring him tonight. We’ll let him know what he’s missing out on in a few days.”

Trip made a face like Christian had just said the most brilliant thing in the world. “Make him stew, got it. That way, when he breaks and tracks us down, wondering where in the hell we are, we’ll be brown as nuts and sore as all fuck from all the gorgeous shagging we’re going to do.”

At this point, it really shouldn’t have been possible for Trip to make his ears turn red, but he did. It wasn’t that Christian hadn’t considered shagging Trip. He had. In great detail. After their meeting in the bathroom, there wasn’t much else to do on the plane. But he had never met anybody who talked the way Trip did, as though he was daring the world to have a problem with it.

“Do you think he’ll ring us? Or will he be too worried about Lexie to even notice we’re both gone?”

“Oh, he’ll do it.” How Trip could sound so confident, Chris had no idea. But if anybody knew how Andrew would act, it had to be Trip. “Sooner or later, Lexie will let go of his balls long enough for him to pick up a phone.”

In a way, Trip’s certainty that Andrew would call them made sense. Andrew was always very troubled at the thought of people having a good time without him. In fact, he had been annoyed more than once by Trip leaving town on some shoot, with some model. Annoyed enough that Chris had to hear about it. Every time.

“Well, I won’t be able to talk to him when he does. Unless you plan to shag me so thoroughly, I don’t care what he says anymore.”

Now Trip’s hand was moving, drawing lazy circles that grew ever closer to Christian’s cock. “My reputation must be slipping,” he said with a sly smirk. “If you don’t already know that’s what’ll happen, it looks like I’ll have to work a little harder.”

He leaned in as if to kiss Chris, but a sharp turn around a corner pitched him sideways so that his head came to rest on Christian’s shoulder. Chris waited for him to lift it up and finish what he started, but Trip seemed content to stay there, his eyes falling shut.

Christian tentatively touched Trip’s face, his fingers lingering on the smooth part of his cheek, just above his stubble. Trip smiled slightly, moving his face against Christian’s fingers. He was seized by the desire to scrape his lips across his cheek, testing the texture of his skin and of his stubble, tasting the sweat and the alcohol, moving lower to his mouth. Before Christian gave in to this impulse, he was thrown forward against the passenger seat as the cab came to an abrupt halt.

“Fifteen.”

Christian handed over the money and nudged Trip. “Come on then, let’s get you upstairs.”

“Up, up, up,” Trip muttered.

Trip fumbled with the door handle, but managed to open it before Chris had to reach across and do it for him. Lurching into the street, he rounded the rear of the cab without managing to fall onto his face, a feat that surprised the hell out of Christian. He was on the curb before he came to a halt, looking at his empty side so quizzically that it was hard not to smile.

“You’re taking too long,” he complained back at Chris.

“I’m sorry,” Christian said, stepping up to join him. As soon as he was within touching distance, Trip grabbed him, wrapping his arm around his waist. Chris put his arm around his shoulder and turned him towards the hotel entrance.

Their room was on the third floor. The stairs hadn’t seemed that bad on the way down earlier that evening, but now Chris didn’t think either one of them would be able to make it. He opted for the elevator. The very cramped elevator.

Without letting him go, Trip flopped heavily against the wall, spreading his legs to give room for Chris to lean into him. “Like this shirt,” he said. He grabbed the open collar and yanked it to the side, licking his lips as it exposed Christian’s neck and shoulder. “Like this skin better.”

Christian shuddered as Trip raked his teeth along the curve, his tongue soothing over the ragged path he left. Small growls came from Trip’s chest, and his fingers dug into Christian’s muscles, hard and pinching. He shouldn’t have so much strength in his state of inebriation, Chris thought irrationally. But that thought led directly to, *how strong is he when he’s sober?*

The elevator ascended slowly, and Christian couldn’t help but be grateful for its languorous pace. Trip was busy demonstrating just how much he liked his skin, and Chris thought he could stay like this forever. The door behind him dinged and opened, but Trip’s grip on him didn’t loosen, allowing the doors to swoosh shut again before either of them moved.

Christian moaned and hit the button to open the door again. “Come on. Let’s get to our room.” Trip responded by sucking the skin at his throat between his teeth. Christian whimpered, but managed to pull away from him before the door shut yet again.

Trip stumbled as he followed Chris down the hall, righting himself by curling fingers through the back of Christian’s waistband. When they reached their door, he coiled an arm around Christian’s waist and began nibbling on his neck.

“You a screamer?” he asked between bites. “Don’t know if you bein’ so quiet on the plane was your natural reaction or you not wanting to bring the captain around to boot us off.”

Christian thought of the number of times he’d screamed Andrew’s name until he was hoarse. “No, I’m not usually so quiet.” He fumbled with the key, grateful he had been moderate in his drinking. If they were both drunk, they’d probably be naked right there in the hall. The door flung open and they fell inside, a tangle of legs, Trip still firmly attached to him.

Christian managed to guide him to the bed, but Trip’s foot wrapped around his ankle, and they fell to the mattress. Chris wasn’t entirely convinced it had been an accident.

Trip sighed in satisfaction. “You’re so bloody warm,” he murmured.

“So are you,” Christian breathed, sliding against Trip’s chest. He knew Trip wasn’t in any condition to do what he clearly wanted to do. He knew he should put Trip to bed, and if anything more happened between them, they should be sober. Or a little closer to sober. But...

He pushed Trip’s damp hair away from his forehead and gave in to his earlier impulse to kiss him, running his lips over Trip’s brow and cheek and jaw. Trip turned his head and caught his lips. His mouth was hot and tasted like the whiskey they’d been drinking all night, but better. And far more intoxicating.

The kiss lengthened, deepened, slowed, did crazy things to Christian's head that might have been a result of the alcohol or Trip's hard body or all the promises that had been offered already that night. The bed didn't seem so small any more. With Trip beneath him, there was plenty of room. All Trip needed to do was spread his legs a little, and...

"Warm," Trip repeated, though the single word was more of a breath. In the next, his mouth stopped moving entirely.

Christian lifted his head. Trip's eyes were closed, his mouth partially opened, and his breathing deep. Christian sighed and pushed himself to his feet, careful not to disturb Trip. Though he seemed dead to the world. Chris wasn't sure he could be disturbed.

He closed and locked their door, turned on the bedside lamp, and changed his clothes. The leather stuck to his thighs, and he really wished Trip had been awake to help him. Once he had himself ready for bed, he turned his attention to Trip and was immediately struck by how young he looked. Not that Trip looked old when he was awake, but asleep, he took on a boyish quality that didn't have any place on a face that was usually leering.

Unable to resist, Chris skimmed his fingertips over the strong line of Trip's jaw. Though he'd slicked back the longer strands of his black hair at the evening's start, all their activity had left Trip provocatively disheveled, the ends curling at his nape, a long lank falling across his brow. Trip turned his head into Christian's touch, but rather than wake him up, Chris withdrew, shifting his attention to Trip's feet. Boots were easy. Not sexy at all.

The jeans were next. His fingers were clumsy as he struggled to pull the denim down Trip's lean hips, and his breath caught in his throat when he realized Trip wasn't wearing anything underneath them. At least Trip wasn't completely hard. His cock rested along his thigh, thick and mouth-watering, and it took the rest of Christian's concentration not to swallow it right then. He wanted to feel it swell against his tongue, probe the back of his throat.

Trip groaned in his sleep, a reminder that all of Christian's fantasies weren't going to come to life tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

Getting the sleeveless shirt off was a hell of a lot harder than the jeans, but eventually that was gone, too. Chris knew Trip was muscled; the way Trip dressed left little to the imagination. It was the little left over, however, that took Christian's breath away. Trip's arms and chest were tightly sculpted, sinew and strength in every line, and the thin line of hair that ran from the middle of his stomach straight to his crotch was more of a beckoning than anything else. He wanted to drag his tongue down that line. He didn't want to stop when he reached Trip's cock.

If Christian had been the jealous sort, he would have had a serious problem with Andrew spending so much time with such a gorgeous specimen. Of course, it was an entirely moot point. And it wasn't Andrew spending time with him now. Christian was, and he intended to get to know Trip much better. He intended to become acquainted with the way he tasted. He wanted to find out if Trip was as vocal in bed as he was out of it. He wanted to feel Trip's sinewy strength pinning him to the bed as he pounded into his ass.

Christian rubbed his face and forced himself to stop thinking about it. His cock was hard enough without creating more tantalizing images and fantasies that would have to be

put on hold. He fished a pair of shorts out of Trip's luggage and pulled them up his legs. His earlier resolve fluttered away as his fingers brushed against Trip's inner thigh. Chris froze and looked up to Trip's face, waiting for any reaction. Trip's face was impassive. Slowly, he lowered his head and kissed the soft skin he'd just touched, inhaling deeply. His mouth watered. Christian forced himself to straighten and finished pulling up the shorts, covering all points of temptation.

He gently nudged Trip to the inside edge of the bed and crawled in beside him. As soon as he was settled under the blanket, Trip rolled over, his arm and leg pinning Christian to the mattress.

Chapter Five

Giovanni was actually waiting for him outside. He was taller than Christian remembered. And prettier. For a moment, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. The man standing on the corner had to be a stranger, waiting for somebody who wasn't Chris. But then he turned around and smiled. He raised his hand to beckon Chris over, and Christian's feet moved on their own accord.

Trip was still sleeping off his drunk upstairs. Christian hoped he would sleep right through his hangover. He had taken a few euros out of Trip's billfold, replacing them with a scrap of paper that said *IOU-C*. He figured he was entitled to lunch on Trip after the night the other man had subjected him to. He got very little sleep, and he was hard most of the time, a direct reaction to Trip's need to cuddle. He had somehow managed to keep his hands to himself, though a small voice kept telling him that Trip would never know if he molested him in his sleep, and even if he did know, he wouldn't care.

That was no doubt true, but it didn't matter. Even if he got away with it, it wouldn't have been very satisfying. In fact, the contact he did get away with only served to aggravate the problem. He was up and out of bed by dawn, venturing out of the hotel to find breakfast. Trip had still been asleep when he returned. Christian couldn't wait for an excuse to leave again.

And now Giovanni was waving at him, his black hair shining in the sun, his eyes flashing. He grabbed Christian by the shoulders as though they were the greatest of friends, parted only by the cruelest of fates, and kissed Chris right on the mouth. He pulled back before Chris could even think about responding, his smile still wide and inviting. And pretty.

"I am so happy to see you."

Chris smiled. "I'm happy to see you, too."

"Come, come with me. I know the perfect place for lunch."

Christian was surprised he still intended to eat. After a greeting like that, Chris thought their midday activities might have less to do with food, and more to do with satisfying other appetites. And he had them. The kiss did nothing but remind him of everything he wanted to do that he was denied. Maybe he was being greedy. Maybe he was sublimating all his pain into sexual desire, the way his sister always sublimated it into a craving for cheese.

Giovanni led him to a very small restaurant. Despite the hundreds of tourists milling around outside, looking dazed from the heat and hunger, the tiny room was empty. Giovanni spoke to an old woman in rapid Italian that Christian couldn't follow; Andrew was the fluent one. He was the one who was supposed to translate, do all the talking for both of them on this holiday. Except Andrew wasn't here. Giovanni was. And Trip.

The old woman led them to a table in the corner, disappeared, and then returned with a bottle of wine.

"She's my aunt Maria. This is her place."

Christian looked around. It was perfect. The perfect Italian restaurant. It was no surprise it belonged to the family of this perfect Italian boy. "What do you suggest I have?"

"I'll order for you," he offered.

Christian nodded. "Thank you."

"Is your friend well?"

"He's still asleep."

"Ah, so you are sleeping together?"

"Yes. No. Yes." Christian shook his head. "It's complicated."

"Yes, it sounds like it. I don't want to...how you say? Step on any toes."

"You won't. You're not," Chris assured him quickly. "Trip and I are just traveling together right now. That's all."

Giovanni looked placated by the explanation, and he waved Maria over, his melodic voice filling the room. Christian was happy to listen to him, and after she left to get their food, he sat back and allowed Giovanni to dominate the conversation in a mixture of English and Italian. Chris learned more about the Italian Renaissance than he ever needed to know, but Giovanni could have offered an in-depth analysis of the weather forecast, and Christian would have been content to listen to him. It was the light in his eyes, more than anything, that kept Chris interested. He could never resist a man who was passionate about something. It didn't matter what, as long as it made his heart race a little faster, and his smile shine a little brighter.

The afternoon wore on, but Christian didn't feel the need to hurry things. They lingered over each dish, each glass of wine, each piece of bread. After the meal, they shared another bottle of sweet wine, and the conversation wound down. Christian felt mellow, his head full of cotton, and all he could think about was the way Giovanni had teased him the night before with pretty words, and how Trip had made him blush like he was some sort of virgin who had never been kissed, and how they had kissed.

Christian blinked. "Do you think we could go somewhere more private?"

Giovanni's smile was slow and promising. "*Sì*."

He stood and offered his hand, his fingers closing around Christian's with undeniable strength. He played some sport in his spare time, Christian remembered. What was it? Not football. Christian dismissed the question. It hardly seemed to matter now. All that mattered was Giovanni's hard body, and the way he held on to Chris for a moment too long, and the way Christian's body throbbed in response.

Giovanni took him into a small room. A closet? A pantry? It was just big enough for the two to stand comfortably, and a tiny light hung above them, casting more shadows than it dispelled. Giovanni shut the door behind them, pushing Chris against the wall and cupping the back of his neck. Christian opened his mouth to the kiss before Giovanni touched him, the tips of their tongues touching first.

Except for the all too brief kisses he'd exchanged with Trip, Giovanni was the first person, other than Andrew, Christian had kissed in a little over a year—since his first meeting with Andrew. A part of him still expected Andrew's mouth, and was shocked and a little disappointed by Giovanni's. His lips were softer, his mouth wider, his tongue more insistent, and he tasted of wine and garlic. The initial disappointment faded, replaced by desire. The desire for contact, the desire to know he was still wanted. Andrew's love and betrayal hadn't scarred him, hadn't made him incapable of kissing somebody new in a dark closet in the middle of Rome.

Giovanni's hands were all over him. Christian couldn't keep track of where they were touching, where they were going, what they were reaching for. He didn't resist

when Giovanni went to his zipper and forced it down, freeing the erection he had been sporting for what seemed like years. He took Christian's erection and forced his hand over the bulge Giovanni sported. Chris quickly unbuttoned the tight jeans, and they both sighed with pleasure as Chris began to stroke his length.

"Te voglio. I want to fuck you," Giovanni panted in his ear.

"Condom?"

One appeared in his hand almost immediately. Christian wondered if he had it up his sleeve the entire time. He might have said no, but he was buzzed on the wine, dizzy with desire, and Giovanni smelled very good. It should be illegal for people to smell that good. He inclined his head. That was all the acquiescence Giovanni needed. He spun Christian around, and he braced himself against the wall as Giovanni yanked his pants down.

Christian looked over his shoulder as the other man grabbed a bottle of olive oil off the shelf. It wasn't his first choice for lube, but it would get the job done. Giovanni poured the liquid over his fingers and then pushed them both in Christian's ass without further warning. The sudden assault didn't cool Christian's lust. If anything, it made his balls ache more.

"So tight," Giovanni murmured.

Christian turned his head and caught Giovanni's mouth as he pumped his wrist. He fucked Chris with his tongue and his fingers, until Chris twisted against him, pushing for more.

"You're ready for my cock now?"

"Ready," Chris gasped. "Waiting."

Giovanni pulled away from him, and Chris closed his eyes and rested his head on the wall, listening while the Italian rolled the condom on. He didn't spare a thought to Andrew, but he did briefly wonder what Trip was doing, if he was awake, if this was what he had in mind when he ordered Giovanni to meet Chris for lunch. Until Giovanni's cock was nudging him, thick and blunt against his hole.

Then Christian was done thinking about anything except Giovanni's fat cock stretching him. He pushed against the wall and back onto Giovanni, urging him to sheath himself completely. Giovanni wrapped his arm around him, holding him still as he began to piston his hips. It might have been a little faster than Christian wanted, a little harder than he was prepared for, but it was still good. Better than good.

Giovanni gripped Christian's shaft and began to stroke him in time with the rhythm of his hips. Chris closed his eyes, focusing on each sensation as it spiraled out of control through his body. The air was stifling in the small room, and he wasn't getting enough in his lungs. Sweat rolled down his forehead and neck. Giovanni was overpowering behind him, his chest damp against Christian's back.

"Don't make any noise," Giovanni warned, his breath tickling his ear.

Christian shook his head. *No noise. No noise.* He repeated it like a mantra, and remembered Trip asking him if he was a screamer. Trip wanted to make him scream. He clamped his teeth down and stifled his moan as Giovanni hit his prostate and stripped his shaft. His palm covered the head of his cock, and Christian jerked against his hand, covering it in come as he shuddered with his climax.

Giovanni released him and brought his hand up to his mouth, licking it clean before pulling away from Christian's ass. Chris could only watch silently as he cleaned himself, wondering if Giovanni would want to kiss him again.

“Wait one moment,” Giovanni murmured, his voice thick. “I will check outside.”

Christian nodded and pulled his trousers up, a shiver rolling down his spine as fresh air hit his neck.

“Nobody is out here.”

Christian was going to ask where Maria was, but he found he didn’t care. He zipped quickly and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. Giovanni took his other hand and led him out to the fresh air, through the tiny restaurant, and into the sunshine.

“Would you like me to walk you back to your room?”

Christian’s head was still spinning from the quick fuck and the even quicker dismissal. He didn’t think they’d cuddle on the floor of the closet or anything, but he wasn’t quite prepared for the *wham bam* that was Giovanni’s style. Maybe he had just been suffering from the same frustration that plagued Chris. Maybe he had a boyfriend to get back to after his quick nooner.

Maybe he should just accept the meeting for what it was.

“No, no, I can find my own way.”

“We should meet again.”

Christian nodded vaguely. He was still tingling from his orgasm, still pleasantly sore, and for several minutes, he had been consumed by something other than thoughts about Andrew. And Trip. There was no reason not to meet Giovanni again, but he found he didn’t want to commit to anything.

Giovanni kissed the corner of his mouth. “I hope you can be happy.”

Christian could only smile. Giovanni released him and disappeared into the crowd.

Chris moved slowly through the streets, in no great hurry to be anywhere. He was surprised when he found their room empty, but not necessarily disappointed. He needed some time to think, and Trip wasn’t interested in allowing personal space. He stripped and went to the shower.

* * * *

The other side of the bed was empty when Trip woke up, the sheets already cool to the touch. He vaguely remembered Chris breaking up the football discussion with the German and the taxi ride back to the hotel, but the pounding behind his eyeballs made the rest of it blur. Had they had sex like Trip wanted? Being undressed would have been a good indication of that, except he was wearing shorts. Those hadn’t been part of the ensemble last night, which meant Christian had done the gentlemanly thing and got him ready for bed and that was it. It was almost a shame. Trip would’ve regretted it more if he actually remembered more of the night’s events.

A quick glance at his watch said it was past noon. It took a moment for his laggard brain to call forward the memory he needed, but then there were seductive brown eyes and Christian’s disappointed declaration about taking his friend home and Trip’s voice suggesting lunch on him. So that’s where Chris was. Good for him. The more time Trip spent with the man, the more he thought Chris was better off without Andrew, the Lexie issues notwithstanding. A fling with a pretty Italian boy would be a good step toward realizing that.

He took his time in the shower, scrubbing himself raw as he washed away the night at the club. He loved his life, but sometimes the hustling felt exactly like that. Pursuing

photography had never been about getting an invite to a world of partying and lost nights. It was a fun side effect, sure, but the root had always been about truth in beauty. Which was more than a tad ironic considering most of his work these days was in fashion photography.

Hitching a ride to Rome with Christian had been a boon for more than three weeks of fun. There was a job he wanted—that he'd been gagging for—with *Dieci*, a prominent men's magazine he'd done work for previously. In the past few weeks, word had come through the grapevine they wanted to start a monthly feature highlighting social concerns. The new owner was a glutton for getting involved, and the prospect of doing something different, something that was more than bodies, that would challenge him, had Trip more excited about having a camera in his hands than he had been in years. All he had to do was show them his portfolio. Trip was sure it would speak for itself.

So he had had Helen, his assistant, help him pick out some of his better work. Nobody but her knew about what he was going to try to do; there was enough competition in his field without letting on what jobs interested him the most. He had considered telling Christian about his plans, but that had felt like too much. Christian was here to escape. He didn't need to be burdened with Trip's excitement about a new project.

By three, Trip was outside and under the brilliant sun, a bounce in his step, his portfolio in his pack. Briefly, he wondered how Chris was faring, but those thoughts soon focused on his own afternoon. What he would say, how he would pitch. Talking himself up shouldn't be so hard. Why, then, did his stomach feel like a hive of bees had taken up residence there?

The pretty receptionist met his most ingratiating smile with a polite one of her own. "How may I help you?" she said.

Though she addressed him in Italian, Trip knew she would speak English and replied as such. "I'm here to see Paolo Menozzi, luv." He leaned against the raised counter separating them. "The name's Trip Watson."

"Do you have an appointment, signor?"

"Not specifically, no. But if you let Paolo know I'm here, I'm sure he'll find a few minutes to spare for me."

She looked doubtful, but picked up the phone anyway, turning away as she made the announcement. Trip didn't budge while he waited, his smile still in place when she hung up.

"Signor Menozzi will be right with you," she said.

The nerves returned as he thanked her and took a seat in one of those god-awful, uncomfortable chairs that the Italians were so in love with. It was impossible to sit without having his ass fall asleep, so as soon as he heard the lift whisper open, Trip stood up again. He stuffed his hands into his pockets only to pull them out when he realized he was going to need to shake Paolo's hand.

"Such the surprise!" Paolo's smile was wide as he grabbed Trip's shoulders and kissed both cheeks, his beard scraping against Trip's skin. "What are you doing here? I had no idea you were in Rome."

The exuberant greeting helped Trip relax. "Last minute thing. But I couldn't come to town without seeing my favorite editor, now could I?"

Paolo's smile faded at the same time his eyes narrowed. "I am only your favorite

when you want something.”

“That’s not true. You’re my favorite when I don’t want something, too.”

“But you come for a reason.”

Trip took a deep breath. Leave it to Paolo to cut through the niceties. “I heard about the new tree-hugger shoots, and I want in.” Pulling off his pack, he dug out his portfolio and held it out. “I brought some new stuff nobody’s seen, and it’s bloody good, if I do say so myself.”

Paolo didn’t even glance down at the offering as he shook his head. “You have wasted your time. This job is not for you, Trip.”

His stomach clenched, but he kept his hand steady, not withdrawing the portfolio. “I know what my work usually looks like, but I’m telling you, mate, this isn’t what you’re expecting.”

“It does not matter. This job is not for you.”

“You haven’t even looked at them...”

“You are my friend, Trip, and you are very talented, yes. But this job, it will need an...edgier touch than yours. Someone who sees the world differently than you do. This is just the way it is.” Sidestepping the folio that still came between them, Paolo looped his arm over Trip’s shoulder and led him toward the door. “We must have dinner while you are in Rome. You will call me, yes? We will find a night when we are both free and there is no work to discuss.”

And then he was back out in the sunshine, and Paolo was finding some ridiculous excuse about an editorial decision to leave him alone, and Trip was left standing there on the sidewalk, wondering what in hell had just happened. He wasn’t *edgy* enough? His whole career had been about edgy. All Paolo needed to do was look at the photos Trip had brought, and he’d see that for himself.

But Paolo didn’t even think it was worth his time to look.

Trip shoved his portfolio into his pack, his jaw tight. What hurt the most was the unwanted confirmation of what he’d feared all along—that he wasn’t good enough for the job. Photography was the only thing he’d ever wanted to be great at. He’d sacrificed a lot to get as far as he had.

What was there left for him to give up?

Chapter Six

Christian stared at the ceiling as the late afternoon breeze wafted through the open window, carrying the aroma of coffee and baked bread and exhaust from the endless traffic. He had turned on the television earlier, but decided he'd rather listen to the sounds of the city. He had books in his luggage, and there was a computer in the lobby if he wanted to check his email—had Andrew emailed him?—but he opted to stay on the bed and let his mind drift while he waited for Trip.

And why was he so eager to see Trip? He wasn't on edge with lust, and he had been excited about the prospect of having some time to himself. He had nothing in common with Trip except Andrew, and they didn't even have that in common any more. Not really. So why was he looking forward to inviting Trip to watch the sunset from the Spanish Steps with him?

Christian was half-asleep, thinking about the Spanish Steps and Trip, when the door flew open, startling him awake. He sat up, his greeting dying on his lips. Trip looked...well, it was hard for Christian to describe it. He had never seen that look on Trip's face before. Unhappy, maybe? Even when he was angry with Andrew, Trip had a certain light in his eyes, that swagger in his step. Now he had neither.

"Sorry about that," Trip muttered. The pack he carried landed in a forgotten heap by the door, and in the next step, he was toeing off his heavy boots. "Didn't think I'd see you again today."

"No, it's fine." Christian swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Where did you go?"

He could've sworn he saw Trip wince, and the way he turned his back on him as he began to undo the buttons on his shirt made him think he wasn't going to get an answer at all. As it was, it took nearly a minute for Trip to reply.

"Went and saw an editor friend about a new job," he said. "You mind if I use the shower?"

Christian shook his head. "No, of course not."

Trip grunted and disappeared into the bathroom. Chris sat on the edge of the bed for several seconds until he heard the pipes rattle to life. He debated with himself over what to do. He wasn't sure what to do with a depressed Trip—and he clearly was. Christian didn't need to be told things had not gone well with his editor friend.

Curiosity prompted him to his feet, and he crossed the room to pick up the pack Trip dropped. Keeping an ear tuned to the bathroom, and feeling like he was committing a small sin, he took out the portfolio. He had seen Trip's work before, of course. Even without the personal connection, you had to live under a rock to avoid Trip's fashion photographs. So he thought he knew exactly what to expect.

He only flipped through three pages before realizing this was not Trip's normal work. The difference was obvious—these were photos taken out of love, not for money. If he had used these to try to get a job, why had he been rejected? Who in their right mind would reject this?

Christian had been amused, aroused, and shocked by Trip. But he had never been this impressed. And it wasn't just arousal he was feeling now. He knew a thing or two

about rejection. He carefully replaced the portfolio and then tested the bathroom door. It was unlocked.

Steam rolled out to greet him as he eased the door open, and Chris paused to allow his vision to clear from the gentle assault. Trip had gone for scalding if the heat of the room was any indication. Behind the clear wall of the shower, he stood beneath the spray, his head bent under the water, his back bowed as he braced against the wall. A tattoo Chris had never seen before spread across Trip's shoulder blades, black sweeps that were impossible to see distinctly through the steam. A tribal tattoo of some sort, it looked like. The distortion made it difficult to tell.

"You want the loo?" Trip asked, not lifting his head.

He had no reason to expect Trip would want *his* empathy, or would want *his* comfort. But Christian couldn't stand to see him defeated. Yes, that was the word he had been searching for earlier. Defeated.

"No. I thought maybe...well, I thought you'd like some company."

The offer turned Trip's head a fraction, though he didn't glance back over his shoulder. "You're not goin' out with your little playmate tonight?"

"We had a good time this afternoon, but that's all." Christian would have added more, but he didn't want Trip to think he was there because he had nowhere else to be. He didn't know why that mattered, but it did. He pulled his t-shirt over his head. "But if you'd rather be alone..."

"No." The answer was swift, swift enough for Chris to feel the need in it. "Been alone with my head all afternoon. Think I've about had my fill."

Christian stepped out of his pants before hesitating. He had thought when they finally had sex—and it was definitely a matter of when, not if—Trip would be the one cornering him in the shower. He had always imagined himself as the more passive partner, but there was nothing passive about his plan now.

He pulled the shower door open and stepped inside the stinging spray. Trip shuffled forward to allow him as much room as he could, but the space was cramped. It was barely bigger than the closet he had been crammed in with Giovanni, but he had enough room to move. Which he planned to do any second. Trip's naked, slick body pressing against his, all sinew and muscle and hard planes, distracted him from his original intentions.

A long sigh escaped Trip. Dropping his head back, he rested it against Christian's shoulder, the water beating down onto his face and neck to roll in tempting beads down his chest. "Should've woken up with you this morning," he said. "Maybe this day wouldn't have gone all to shit then."

"We'll just make up for it now," Christian said, smoothing his hands down Trip's chest. *God, he feels good.* The hot water flowed over them, like another pair of hands, and Chris acquainted himself with every inch of Trip's torso, his shoulders, and his upper thighs. He expected Trip to impatiently demand more, but for the moment, he seemed happy to let Christian indulge his need to explore. In fact, he was immediately responsive to every caress, as though he had been starved for physical contact.

A hand reached behind, caressing the long line of Christian's hip at the same tempo Chris set, and Trip turned his head to skim his mouth over the sensitized skin. His lips parted and allowed the tip of his tongue to emerge, and when the sound of faint moans began to fill the shower stall, Chris was surprised to realize they were coming from Trip

and not him.

“Want to feel you inside me,” Trip murmured. He slithered his hand between their bodies, seeking out Christian’s hard cock to begin pulling it in long, slow strokes.

“Please?”

The final word, so low it was almost lost in the water, was like a fist to his chest. Trip wanted him. Not the way he wanted Giovanni earlier. Not the way you wanted a quick fuck when the world was too much and your skin was going to crawl off your body. Christian couldn’t deny him even if he wanted to, and he most assuredly didn’t want to. But he didn’t want to fuck Trip just yet, either. There was nothing like the first opportunity to learn a lover’s body, and Christian wanted to know Trip’s. He wanted to trace the line of tattoos with his tongue, and he wanted to find the sensitive points on his ribs, and the ones on his stomach, and the ones on his back. He wanted to know them all.

“Yes,” Christian rasped in agreement, in acknowledgement. “Just let me...” He gently pushed Trip forward, flush against the tile wall. “Let me do this first.”

Trip obeyed without argument, releasing his hold as he spread his legs and stretched his arms to brand himself to the slick wall. The position created new peaks and valleys among his muscles, taunting Chris to trace over them with wet fingertips before following them with his tongue. At the first contact, Trip shuddered and his body rippled as he rested his brow to the tile.

The water clung to Christian’s lashes as he turned his head to lick along the dark lines of Trip’s tattoo. He probably should have closed his eyes, but he wanted to see every inch of Trip, just as he was learning every inch with his hands. Smoothing his palms over his hips, he felt Trip’s muscles tighten with the strokes, and his cock jumped at how they would feel clenching around his shaft.

Christian slid his hand between Trip’s thighs, caressing the sensitive skin behind Trip’s sac with his thumb. He kept his other hand on Trip’s hip, holding him in place, kneading his flesh with the tips of his fingers. Trip moaned and tried to widen his legs further, and Christian silently cursed the cramped space. He didn’t have the room to drop to his knees and follow the path of his fingers with his mouth. He distracted himself by closing his mouth on the nape of Trip’s neck, biting and sucking on the skin there.

“Don’t think we’re goin’ to need lube,” Trip muttered. His eyes glittered as he finally looked back at Chris. “But unless you were planning this all along, we don’t have a condom.”

Christian nearly growled in frustration. No, he hadn’t planned ahead. He hadn’t even thought about protection. He was too busy thinking about Trip’s body. He was almost tempted to pretend to ignore Trip, but his brain wasn’t completely gone.

“No, I don’t have one,” Chris confessed. “I don’t have any with me at all.”

Trip turned around, his cock heavy and hard where it brushed against Christian’s. “I’ve got some in my pack,” he said, smoothing his hands down to Christian’s ass. “But that means getting out of the shower.”

Christian gripped Trip’s chin and pushed his tongue between his lips. The water was cooling around them, and getting out of the shower wasn’t a bad idea. He loved the way Trip felt against him, slick and hungry, his skin glistening. But the thought of Trip stretched out on the bed, warm and welcoming like he had been the night before, his arms and legs wrapped around him, had its appeal, too.

“Okay,” he said against Trip’s mouth. “Let’s get out.”

Without breaking the seal of their mouths, Trip reached behind and turned off the water, the sudden absence of sound revealing the almost continuous moans coming from his throat. His hands returned to clutch at Chris, and the way he scratched at his skin sent electric cascades through Christian's veins.

"Love the way you taste," Trip breathed. "Almost think I could spend the night kissing you and still be satisfied."

Christian couldn't help but think of a night full of long, slow kisses. Trip kissed with his whole body, and Chris thought he might be satisfied with that, too. Later. He couldn't help but laugh at himself a little. Fucking Trip was one thing, but fantasizing about what amounted to a marathon make-out session seemed almost silly. But that didn't change the fact he wanted it.

Chris broke away long enough to grab one of the thick towels hanging beside the shower. He wrapped it around Trip's back and pulled him forward against his chest, immediately seeking out his mouth again while he massaged Trip's shoulders and spine with the towel.

Every press into Trip's muscles made him melt even more into Christian's body. Trip guided him backward toward the door without slowing or ceasing the delicious kisses, and Chris was barely aware of the carpet beneath his heels until he felt the bed at his knees. He waited for Trip to push him onto the mattress, eager to feel their lengths pressed together. Instead, Trip slid his mouth to Christian's chest, leaving a hot, wet trail as he disappeared beneath the towel.

"You dried us off," he murmured, his voice muffled. "Need to get you slicked up again." His strong hand gripped the base of Christian's cock as he sucked the head past his lips.

Christian gasped Trip's name, running his fingers through Trip's hair and along his forehead, then caressing the hollow of his cheek as he drew Christian's shaft deeper into his mouth. Chris thought the blowjob in the plane had been a pretty good demonstration of Trip's talent, but he had been wrong. Very wrong.

Christian shifted back, resting his weight against the bed, his legs too weak to support him fully. "Trip, you feel so fucking good."

The towel fell forgotten to the floor as Trip bobbed up and down his length. Just when Chris thought his knees were going to give out altogether, Trip scraped his teeth along the shaft as he pulled back up again.

"Lemme get the condom." He let Chris go and turned to dig through his pack. "I don't want to wait anymore."

Christian collapsed on the bed, and wasn't surprised Trip didn't need to spend five minutes digging through his bag to find the condoms. In fact, he pulled out an unopened box almost immediately. He pulled one free from the cardboard and ripped the cellophane open with his teeth. Christian smiled, watching as he crawled onto the mattress to settle between his legs. Trip stroked Chris once, his grip tight, before unrolling the condom onto his length.

"Way I see it, we've got three weeks to suss out what we like best." Trip prowled up Christian's body until their cocks were aligned, bowing his head to drop a lingering kiss before adding, "But right now, I want you to pound into me so hard, I have to wrap my legs around you in order to hang on."

Christian wrapped his arms around Trip and rolled him to the mattress. Trip hooked

his legs around Christian's hips, pushing his ass off the bed. Christian always enjoyed topping, but Andrew never wanted Chris to fuck him. The stray thought about Andrew took Chris by surprise—because it was the first one he had had since seeing Trip's naked body. He ran his fingers over his cock, spreading the condom's lube over the tip, and then guided himself to Trip's ass.

He pressed his lips against Trip's, still greedy for his mouth, and thrust forward, sheathing himself in Trip's tight body with a single, long stroke.

"Oh, fuck," Trip muttered. Everything about him tensed, from the clamping around Christian's cock to the legs coiled around his hips, and he held Chris inside for long seconds as they both allowed the overloading sensations to ease. The moment he began to relax, Trip reached up and threaded his fingers through Christian's hair, holding his head in place as he attacked his mouth with a fresh fervor.

Christian didn't want to close his eyes, didn't want to lose sight of Trip, but he was too overwhelmed by the heat flowing from Trip and through his own flesh. He pulled out of Trip, then rocked forward again. His first few thrusts were slow as he tried to get his bearings and become accustomed to Trip's tight, flexing muscles. Trip clawed at his back, and his mouth became more frantic. He didn't need to vocalize what he wanted. Christian knew. He wanted the same thing. The bed began to rattle against the wall as Chris pushed into him faster and harder.

"That's it, that's it, fuck me," Trip breathed between kisses. "Fuck, luv...so good, feel like fucking heaven, you do. Harder..."

The last was strangled as a new angle had Trip crying out, his back arching away from the bed as he slammed his head back into the pillow. Chris drove into him again, and there it was, the shudders of pleasure wracking through Trip making it all too clear where Christian was hitting.

"Don't stop, don't stop," Trip begged.

Their chests were slick with sweat where they rubbed against each other, their stomachs more so from the pre-come dripping from Trip's cock. Chris bent his head and licked at Trip's neck, chasing the taste of him as Trip's litany continued.

Christian couldn't take his lips away from Trip's skin. He licked, he bit, he sucked, he kissed, he covered Trip's neck in mouth-shaped marks. Trip's words finally devolved into moans that came from deep in his chest and vibrated through his throat and Christian's skin. The whole bed seemed to be vibrating. The base of his spine tingled, and his groin tightened. He slid his hand between their bodies, fumbling for Trip's cock, spreading the pre-come over his palm.

It took only a single stroke down the shaft for Trip's hands to scratch down Christian's back, a ragged scream ripping from him as he shot over both of their abdomens. His ass clenched, forcing Chris to plough into him harder, but when he stifled his shout of pleasure by sinking his teeth into the taut sinew of Christian's neck, Chris lost it.

He shouted against Trip's shoulder, lights flashing behind his eyes as he buried himself in Trip one final time. His entire body shook, and his second shout turned into a long moan. Everything that had happened before that moment was a gray blur. All he knew was the way Trip felt around him, the way he smelled, the way he tasted, the way he sighed and gasped in Christian's ear, like he wouldn't be able to catch his breath again. Chris licked a trail back to Trip's lips and teased his mouth with a gentle caress.

“Can’t believe you got me to beg,” Trip chuckled. His legs loosened, his feet sliding down the length of Christian’s legs, until he was completely unfolded beneath him. “But that was bloody worth it, let me tell you.”

Chris rolled to his back and took a deep breath. “It was. Can’t remember the last time I came that hard.”

Trip trailed his fingertips along the top of Christian’s thigh. “Guess it’s a good thing for me your little Italian boy didn’t put out then.”

“He did.” Christian frowned. “I suppose that means I have loose morals.”

“Nah.” He caught Trip’s brilliant smile out of the corner of his eye. “Just means I’m better.”

“You haven’t already tried to push me out the door, so I guess that means you’re better in more ways than one.”

The bed shifted as Trip suddenly rolled on top of Chris, his sticky stomach adhering them together in more ways than one. “And let you go before I get my own back?” His eyes were dancing as he ran his tongue along Christian’s jaw. “I’m not completely daft, thank you very much.”

Christian tilted his head back. “No,” he teased, “you’re not nearly as daft as I gave you credit for.”

Trip’s slow smile was a return to the man he’d known, not the one who’d walked into the room an hour earlier looking like the world had ended. “Good thing we’ve got that straight, then,” he said, right before lowering his mouth back to Christian’s waiting neck.

Chris gripped Trip’s damp hair and arched beneath his mouth. Just the touch of Trip’s tongue was enough to send sparks down his spine. He still couldn’t remember what prompted him to invite Trip to Italy, but as Trip sucked on the delicate skin at the hollow of his throat, Chris was very grateful he had.

Chapter Seven

The day had been full of surprises. There was the unpleasant one of Paolo's rejection, but Trip was choosing to ignore that for now in favor of focusing on the surprise currently sitting on the bed, leaning against the wall, tossing aside the takeaway carton he had just emptied. Crumbs clung to Christian's lips, and as Trip watched, he absently licked them off, most likely unaware of the effect he was having on the other occupant in the room.

The sex was fantastic. Even if he wasn't getting to know the man Andrew had claimed to love, Trip would have at least understood why Andrew kept him around for other reasons. Once he got started, Christian didn't know how to stop, and he gave and gave and gave until the only rational choice was to beg for release. Andrew had been remarkably private about the details of his relationship, and it amazed Trip he'd been able to hold back as much as he had. If it had been him, he would've been extolling Christian's praises to any and all who would listen.

The next three weeks were going to be very interesting. Trip wasn't sure he was going to be able to walk by the time they returned to England.

Thoughts of their departure led his mind to what it would be like when they got home. He knew why Chris didn't want to call Andrew now, but it was killing Trip not to ring and have another go about what he was doing with Lexie. He was sure if he only had the chance to talk to Andrew, he could get him to see reason. There was too much history to ignore, and Andrew wasn't a stupid man.

His eyes flickered to Christian again. Well, except for when it came to breaking up with Chris. That was dumb to the nth degree. Lexie or Christian? Even if he hadn't been gay, that wasn't even a contest in Trip's eyes.

"Did you really meet Andrew in a market?" he blurted.

Christian took a deep breath, like he wasn't surprised by the mention of Andrew's name, just resigned. "Yes." He smiled self-consciously. "I know this sounds stupid, but I liked the way he picked produce. Didn't waste his time thumping the melons, or bruising the tomatoes. I watched him for about fifteen minutes before I accidentally on purpose bumped into him."

"And that was that." He couldn't refrain from expressing his astonishment. Andrew had never been comfortable about liking men; the fact that Chris had picked him up with that much ease boggled his mind.

"Almost. He gave me his number, though I couldn't get him to meet me until about two weeks later. But I thought he was worth the effort."

That made it a little easier to stomach, though not much. "How long before you found out about Lexie?"

Christian dropped his head back, exposing the column of his throat. "Let me think. About a month. We were in Brighton one weekend, and he cut the trip short. He just said it was an emergency. I didn't find out until much later the nature of the so-called emergency." Christian shook his head. "There were clues."

"Shouldn't kick yourself. Andrew's the king of closets. He's got a host of 'em, and he doesn't like to mix 'em up if he can help it."

Chris snorted. "He told me the whole sordid story once I pressed. Well, most of it. I'm sure I still don't know all the dirty details. But their divorce had been final for nearly three years at that point. I figured we all have bad relationships; there was no reason to hold that over his head. And I thought as long as *he* wasn't calling *her*..."

"He never had to. Lexie's the one who always pulled the strings in that relationship. There was one time at uni, I bought me and Andrew a holiday in Amsterdam to celebrate his finals. Lexie got wind, threw a wobbler, and ended up tagging along." Trip sighed, remembering the sounds of Andrew and Lexie's fight when she'd found out. "The bitch even broke a window with her piss poor aim. Tossed a shoe at Andrew's head and missed him by a mile."

Chris grimaced. "Her aim with that shoe improved. I only ever met her face to face three times, but the second time involved flying footwear. And the things she said to him." His hands curled into fists, but Trip didn't think he noticed. "She'd be all sugar-sweet and nothing but smiles one second, and then she'd turn on him like a bloody viper. The night she called him a cocksucking queer was pleasant."

"Ah, yes, Lexie's lovely homophobia. At least you didn't have to be the one she accused of turning Andrew gay in the first place." He waggled his brows. "I'm a bad, bad influence, you know."

"Oh? How did you turn Andrew gay? The old-fashioned way, or did you take him to one of the recruitment meetings?"

The answer came out before he thought to censor himself. "Somebody had to be his first." It dawned on Trip after the admission was out there that Chris had no idea about the ongoing relationship he and Andrew still had. Or had had. It had never bothered Trip that he'd been shagging somebody who was in a relationship, but now that he was getting to know Christian better, he wasn't so keen on those details getting out there. Chris didn't need to get hurt more. "Lexie never let that go."

"No, I guess she wouldn't. Andrew belongs to her, after all." There was no disguising the bitterness in his voice. "God, it'd be easier if I could just hate him the way I hate her."

Trip rose from where he'd been sitting on the floor, tossing his half-eaten panini into the rubbish. "Don't think it's possible to hate anybody the way we hate Lexie," he said as he crossed to the bed. "And you don't seem to be doin' so bad. You didn't get drunk today, *and* you pulled a pretty Italian boy. Two steps in the right direction."

Christian reached out and curled his fingers around his wrist. "Three steps, I think. Didn't think about Andrew at all since this afternoon."

Trip let him tug him onto the bed, but instead of falling into his lap like Chris had obviously wanted, he twisted so that he was lying down, his head resting on Christian's thighs. "I'm glad you invited me along," he said quietly. "Even if I did have a pissor of a day before getting back here."

Chris brushed his fingertips across Trip's hair. "I could never do that, you know. Put myself out there the way you do."

"Just shows you've got some common sense. Me, I obviously don't know when to stop. Even when I should."

"You shouldn't stop," Chris said. "I hope you don't mind but I looked at your portfolio, and you shouldn't stop."

The soft strokes through his hair had been lulling Trip into a new calm, but as soon

as Chris made his admission, Trip stiffened. His eyes shot to Christian's. All he saw there was the same gentleness that had brightened them in the shower, and try as he might, he couldn't find a hint of mockery.

"Thanks, mate. But it doesn't matter anyway. Nobody wants to see what they don't expect."

"Andrew told me when you dropped out of uni, you didn't have a single professional credit to your name. Seems to me what you can do once, you can do again."

He didn't know why Chris was giving him the pep talk. He only knew that he liked it.

"You wanna hear something fucking ironic?" When Chris nodded, Trip grinned. "The shot that finally got me noticed? One of Lexie Andrew begged me to do."

"And I imagine she never, ever let you forget it, either. What was it? Did you do something with the lighting to make her look human?"

Trip snorted. "You kidding? You put Lexie in front of a camera, she preens and everyone can see it. No, it was a candid I got when she thought she was alone. She never knew it was me, but Andrew carried the damn thing in his wallet for years."

"You three have so much history together," Chris murmured thoughtfully. "Andrew never wanted me in that part of his life. Maybe Lexie didn't *just* come back. Maybe she never really went away."

"No, she was gone," Trip said, though the implication of what Chris was thinking didn't escape him. "I honestly thought I was rid of her, once and for all."

"I just...I don't want to dwell. I know that this wasn't even about me, not really. It's about Andrew and Lexie and a fucked up relationship that was fucked up long before I came on the scene. But I can't stop wondering..." Christian faded into silence.

"What?" Trip prompted.

"What did I do wrong? Or what could I have done differently? We were happy, Trip. I was happy. And we were good together. Why was it so easy for him to walk away from me?"

Because he's a selfish prick, Trip wanted to say. But if he did, then he'd have to explain Chris wasn't the only one Andrew had walked away from, which would lead to questions why, and Trip didn't want to go there.

"Well, if you ask me, we haven't been so bad either." Reaching up, he grasped the back of Christian's head and pulled him down, lifting up to meet him halfway for a hard kiss. "And if you can get along with me, you can get along with just about anybody. You'll see."

It was enough to pull a smile from Christian. "You're not so hard to get along with. In fact, you're rather pleasant company."

He winked. "That's because I keep blowing you."

"Well, there's a lot to be said for your technique. You're not a bad kisser, either."

"The secret of my success."

Chris tugged gently on his arm. "Want to come up here and give me another demonstration of your secret?"

Trip didn't have to be asked twice. Kissing Christian was infinitely preferable to talking about Andrew, or Lexie, or reasons why she blamed Andrew's bisexuality on Trip. Sitting up, he swung his leg around to straddle Christian's hips, cupping his face to hold him still. His thumbs stroked the high cheekbones, and he let his gaze fall to

Christian's waiting mouth, lips parted, the tongue darting out to moisten them in the split second before Trip leaned in.

"Don't know what it is about kissing you," Trip murmured. "But hell if I'm goin' to stop and analyze it."

"No, don't analyze it," Chris said, just before their lips touched. He held Trip against him and sighed into his mouth, the tension flowing out of his shoulders as he relaxed into the kiss.

They had spent hours fucking; first Christian, then Trip, then Chris again. Then came dinner when both of them realized they were starving, so by the time they started talking about Andrew, their hungers were sated, all of them. Kissing now wasn't about hunger. It was about want. That's what made it simple to keep it slow and easy, savoring each sweep of their tongues together. Trip kept one hand on Christian's face, while the other set off to explore the body he was growing to know as well as he knew Andrew's.

Trip shoved the comparison aside as soon as it popped into his head. Andrew wasn't here. Chris was. Most importantly, Trip wouldn't have it any other way.

Chapter Eight

The phone rang. And rang. And rang. Drilling into his foggy brain. He rolled over and stretched, reaching for Trip. But he wasn't there. *Breakfast, probably.* The phone finally, thankfully, stopped, and he snuggled into the pillow. Trip's pillow. It smelled like his sweat and their fucking. He inhaled deeply and buried his face against it. He didn't remember falling asleep the night before. He remembered Trip settling on his lap and kissing. Endless, wonderful kissing. Was it possible to kiss that much?

Christian supposed it was, if you were kissing Trip. A part of him wanted to be kissing Trip at that moment. When he came back, Chris fully intended to meet him at the door and fulfill that particular desire. Then they'd have a lay in. That's what holidays were all about, right? Sleeping in far too late, eating food he shouldn't, watching whatever he found on telly, and kissing Trip. He smiled and began to drift back to sleep.

Only to be startled awake by the phone again.

He should have known. When he reached for the receiver, he should have known. Several people knew he was in Italy, of course, but only a few people had the contact information. His mother. His sister. Andrew. His mother and sister wouldn't call this early in the morning while he was on holiday. So he should have known.

But he answered the phone anyway, his voice and eyes both heavy with sleep. "Hello?"

"You know, Chris, I really expected more from you. I really did."

Christian sat up, Andrew's voice like a bucket of cold water over his face. *Oh fuck.* He wanted to defend himself, but he didn't know what prompted that tone from Andrew. He had behaved out of character in several ways. What had disappointed Andrew the most?

"Funny, I could have said the same about you."

"This is not the same thing, and you know it. But come on. A leather store? If you wanted my attention, there were better ways to get it."

The leather store? *He doesn't know about Trip.* Christian was absurdly relieved by this, even though he knew Trip wanted to tell him. And another part of him wanted to ask what else he could do to get Andrew's attention. God help him.

"Really? It seems to have done the trick. You called, didn't you?"

Andrew sighed. "Do you know how close I was to ringing the police? I was on hold with them when I realized you still had that credit card. A holiday is one thing, but you don't really think I'm going to pay for leather trousers so you can fuck anything with legs in Italy, do you?"

Christian's mouth fell open. Did Andrew really think he would fuck anything with legs? It was true he had fucked two men. In the same day. But that was at Trip's gleeful encouragement. If Trip hadn't come with him, he would have been hiding in museums and tourists traps and sulking.

"Why would you say something like that to me?" Chris blurted.

"Why else would you buy leather trousers?" Andrew countered. "They're not exactly your style."

Christian was not going to mention Trip. He wasn't going to have that argument

now. It was none of Andrew's business. *Just tell him you'll wire the money with interest, and hang up the bloody phone.*

He knew exactly what he wanted to say, so he was at a loss when he said, "Maybe not, but Trip thought they looked quite fetching."

Silence filled the line. It lasted long enough for Chris to start to get itchy.

"You did not just say, *Trip*."

Christian shrugged. *In for a penny.* It was a shame Trip was going to miss the fireworks he had been so looking forward to. "He picked them out himself."

He had never heard so many curses come from Andrew's mouth at once. "At least it makes sense now. All this ridiculousness is Trip. As usual."

Now he was feeling defensive on Trip's behalf. Using the card had been a mistake. Chris knew that. He was about to acknowledge as much when the door opened, and Trip burst in. His hair was in complete disarray, and his shirt was untucked, and he was looking exceptionally pleased with himself. Christian's body was already trained to respond to his presence, and he felt an immediate tug of desire.

"Look, I'll pay you back, okay?" Chris said quickly. "I'll wire you the money this afternoon and drop the card in the mail."

Trip halted in his tracks, the bag of food forgotten in his arms. "That Andrew?" He held out his hand. "Give me the phone. Let me talk to the wanker."

"Is that Trip?" Andrew's annoyance was unmistakable. "It's seven o'clock in the morning! What the hell is Trip doing in your room?"

Christian shook his head and tried to shoo Trip away. The small voice in the back of his mind apparently thought Chris could win Andrew back if he played this right, if he apologized, if he...what? It wasn't going to happen. And he didn't owe Andrew anything anymore.

"I only booked one room, Andrew, and he's got to sleep somewhere. He just stepped out for a moment to get breakfast."

"One room? The room you and I were supposed to share. Jesus, Chris, think for a second with something other than your dick, will you? Which, trust me, I know is hard when Trip's involved."

"Yes, the room you and I were supposed to share before you threw me over for that syphilitic whore. So save your lecture, please, for somebody who still cares about what you have to say."

Trip closed the distance. "What's he saying?" he demanded, tossing the food onto the bed. "Give me the phone."

"Watch it, Chris." The sudden menace in Andrew's voice made him grip the receiver a little bit tighter. "I never lied to you about how I felt for Lexie, and just because she needs me now, doesn't give you the right to say those kind of things about her." He snorted. "You sound like Trip. *Really* not flattering."

"I'm beginning to realize Trip and I have a lot in common, not the least of which is the firm opinion that she's a silly bint and you're a bloody fool. I mean, fuck, Andrew, what do you want? Do you want to be canonized because you never lied to me about her? Or do you think the canonization will come because you roll over and show your belly any time she whistles?"

Trip's smirk emboldened Chris for the five seconds before Andrew replied.

"The only thing you and Trip have in common is that you'll both get on your knees

and beg me to fuck you. At least Trip knows when to leave when I'm done with him. You, apparently, feel the need to act out when I'm not paying enough attention to you."

The air rushed out of Christian's lungs. He felt like Andrew had reached through the phone and punched his solar plexus. "You're fucking Trip." Present tense. Not past. It was a question and a statement, a request for clarification. He didn't look up to Trip.

"Oh, did Trip leave that little detail out? Gee, surprise, surprise."

He barely felt Trip's fingers curling his away from the phone, too stunned to do anything but glance up as Trip lifted it to his ear. "You bloody bastard," Trip swore at Andrew. "First, you rip his heart out, then you have the balls to tell him about us? What's wrong? Lexie let you have them back for the day and you decided to go whole hog on how much you use 'em?"

He fell silent as Andrew replied, his dark eyes fixing on Christian's. There was a silent entreaty there, though what he was asking for, Chris had no idea. It vanished within seconds, however, all the color leeching from his skin as he listened to whatever it was Andrew was saying.

"You know what, Andrew?" His voice was low and dangerous, and it sent a shiver down Christian's spine. "You can go straight to fucking hell." The force with which he slammed the receiver back down made both of them wince.

Christian didn't know if he should get up and walk away, or kick Trip out, or shout, or put his fist through the wall, or just accept the fact he was the worst kind of fool. The night before hadn't been meaningless sex to him. And god, how had he allowed himself to get attached to Trip, even a little?

"What was this all about, Trip?" he asked dully. "Did you come here with me just to gloat? I mean, if history repeats itself, Lexie will be gone within a month. Take a bit of a holiday, and when you go home, Lexie's gone and I'm out of the picture, right?"

There was no humor in the black gaze Trip leveled at him. "Right. Because getting my heart ripped out yesterday was all about getting my rocks off." With an exasperated sigh, he ran his hand through his hair, mussing it even more than it had been. "Came with you to make sure you didn't sit around and mope after Andrew when he doesn't deserve it. And I stuck around because it just so happens, I actually like the bloke who was willing to go along with my daft notion of brassing Andrew off. Like him so much, I didn't level him when he poked his gob into my portfolio." His eyes returned to fix on Christian's. "The portfolio nobody but me and my assistant's ever seen before, by the way."

"But when we go back, to our regular lives...your regular life is going to include Andrew again, isn't it?" He didn't expect anything less. They had years of history. They were friends. But at that moment, it was the unforgivable sin. He could stand the thought of never seeing Trip again at the end of three weeks because that's the way their lives went. But he couldn't tolerate the thought of losing whatever tenuous connection was growing between them over Andrew.

"No." The single word was swift and deadly, the anger still barely restrained in his tight muscles. "I'm done with him. He's made his bed, and fuck if he's even worth me crawling back into it again."

Christian didn't know if he entirely believed Trip, but he believed Trip enough. Enough to keep from walking out the door and going straight to the airport. He suspected Andrew had said something unforgivable—for now. Maybe in a few weeks, or months,

or years, Trip would change his mind. But what did that matter now?

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” Christian asked, though even as he spoke, he knew he wouldn’t have wanted Trip to tell him. He knew he would have been happier never knowing at all.

“Because you were hurting,” came the response. “And you wouldn’t have let me come if you knew the whole story.” That mouth he’d spent so many hours kissing the night before twisted into a grimace. “And because I’m a selfish bastard and I didn’t want to get kicked out.”

Christian fell back to the bed, lying atop the wrinkled sheet. He was utterly numb, but he knew it would wear off eventually. When it did, he thought one of two things would happen. He’d crash, or he’d be sick with rage. At that moment, it felt like the latter.

“I just don’t know what to think right now.” He caught a whiff of the pastries Trip bought, and his stomach growled. He lifted his head and eyed the bag, but wasn’t sure he had the energy to sit up and grab it. Even if he did, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to taste the food.

Trip sat on the edge of the bed, grabbing the sack and digging out one of the pastries. “You think you’re better off without Andrew,” he said, holding out a cannoli. “We both are.”

Christian plucked the cannoli from Trip’s fingers with a slight nod. “You’re suggesting I’m better off without a self-loathing, selfish, cheating jerk who doesn’t know if he’s coming or going?”

“I’m suggesting you’re better off without the one named Andrew.” Trip smiled, though Chris could see how hard he was trying to make it light. “This self-loathing, selfish, cheating jerk would like the chance to show you he’s not as bad as Andrew says he is.”

Christian chewed slowly, stealing every second he could to mull over Trip’s words. Three weeks. Just some fun for three weeks. But what if he told Trip he *wanted* to see that he wasn’t as bad as Andrew said he was? What if they returned to London, and he discovered he really *liked* Trip? It wasn’t impossible.

“How would you do that?” Chris asked softly.

Trip’s smile faded as his gaze fixed on Christian’s mouth. He leaned forward, bracing himself on his knuckles, and skimmed the tip of his tongue along the curve of Christian’s lower lip.

“I could promise you, no more picking fights with idiot Germans,” he murmured. “Or I could show you some of my favorite parts of this country, parts that don’t have anything at all to do with shagging. Or I could dress you up in your pretty leather that makes you look like sex on a stick and help you pull any pretty Italian boy you’d like.” He met Christian’s gaze, any sense of insincerity absent from his eyes. “Your pick, mate. All you have to do is say the word.”

Christian thought of Trip’s mouth pressed against Andrew’s, tasting Andrew’s body, wrapped around Andrew’s cock. It was like poking his finger into an open wound and then wiggling it around. It was enough to work through the numbness, the pain spreading through him. He expected that pain to turn into disgust. He thought it would make him recoil from the person who hurt him.

But the person who hurt him was in London.

Christian licked his dry lips. He didn't want to pry, but he needed to know. "What did Andrew say to you?"

Trip lowered his lashes for a second before lifting them again, his decision to reply seemingly made in that single moment. "Told me I was cracked to think just because you and he might be over, that I was ever going to be more than a convenient fuck buddy. Said...I might wish for it all I wanted, but he's never going to love me like he loves Lexie. That nobody could love me, because apparently, all I'm good for is a shag and some pretty but empty pictures."

Chris studied his hands for a moment. "I want you to not pick any more fights with idiot Germans, or anybody else for that matter. I want you to show me all your favorite parts of this country." He looked up. "The parts that don't have anything to do with shagging, as well as the other parts. I want to go to the Spanish Steps tonight, and buy a big tub of mint gelato. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Trip agreed. A faint twinkle appeared in his eyes. "Is the gelato for eating with a spoon or eating off of you?"

Christian snorted. "You're crazy if you think I'm going to share my gelato. I guess that means I'll have to eat it off of you."

"Then that's more than fair enough." He leaned forward until their mouths were almost touching again. "I'd like to kiss you now."

The pictures in Christian's head shifted. Andrew was now obscured, gone entirely. Now all he could think about was Trip's mouth—just Trip's mouth. Chris looked from Trip's lips to his dark eyes and nodded. "Please do."

He felt the time it took for Trip to close the distance between them with every thud of his heart. It wasn't even a kiss at first, more of a lingering caress as Trip seemed to reacquaint himself with the shape of Christian's mouth. Then his lips parted, a small fraction to allow the tip of his tongue to come out and tease the seam of Christian's, entreating him to enter and allow him to deepen the kiss.

Christian sighed and opened up to him, his tongue sneaking out to brush against Trip's. Chris thought he heard a catch in Trip's breath before he moved to deepen the kiss. Trip's mouth was sweet like the powdered sugar on the cannoli, and though Trip probed deeper and deeper into his mouth, the kiss remained slow. Thorough. Like it was their first, or maybe their last. Christian knew if it was up to him, it wouldn't be.

"Take this off," he murmured, tugging at Trip's shirt.

Trip sat back for only the second it took to pull the offending garment over his head. Then his strong hands were on Christian's shoulders, pressing him to the mattress as he covered his body with his own. "We'll get two gelatos," he said, nibbling at his chin. "And it'll taste even better for being eaten off you."

Chris shivered, imagining the cold cream rolling down his ribs, only to be chased by Trip's hot tongue. A small voice told him this was a bad idea—still and always. He couldn't tell himself that there was no chance, or even a small chance, of being hurt. He couldn't even justify it, except that Trip's body fit well against his, and he still wasn't tired of Trip's mouth, or Trip's smile, or Trip's wicked sense of humor.

"We're going to make a mess."

The smile that greeted Chris was pure sin. "Only the best kind."

Chapter Nine

The following four days were a blur, mostly because, in the end, Trip and Christian didn't venture too far from their hotel room for any length of time. Chris seemed more than content to allow Trip to make up for what he was already thinking of as "the Andrew incident," encouraging long hours spent sprawled atop their bed, mouths and hands doing nothing but exploring the other's body. That worked for Trip. That more than worked for Trip. It was his favorite method of distraction, and frankly, both of them needed it now. Andrew was being an absolute ass about the entire situation, with the piece de resistance, his nasty closing comment to Trip on the phone.

It hurt. There was no denying it. And Trip meant it when he'd told Chris he was done with Andrew. Not even Trip was that big of a masochist.

It helped to have Christian in his corner. Trip felt more than a little guilty that Chris had found out as he had, but better the truth get out now than later, he realized. It wasn't like Andrew was even emotionally committed to Trip. Everything he had was saved for Lexie, and it was now them against her and Andrew.

Trip was slowly realizing he liked that arrangement.

At the end of their week in Rome, they boarded the Eurostar to Lecce, ready to begin the second leg of their holiday. All Christian could talk about was the architecture he'd read about, but Trip was looking forward to spiriting him away to the beach. At some point, he wanted to get some photos of Chris, something to remember the trip by after they returned to London. Seeing him lying on the white sand felt like the best opportunity to show Chris that, yes, there was life after Andrew, and yes, he was more than attractive enough to pull somebody more deserving of his company. It would be a shot in the arm for him, Trip thought. And a hot reminder for himself.

After they were seated and had their wine, Trip stretched out his legs so his feet were entangled with Christian's opposite him. "So six hours until we get there, huh?" he said with a smirk. "Whatever are we going to do for six whole hours?"

Christian smiled. "Nothing that'll get us kicked off the train, I hope."

Trip pretended to pout. "Well, that's no fun. Haven't I taught you better than that yet?"

Christian sipped from his wine, and Trip couldn't help but notice the stray drop of liquid that clung to the corner of his lip. "You haven't taught me anything about the proper way to fool around on a train."

"We'll save that lesson for the tube in London. If you can shag on the Underground, you can shag just about anywhere."

Chris chuckled. "How many times have you shagged on the Underground?"

"Enough to know when the bill are least likely to catch you," he shot back.

As they laughed together, it dawned on Trip that while he had spent a week with Christian already, he actually knew very little about the other man's life in London, other than the unfortunate parts that included Andrew. If pressed, he wasn't even sure what Chris did for a living, and suddenly, the desire to find out was all-consuming. He wanted to know about it all.

"So how long have you lived in London?" he asked. Might as well start off with an

easy question.

“Oh, most of my life. Grew up there, then moved back after university. What about you?”

“Moved there after I dropped out of uni. All my family’s back in Southend or thereabouts, so wasn’t too far of a go for me. Only place to be for what I wanted to do, though.”

Christian looked at him thoughtfully. “Shoot for fashion? Or was that supposed to be the job that held you over until you could do what you really wanted?”

Trip didn’t talk about his aspirations much. The people who tended to surround him didn’t much care about art and beauty so much as fashion and parties. But Christian’s positive response to his portfolio gave him courage, and he ducked his head in embarrassment as he made the confession.

“I wasn’t even twenty. I was green enough to think a few professional credits under my belt would mean I could write my own ticket. And in London, if you’re a photographer, you’re either covering the fashion world or part of the stalkerazzi.” He shrugged. “Lurking about in bushes for hours on end wasn’t my idea of a good time.”

“Given your options, you clearly made the right decision. I doubt you’d have the patience to lurk in bushes for hours, anyway.” Chris paused. “It’s worked out, though, hasn’t it? I mean, even I knew your name. And that was before I met Andrew.”

“It has its ups and downs. Didn’t convince Paolo to look at my folio, for instance.” This was going down a path he didn’t care for, and Trip searched for a way to redirect the conversation. “What about you? Bit ashamed to admit it, but I don’t even know what you do to pay the bills.”

“Don’t be ashamed. I haven’t mentioned it because I didn’t think hip photographers would want to be seen with what amounts to a customer service rep.”

Somehow, it didn’t surprise Trip. The way Chris had reacted when they’d first met was indication enough that Trip’s way of life was foreign to him. It was probably why he got the impression Christian thought he was this exotic creature, and while that was a fantasy Trip cultivated for most of the people he met, it didn’t feel right to foster that with this one.

“I’d never see anybody in my family, if that was the case,” Trip replied. Absently, he tilted his foot to run his toes along the back of Christian’s calf. “Nothin’ wrong in bein’ a suit. There’s something to be said for having some stability in your life.”

“What some call stability, others would call bloody boring.” Chris glanced out the window. “Not that I’m bored. I’m mostly not. I was getting a bit burned out, though. You know when you call the bank over a mistake, and the first two people you speak to can’t help? So they kick you up to the manager and by then you’re furious and ready to take it out on anybody, regardless of how innocent they are? I’m the guy who gets that abuse.”

The look on his face made Trip want to close the distance between them and smother him in kisses. He settled for toeing off his boot and sliding his foot up into Christian’s lap, caressing his thigh in long strokes that grazed across his crotch.

“Then it sounds to me like you needed this holiday,” he said. “Trick will be, not to forget how you feel now when you’re back on the job.”

“It’ll be some trick,” Chris said, sliding lower in his seat. “Do you think I’ll be able to find somebody willing to come over to the office every day to play footsie?”

Trip felt Christian’s cock thickening with every stroke along his thigh. “You could

have anybody you wanted to, mate. Look at how you pulled that pretty boy our first night in Rome.”

Chris ran his fingers over the top of Trip’s foot. “That was just a fluke,” he said dryly. “Some people are attracted to desperation wrapped in leather.”

Trip regarded him with a thoughtful tilt of his head. “Don’t know about that. You had me long before I got to see you in those trousers.”

Christian offered a wry smile. “So you’re just attracted to desperation wrapped in denim?”

“You don’t seem all that desperate to me now.”

“Only because I’m drinking less,” Chris said lightly, his fingers still dancing over Trip’s foot. Sobering, he added, “Last week I thought, well, not too sound overwrought, but I thought I lost the love of my life.” He grimaced. “Christ, that does sound too overwrought.”

Trip grinned to ease his discomfort. “Look at who you’re talking to. If it’s not melodramatic in my world, it doesn’t get looked at. There’s nothin’ wrong with having feelings. Especially since I know they don’t just go away ‘cause you want them to.”

“No, they don’t. But they do start to fade eventually. Now I’m beginning to feel more like I just lost a year of my life.”

“You didn’t lose a year. You were happy, weren’t you?”

Christian hesitated for a fraction of a second before nodding. “As much as I’ve tried to convince myself otherwise, it was one of the happier years of my life. Guess that’s why it hit me where I live.” He squeezed Trip’s foot. “Though as far as happy weeks go, this last one is surprisingly close to the top of the list.”

The admission startled Trip with how quickly it warmed his gut, and he had to duck his head to hide his pleased smile. It wasn’t just that it had been a great week for him; it was that someone like Chris, someone without anything to gain, would reciprocate even a fraction of his current contentment. Because that’s what he was. Content. And it was shocking how good it felt.

Taking his foot off Christian’s lap, Trip slid out of his seat and immediately slid back in next to Chris, not stopping until their thighs were touching. He pushed away the empty wine glasses and shifted toward him, lifting a hand to the back of Christian’s neck.

“We’re miles away from the next stop,” he said, pulling Chris closer. “So sod it. If they want to toss us because I just have to kiss you now, then so be it.”

“If you just have to kiss me, then you just have to kiss me,” Chris murmured, tilting his head to meet Trip’s mouth. He rested his hand on Trip’s thigh, massaging him softly. The kiss was as warm, and soft, and enthusiastic as he had come to expect from Christian. And he didn’t seem interested in allowing the kiss to end any time soon.

When Trip kissed Chris, he lost minutes. And hours. And if he was being honest with himself, days. He’d never met anybody who indulged him like Christian did, who did it without it ever feeling like he was doing Trip a favor. He honestly enjoyed the kissing as much as Trip did. Which only made Trip want to kiss him more. It was a vicious cycle, but one he had no desire to break. The end of the holiday would do that for them soon enough.

It was hearing a woman’s muttered, “Really!”, somewhere behind him that finally made Trip stop. He chuckled when he glanced back and saw her glaring at them, but rather than pull apart from Chris, he just turned back to him.

“So who do I have to thank for teaching you to kiss like that?” he teased.

“A girl named Wendy.” Christian shrugged. “The story is more silly than sexy. We weren’t much more than kids, and both of us were rather perplexed by the boys we kept chasing but couldn’t catch. So she suggested we should practice kissing. And we practiced a lot.” His eyes lit with humor. “Years later, I realized she was taking advantage of me.”

The anecdote made him laugh, but it opened a new path in the conversation that Trip had been meaning to explore. “So does that mean you’re bi, too?” he asked, with mock disappointment. “Because I’m bloody tired of the men I like getting distracted by a pair of tits.”

“I’m not bi,” Christian assured him. “I’ve never been interested in tits. Except Angelina Jolie’s. I’m gay, not dead. I really was practicing with Wendy. There was a dearth of willing partners at the time.”

“Try growing up in Southend. Any fights I get into prove I’m a product of my environment.”

“Yeah, I bet you were a little scrapper.” He ran his thumb over Trip’s lips. “So who do I have to thank for teaching you how to kiss?”

Trip smirked. “Mother Nature. And a French model on my very first professional shoot who didn’t speak a lick of English. I took what he taught me and ran with it.”

“Mother Nature was very, very kind to you.”

“We should pay her back somehow.” His hand stole into Christian’s lap, caressing the hard outline of his cock through his jeans. “Like shagging on the beach when we get to Lecce.”

“Is shagging on the beach some sort of pagan ritual to give thanks? I admit, I don’t know as much about ancient religions as I should.”

“If it’s not, it should be.” Trip didn’t care about the old biddy behind him. Tightening his hold on Christian’s neck, he drew him close again, bypassing his mouth this time to slide his lips along Christian’s cheek. “Tell me you’ll let me photograph you while we’re there,” he murmured in Christian’s ear. “Think you could be some of my best work yet if you let me do it.”

Christian pulled away, his blue eyes wide. “You want to take pictures of me?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I...I don’t know.” He rested his forehead against Trip’s. “What do you mean, if I let you? I’m honored you want to.”

Their noses nudged each other as Trip tilted his head to touch his lips to Christian’s. “Because photos are personal things,” he said softly. “And I’m not interested in shots like you’ve seen in some of the mags. I meant...” He swallowed. Anybody else, he wouldn’t even have thought of suggesting it. “I meant something for my portfolio.”

Christian sighed before murmuring, “Then I’m more than honored, Trip. And a little curious.”

Relief flooded through him. No rejection. It was one thing for Chris to say he liked the photos he’d seen; it was another to agree to be a part of something that would get seen by others. Hopefully.

“Curious about what?”

“How you see me. You must see something other than a pasty-white office drone, because nobody is interested in photos of those.”

“But don’t you get it? That’s the trick of what I do. Take something you might think is one thing and show it how it is inside.” He lifted his hand from Christian’s lap and slid it beneath his shirt, smiling when the muscles twitched against his fingertips. “The beauty of it is stripping away the façade without destroying it in the process.”

Chris tried to move closer, but they were already wedged as close as they could be. “I get it, now. Because I’ve seen your portfolio. Can I make a request?”

“Name it, it’s yours.”

“Let me look at it again. I only browsed through it before, and only for a few minutes. I want to have the chance to actually...study each photo.”

Trip scrutinized Christian’s face, but only saw sincerity gleaming in the blue depths of his eyes. In spite of the sudden knots that had formed in his gut, he nodded slowly, disengaging at the same time.

“Do me a favor and do it when I’m pissed then,” he joked, settling back in the seat. “It’ll be easier to laugh along with you.”

“Laugh? Did you take pictures of clowns? I wouldn’t laugh at those. I don’t like clowns.” Chris turned and faced him, his shoulder against the back of the seat. “Does this self-effacing attitude naturally come with the talent? Or does it extend to other areas of your life?”

“It comes with bein’ bloody terrified of sharing something like that,” he blurted. He rubbed his hand over his eyes. “Sorry. Guess it’s my turn to be a tad overwrought.”

“Yeah, well, it happens to the best of us. Especially when we’re scared. Has Andrew ever seen those shots?”

Trip snorted. “You kidding? He’s always the first to pull my head out of the clouds.”

“He shouldn’t have done that. Andrew’s tastes are...old-fashioned, to put it mildly.” He paused, but his eyes didn’t waver from Trip’s face. “Do you love him?”

It was tempting to lie. If Trip had been any good at it, he would have given it a try. But he and Christian had been through too much together already this week for him to contemplate putting deception on the table now, and he braced himself for what was to come.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “But I sure as hell don’t like him very much.”

“Yeah, me too.” He straightened in his seat, his shoulder touching Trip’s, and looked at the empty chair in front of him. “Not sure you can ever fall out of love with a person. I still love my first boyfriend, and we haven’t even talked in about ten years.”

Without thinking, Trip rested his hand on Christian’s thigh. “Just goes to show how much room you got for it. Someone else is goin’ to come along. I’d wager my best camera on it.”

“Someone else will come along for you, too. Somebody who thinks your head belongs in the clouds.”

Though he smiled at the sentiment, Trip didn’t have the heart to tell Chris it was wishful thinking. He’d been looking for someone like that his entire life. He was pretty sure that someone didn’t exist.

Chapter Ten

The morning broke hot and bright over Lecce, the bright sun reflecting off each white building and back into the brilliant blue sky. Christian stood in front of their open bedroom window, letting the occasional breeze brush against him, though it did nothing to cool his skin. Sweat rolled down the back of his legs and his arms, but at least it wasn't muggy. Christian supposed he should shut the window and pull the blinds, try to capture the cold air in the bedroom while he could, but he wasn't interested in that. He loved the sun. He would have been a sun worshipper.

Thinking of ancient sun worshippers brought to mind Trip's suggestion they shag on the beach. Not that it was hard finding reasons to think of shagging Trip these days. When he wasn't thinking about shagging Trip, it was either because he was actually shagging Trip, or they were sleeping. They ate occasionally, too. To keep up their strength, it seemed.

One week down. Only two left.

Trip stirred behind him, but Chris stopped himself from going over to the bed. Despite what his body was telling him, he didn't actually need to be touching Trip every second of every day.

Christian sighed, wiping his hand over his face. He recognized this sort of euphoria. It was the same as before, except different. Different because this wasn't the euphoria of a new love affair still in its infancy, with a lifetime of promise. This affair was nearly half over. The only problem was, they weren't acting like it. Christian knew he should try harder to keep some space between them. It would be easier to have a clean break if they weren't blindsided by it.

Or maybe it was just him? He did have the tendency to become too attached, too quickly. It was dangerous and he knew better. But he liked Trip. He liked spending time with Trip. He liked talking to Trip, and kissing Trip, and fucking Trip, and watching Trip sleep.

He *loved* that Trip wanted to take his picture. He *loved* the thought of being a part of Trip's body of work.

He loved that Trip trusted him.

It was all very troubling.

Trip may trust you, but he loves Andrew.

Christian shrugged. He loved Andrew, too. It happened. It wasn't the end of the world. One day, maybe one day soon, he'd be over it and so what? *It doesn't matter who Trip loves, this trip is half over. Then it's over.*

He turned from the window and was immediately distracted by the golden sheen of Trip's body in the morning light. The white sheet was tangled around his legs, and his cock was half-hard against his thigh, his lips swollen. Christian didn't know what to do. He needed to wake Trip up. They were supposed to meet a bus that would take them to a local vineyard. Christian was really looking forward to the vineyard.

He walked over to the foot of the bed and crawled up the mattress, dragging his mouth over the bits of skin not covered by the sheet. Trip moved, but didn't open his eyes. He flicked his tongue over the tip of Trip's cock, and the man stirred again.

Christian had just intended to tease him a little, but Trip was fully erect now, and Christian's mouth was watering.

"What time is it?" Trip mumbled. His eyes were still closed, his breathing still slow and even, but his arm flopped down from where he'd had it curled under his pillow to rest on Christian's head. As if of their own accord, his fingers began to entwine with the longer strands of Christian's hair, tickling in his sleepy state.

Chris kissed a line down Trip's shaft, then rubbed his unshaved cheek against Trip's smooth skin. "Seven. A bit early, but I thought you might want some breakfast before we left."

Goosebumps erupted along Trip's thigh, and his eyes fluttered open. "You're always trying to bloody feed me." His hand slid down to Christian's shoulder, tugging at him with a languid grip. "Get up here. I want some more sleep."

Christian lifted his head. "You want sleep more than you want a blowjob? I just want to make sure I'm understanding you."

A faint smile curved Trip's mouth. "Well, when you put it that way, I sound like a right idiot. But actually, I was dreaming of how good you feel when I hold you. Thought I'd catch a little more of that before you make me get up."

How was Christian supposed to remember to keep his distance when Trip said things like that? He not only said it, he *meant* it. He kissed Trip one final time, his tongue flicking over the crown, before crawling up Trip's body. Trip's arms went around him immediately, pulling Chris close as he shut his eyes again.

"I won't make you get up tomorrow morning," Christian murmured.

Trip nuzzled into his neck, his lips grazing across his hot skin. "Why are you making me get up today again?"

"Signed up for a tour of a vineyard," Chris reminded. It was too hot to be curled around Trip like this, but he wasn't going to move. "The bus leaves at nine sharp."

The grazing became licking, and somehow, Trip's tongue was cooler than the surrounding air. "That's an awfully long breakfast you had planned."

"No. I figured it would take at least an hour to get you out of bed." Christian moaned as Trip scraped his teeth across his throat, then followed with another stroke of his tongue. "Was I wrong about that estimate?"

"Depends." He nibbled a path along the underside of his chin, rasping over the stubble. "You calling me a layabout? Or finally understanding how delicious you are?"

Maybe he was a whore for compliments, but he soaked up everything Trip said like a sponge. "You don't lay about when I don't crawl back into bed with you, so I guess the latter."

He was startled when Trip flipped him onto his back, straddling his hips so that their cocks rested hard and heavy against each other. Propping himself up on his knuckles, Trip gazed down at Chris with eyes still heavy with sleep, his sooty lashes opening and closing almost in slow motion. A band tightened around Christian's chest. Trip was at his most gorgeous when he was like this, like a large cat surveying its prey. It was one of his favorite ways to see him.

"Are you always up this early?" he asked. "Back in London, I mean."

Chris slid his hands down Trip's ribs. "Yes. Up every morning at six during the week, and seven on the weekends. I've always been an early riser."

Trip nodded, visibly pondering that little tidbit of information. Slowly, he began to

rock against Christian, their cocks rubbing together as their balls lightly slapped against each other. "I'm not, you know. Some nights, that's what time I'm getting in."

Christian cupped Trip's ass, holding him as Trip continued to move at his own pace. He could let Trip do this all bloody morning. He knew if he wasn't careful, he'd let Trip do whatever he wanted all morning, and to hell with the vineyard. "And your day is probably just starting around the time I go to bed. At ten."

"Sometimes. Sometimes, I'm up for a shoot and I go all day and then all night and then all day again." Shifting his weight to brace himself with one hand, Trip used the other to ghost over Christian's features, tickling where he outlined his mouth, his jaw, the slope of his brow. "Picked up my damn smoking habit because of those. Best way for me to keep going."

"And your caffeine addiction, too?" Christian reached between their bodies and wrapped his fingers around their shafts. He began stroking slowly, increasing the friction just enough to draw a moan from Trip. "You know, I keep feeding you because you're so bloody skinny. Do you drink coffee instead of eat?"

"No, forget about food, is all. And nobody's around long enough to keep on me about it." When Christian let his fingernail scrape over the heads of their cocks, Trip's eyes fluttered shut, his tongue curling behind his teeth as he drowned for a moment in the sensation. His breathing was already quickening, and it washed in warm waves across Christian's neck. "I don't think I can even tell you how to work my cooker."

"I can cook. Took classes and everything," Christian said, and immediately wondered why he volunteered that information. What was he going to do? Go around to Trip's flat every night and cook him dinner? Offer to show him how to throw a few things together? Trip drove his hips forward, and Christian dug his fingers into Trip's ass, pressing him tighter against his body.

Slipping his hand beneath Christian's head, Trip cradled it at the nape as he opened his eyes again. "I'll bet you're fantastic at it," he murmured. He licked across Christian's lower lip, half-kissing, half-biting in random patterns along his cheeks. His thrusts against Chris were growing quicker, harder, but his words continued at their languid pace. "Andrew was a bloody fool."

The sound of Andrew's name didn't startle him. They regularly reassured each other Andrew was a fool, and worse. Trip meant that, too. *What are you going to do this time next month when you wake up alone, go to bed alone, eat dinner alone...*

Christian silenced the voice by kissing Trip and focusing on the way Trip's tongue curled against his. Chris moved his wrist faster, spreading pre-come down Trip's shaft. He knew Trip must have been getting close, but his mouth moved against Chris' with an intense deliberation that belied the speed of the strokes.

His kisses didn't even quicken when Chris felt his cock jerk along his palm, the hot splashes against his shaft triggering his own orgasm. Their come coated their stomachs, melding them together as their hips continued to move, and Trip swallowed each and every one of Christian's groans, gobbling the noise like he was a starving man. By the time Trip slowed, Christian's chest was burning, and he gulped for air when Trip finally pulled back.

"You promised me breakfast, right?"

Chris only caught a glimpse of Trip's sly grin before he ducked his head and slid downward. The muscles in his stomach jerked at the first swipe of Trip's tongue, and he

closed his eyes as Trip set to licking away their come.

"Not quite what I had in mind," Chris sighed. "But I'm not complaining."

He kept his eyes closed, stretching and arching like a cat beneath Trip as he swiped his tongue over the ridges of his stomach, and hips, and thighs. But when Trip continued to lick him long after the sticky fluid was gone, Christian's eyes fluttered open. Trip seemed completely caught up in his task, his eyes closed, satisfaction evident on his face.

"Let me have a taste, Trip."

That was all it took for Trip to stretch back along his length and seal their mouths together. In spite of the rising heat, Christian wrapped his arms around him and rolled him to their sides, savoring the taste of their mingled come on Trip's tongue.

"Now wasn't that better than a blowjob?" Trip teased in between kisses.

"Yes, I think it rather was." He glanced over Trip's shoulder to the clock on the wall. "And now it's nearly eight." The reminder was more for himself than Trip. He knew that if Trip really didn't want to get out of bed, Christian wouldn't even try to make him.

Trip surprised him by letting go, rolling over in order to sit up and stretch. "This vineyard is the one you were nattering on about all day yesterday, right?"

Christian propped himself up on his elbow. "I wasn't *nattering*. It's the same one I mentioned once or twice yesterday."

"Four times." Trip shot him a grin before standing. "Not that I was counting."

Christian watched him fumble through his discarded clothes for his pack of cigarettes, and then pull a chair over to the window. Trip tapped the pack against his palm and extracted one. The room was non-smoking, and he wasn't wearing a strip of clothing, and if either one of those things was a problem, Trip didn't acknowledge it.

Chris pushed the sheet aside and sat on the edge of the mattress. "Well, I've never been to an Italian vineyard. It's exciting."

"Which is why we're going." Cupping his hand around the end of his cigarette, Trip lit it and took a long drag before turning back to Chris. "It's your holiday, after all."

"That doesn't mean you have to let me drag you all over the Italian countryside when it's hotter than fuck outside," Chris pointed out. "You don't have to come with, if you're not interested."

"And miss out on the chance to see you smile about something that isn't sex? Sod that. I'm goin'."

Christian shook his head and reached for his bag, pulling out a clean pair of shorts. "You're nicer to me than some of my boyfriends were."

Trip's eyes followed Chris as he stood, trailing down his body for a moment before leaping back to his face. "Only some? Damn. Losing my touch."

Christian briefly wondered if Trip wanted to make this hard. He was thoughtful, and the sex was fucking fantastic, and watching Trip smoke shouldn't have turned him on all over again. Smoking wasn't sexy. It was a nasty habit. Except when Trip did it, apparently.

"You've still got two weeks. Maybe you can surpass all of them."

Trip turned toward the window to exhale a long stream of smoke, his strong profile a reminder of all the times in the past nine days Chris had watched him sleep. "That's also plenty of time for you to get sick of me. I'm a dab hand at mucking things up."

"You think so? What do you think I'm going to get sick of first? The fantastic sex? Your wicked sense of humor?" Chris said it lightly, but those were going to be the two

things he missed the most. “Your smile?” That was the third.

“My mouth,” Trip said, without hesitation. “It runs off, remember? One of these days, I’m going to put my foot in it, good and proper. Just wait.”

Christian tilted his head and watched as the mouth in question closed over the cigarette again. “If you put your foot in it, you’ll just have to find a good way to apologize. Preferably with the fantastic sex. I’m a forgiving soul.”

Though Trip smiled, his eyes remained thoughtful, gazing over the landscape as Chris had earlier. “Yes, you are,” he said softly. He waved a hand toward the bathroom. “You can go ahead and use the shower first if you want. I need a few more minutes to wake up.”

Christian nodded and stood up. “I won’t be long.”

As he stepped under the hot spray, all he could think about was how much he was going to miss Trip. Even if he did occasionally run off his mouth. Even if he already had to forgive Trip for something worse than running off his mouth. Why was he thinking about it so much? Why was he making it so hard on himself? Maybe he was a masochist. Maybe he was a glutton for punishment. Maybe he was just vulnerable and Trip was taking advantage of him.

Any of those would have been reasonable explanations. But Christian suspected none of them were the *right* explanations.

Chapter Eleven

Even with his sunglasses on, the sun was blinding, softened only by the breaks in the horizon of the vineyard buildings and the rows and rows of green stretching across the countryside. Trip followed along with the group, half-listening to the guide as his gaze kept straying to scenery. It was a beautiful backdrop, and though his brain went automatically to how he'd use it in a shoot, he couldn't help but wonder what kind of shots he could get of the workers bowed in the fields. Close-ups of gnarled hands. A long shot where the people merged with the plants. He was itching to get his camera out, right then and there.

At his side, Christian was captivated by the history the tour guide was detailing. Between stealing glances at the vineyards, Trip turned his eyes in the opposite direction, drinking in Chris just as voraciously. What was happening here? The holiday was supposed to be about expunging Andrew from their systems, fucking until their dicks were raw, forgetting until they stepped back onto British soil. Somewhere along the way, though, he'd stopped thinking of Chris as a holiday fling. Somewhere along the way, Chris had become real, far more real than made Trip comfortable.

He liked him. It was impossible not to. Christian was intelligent and thoughtful and loved his portfolio. In fact, he was the most ardent supporter of Trip's photography he had ever known. Well, without being on the payroll and those sycophants didn't count. Christian's effusive praise was genuine. Trip was still trying to get used to that.

Then there was the sex. The mind-blowing, bloody phenomenal sex. Sex where all he was capable of thinking about was where else to lick, where else to taste. Taking his mouth off Christian always constituted a major effort on Trip's part. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd been so wrapped up in a lover, but then again, the longer he spent in Italy, the harder it got to remember what life had been like before Christian at all.

That was part of why he'd brought up the London issues this morning in bed. He needed Chris to see the differences, to be the smart one and remind him why they were so incompatible. Except Chris had countered with the simplest of logic. Did he do that because he didn't want to see the disparities? Or because he didn't think the disparities mattered? Trip didn't know. Trip *wanted* to know. He needed it.

Because the thought of this ending when they got to London was getting harder and harder to consider.

He waited until the tour was over before slipping his hand into Christian's and tugging him outside. "Let's walk," he said. "Soak up as much of this sun as we can."

Christian nodded, his hand fitting comfortably against Trip's. Chris never protested holding hands in public, or any other outward sign of their private relationship. He wasn't ashamed, or embarrassed, or desperate to hide the fact that he liked to fuck guys. Unlike Andrew, who always treated it like a national bloody tragedy if Trip so much as touched him in public. It was something else to adore the man for.

"Did you like the tour?" Chris asked.

"Like this place," Trip replied. "It's gorgeous." His free hand toyed with the strap of his camera hanging at his side. "Wish I could photo it."

"Why can't you?"

He shot him a smile. "Because that would mean not getting this time with you. Easy maths. You win."

Chris squeezed Trip's hand. "You should photo it, if you want. After all, you don't know when you'll be back here again. I don't mind watching you work. That is, if you don't mind me watching."

It was incredibly tempting. "Did they say we can go down in the fields?"

"They didn't say we *couldn't*."

The response made Trip laugh out loud. A week ago, he doubted Chris would have been as flip about bending rules to his own whim. If nothing else, Trip had taught him when it was all right to take a risk.

With a fresh spring in his step, Trip pulled him down a narrow path leading away from the main buildings. It wound down a steep incline, forcing them to relinquish their holds on each other in order to navigate, but at the bottom, Trip grabbed Chris again and tugged him toward the far rows.

"I want some long shots first," he said. "I'll get the fine ones after."

Christian watched with obvious interest as Trip unpacked his camera, before surveying the vineyard that stretched for miles around them. "What are you going to shoot?"

Trip nodded toward a patch of workers at the end of the row. "Them."

There was no more talking as he lifted the camera to his eye. When he viewed the world through his lens, everything else disappeared. He'd talk to a model during a fashion shoot, but this was different. He had no desire to direct what he wanted to be real.

For long minutes, all he heard was the click of his shutter, the rustle of the vines as he stepped and crouched amongst the rows. Christian never spoke, but for some reason, Trip never forgot he was there.

That was a first.

Christian waited until Trip lowered his camera before smiling softly. "Watching you, it looks like you were born with that camera in your hand."

"Not quite. I was six. I nicked my grandad's, and when I dropped and broke it, I threw such a wobbler, he bought me one of my own. After that, there was no looking back."

"Can I have a copy of these photos?" Chris asked.

Trip's fingers slowed where he was attaching a longer lens. He was grateful for the sunglasses, hiding his eyes from Christian's when he glanced back at him. What he was going to talk about had the potential to explode in his face.

"It'll have to wait 'til we get back to London," he said carefully.

Chris shrugged. "I figured that." He paused before adding. "I'll be sure to give you my number before we leave."

"You want mine?"

Chris turned away, his feet sending up a small cloud of dust. He seemed fascinated by something on the ground. The silence was heavy, and it was on the tip of Trip's tongue to tell him to forget it when he said, "Yes. I do want yours."

It was small, but it felt like a victory. The only problem was, Chris wasn't looking at him.

Trip took the few steps it took to reach him and touched his arm. "This is probably me putting my foot in it, but this thing between us, this isn't what I thought it was goin'

to be.”

“No, it’s not what I expected either.” He looked up and briefly touched Trip’s cheek. “You’re not what I expected. But this thing between us...I don’t know what it is.”

His nerves were all over the place. He felt like a pimply-faced kid, approaching his first bloke. “What if I said, I don’t think it’s something we can sort out in two weeks? Less than two weeks, even.”

“Ten and a half days. Which is really no time at all. Honestly, I can’t stop thinking about what’s going to happen when we go back. I don’t feel like I have anything to go back to.”

Trip took a deep breath, lifting his chin to meet Christian’s gaze directly. “You could have me. Been told I’m quite the distraction, more than once.”

“I want you,” he said softly. “But Trip...everything is great here because it’s just us, and wine, and sex. No work, no other obligations...or distractions. What makes you think you’d still want me when you realize your life is going forward in one direction and mine...isn’t?”

Grabbing his case, Trip slipped his camera inside so both his hands were free. He grasped Christian’s wrist and began leading him to a shaded outcropping, out of view of the pickers and the main property.

“You keep thinking we’re so different, Chris. And yeah, there’s enough there that it’s taken me this long to work up the nerve to say something. But truth is, we’re not goin’ to know if we don’t give it a chance.” Gently, he shoved Chris against the hard wall of earth, pinning him there so that he’d have to struggle to get away. “I *want* that chance.”

Christian rested his hands on Trip’s hips. “I was just thinking this morning about how much I was going to miss you.” He tilted his head, his lips teasing Trip’s. “How happy I’ve been. I want that chance, too.”

“So let’s take it.” He curled his fingers into the tight muscles, pushing harder against Christian’s body. “I like having you around, luv. And not just for the fantastic shagging. I like *you*.”

Chris smiled. “You sound surprised by that.” He curled his fingers against Trip’s cheek. “This is crazy. You know this is crazy, right?”

“You’re talking to the wrong bloke. My whole life is crazy. You’re the first thing to come along in a long time that wasn’t.”

Unable to resist any longer, Trip caught Christian’s lips with his, sighing at the fresh contact. There were so many ways this could have gone wrong. They still could, for that matter. This didn’t guarantee anything but opening a door they’d both been standing in front of for far too long.

If Trip got his way, Chris would still be smiling when he dragged him through to the other side.

Chris gripped the sides of Trip head, his palms covering Trip’s ears, and deepened the kiss. Chris might have said he wanted the same chance Trip did, but he proved it with the kiss. It was both demanding and soft, like he was making a firm statement and trying to coax a similar response from Trip. The sun was ruthless on his back, and he heard the workers, and maybe a fresh group of tourists, in the distance.

They broke from the kiss slowly, but Trip didn’t want to lose any contact. His mouth immediately went to Christian’s jaw and neck.

“I think you’re the craziest thing that’s ever come in my life,” Chris sighed, sliding

his fingers through Trip's hair.

Trip smiled against his skin. "Been called a hell of a lot worse," he murmured. "I can't believe I'm actually goin' to have to thank Andrew for being so blind to what he had."

"Maybe I should do the same," Christian said, moving his fingers down Trip's neck. "I hope you're just going to thank him with a card or something."

"Considering I'd have to get into touching distance to thank him with a blowjob, a card will have to do," Trip joked. "Don't think I can stand being around the bastard for a bit without wanting to flatten him."

"I'm beginning to suspect Andrew's decision to keep us separated was a wise one." Christian smoothed his hands down Trip's back and snuck under his shirt, his fingers hot and rough against Trip's ribs.

Trip straightened, cocking a brow. "Speak for yourself. I could've done with a whole year of getting my hands on you. Plus it stopped us from having a threeway with Andrew." At Christian's look of surprise, Trip smirked. "The man's a wanker, but he's still a fucking great shag."

Chris shook his head. "I don't think I could have handled a threeway. I'm selfish. I don't want to share."

His words reminded Trip of how they'd kept Chris in the dark all that time, and a new flare of guilt crept beneath his skin. "We probably would've brassed Andrew off anyway," he backpedaled. He pulled the open collar of Christian's shirt to the side and licked a trail as far as he could go along his collarbone. "I get my mouth on you, and I tend to forget everything else."

"And when you get your mouth on me, I tend to forget everything else," Chris murmured. "Except how much I want to get you back to our room."

Skimming his hands down to grip Christian's hips, Trip ground the hard lines of their erections together, smiling when Chris moaned. "Ever get fucked in a vineyard before?"

He caught his breath. "No. Do you want to be my first?"

"Always."

Trip hauled him further out of the line of sight, reluctant to lose even a second of contact. When he no longer saw the workers out of the corner of his eye, he shoved Chris back and attacked his mouth, his fingers working to undo Christian's shorts. They both groaned when Trip pushed his hand inside and fisted Christian's cock, but Trip only indulged for a moment before letting go to push the shorts down his hips.

"I've got lube and a condom in my pocket," he murmured in Christian's ear. "But I think I'm going to get you wet the old-fashioned way first."

"I love the way you're always so prepared," Chris said, allowing Trip to turn him around. "You didn't plan to ravish me in the vineyard, did you?"

Trip chuckled. "I've just learned not to go anywhere with you without having both at my fingertips. And speaking of..."

His voice was muffled by his wet mouthing of Christian's back, his hands already busy stroking the tops of Christian's thighs. Slowly, Trip sank to his knees, pushing the shirt up to Christian's waist when he reached the tight muscle of his ass. He cupped each cheek, fingers digging into the flesh, and pulled them apart so he could lean in and run his tongue down the crack. The muscle twitched beneath his mouth, and when he reached the waiting hole, he sighed in satisfaction. He loved eating Chris out. It never ceased to

amaze him how responsive he was.

“Oh fuck...yes. God, Trip, I’ll never get enough of this...of your mouth...of you.” He reached behind him, skimming his fingers over Trip’s head and face.

The encouragement was heartening, but definitely unnecessary. With the scent of Christian’s skin filling his nose and the texture of the tight ring teasing his tongue, Trip was ready to stay on his knees forever. He licked around the pucker once, twice, deliberately avoiding penetration for as long as possible as Christian squirmed against the wall. His fingers dug into the flesh even more, hard enough that he knew there’d be faint bruises the next day, but it only served to turn Christian’s panting into groans, especially when Trip finally gave in to temptation and sank his tongue as deep as he could into the waiting passage.

Christian began to pant Trip’s name, and pleas for more, and soft words of encouragement, until they all ran together in his rapid breathing. Trip fucked him with his tongue—each long, slow stroke drawing another torrent of words from Chris. His ass clenched around him, and Trip felt the muscles in Christian’s thighs tense and tremble.

Though he could do this for hours, the threat of being caught out before getting his cock in Chris was too frightening to ignore. With one last thrust inside the tight hole, Trip reached into his pocket, pulling out the lube and condom he had ready. He straightened, opening his jeans, and when his cock slapped against Christian’s ass, he yielded to the urge to run its length up and down the crack.

“If you scream, they’re going to kick us out, you know,” he said, ripping open the condom.

“You should have thought about that before you got my shorts down around my ankles,” Chris said, pushing back against Trip’s length. He looked over his shoulder and watched as Trip rolled the condom onto his erection. “I’ll save my screaming for later.”

The lube was next, and Trip greased up his fingers before coating his cock with a few thorough pulls. “Sod that,” he said. “When we get back to the villa, it’s going to be my turn to get fucked.” Gripping the base, he positioned himself at the tight pucker, the muscle glistening from his earlier attentions, and slowly pushed inside, taking his time with every inch so he could feel Christian’s channel squeeze and throb around his shaft.

Chris pushed back against him, his head falling forward. He hissed as Trip pulled out and then thrust forward again. “I’ll fuck you when we get back,” he promised, reaching behind him to grip Trip’s flank, his fingers digging into Trip’s flesh. “I’ll do whatever you want...anything...”

Sweat dripped down his back to make his shirt cling to his skin, and Trip leaned forward against Christian, chasing the beads of moisture he saw collecting at his nape. “All I want is your word that you’ll give us a chance.” He curved an arm around Christian’s waist and grasped his cock, stroking it in rhythm with the thrusts into his ass. “When we get back to London. Tell me you’re willing to try to make you and me work.”

“You have it...you have my word...” Christian said without pause. “I don’t want to give you up, Trip.” He dropped his head back to Trip’s shoulder, his lips brushing against his jaw, seeking out his mouth. “As long as you want me.”

Trip gave up any more words in favor of long, slow kisses that made him shudder and tremble in all the best ways. Though he was the one inside Chris, he felt him everywhere, wrapped around him, inside his gut. And he even knew why. It was the freedom to be able to believe in something more, that this wasn’t just a holiday shag and

that when their time here was over, their time together wasn't. It was letting it all out, and welcoming the possibilities in. It was the potential future that no longer seemed dreary.

He deepened the kisses. Because he could.

Christian moaned, the sound going straight to Trip's cock. Christian's tongue wound around his, and Trip's lips vibrated with the sounds that came from Chris' throat. He covered Trip's hand with his own and forced him to move his wrist faster, harder. Trip didn't break the kiss as he felt Chris tense, knowing that keeping their mouths sealed would be the best way to muffle the shout he knew was coming. Christian clenched around him, froze for an endless second, and then shuddered, his come covering Trip's fingers. Satisfaction rolled through Trip as Christian whimpered, and he sank into Chris once more before he erupted. Now it was Christian's turn to muffle Trip's scream.

By the time Trip stopped moving, they were both sweaty and sticky, and he rested his brow on Christian's shoulder as he fought to catch his breath. "You're stuck now, you know," he said. "Because you haven't seen me in full-on, head-over-heels mode. If you thought I was affectionate before..."

"Head-over-heels mode?" Chris smiled. "I'm looking forward to it. As long as you don't mind my head-over-heels behavior."

"Yours doesn't get us arrested, does it? I'd rather not double our odds on that."

"It hasn't yet. But it might, if we don't get dressed before somebody catches us."

With a grin, Trip pulled back, wincing as his cock slid out of Christian's ass. He stripped himself of the condom and dropped it in the small rubbish bag he carried, then wiped his sticky hand off on the grass. By the time he tucked himself back into his jeans, Christian was already dressed, looking only a little mussed from their encounter.

"How do you do that?" he complained. He passed a hand through his hair, but it was obvious from the way it felt that it was sticking up every which way. "I look like the one who's just been thoroughly shagged here. You look like James fucking Bond."

Chris grinned. "Practice. I lived with my mum for two years when I moved back to London, and as far as she's concerned, I've never even been kissed." He ran his hand over his hair. "Which James Bond?"

Trip tilted his head, his face screwed up as he contemplated the question. "Brosnan," he announced. "You're too put-together. You look like you should be wearing a tux."

Chris smiled. "I do look quite good in a tux, but I never have the occasion to wear one."

"That'll change. There's a whole mess of events goin' on when I get back to London. We'll have to buy you a tux to save on the cost of hiring one each time." Trip stopped. The surprised look in Christian's eye made him realize what it was he had just said, and he backtracked quickly, in case he'd gone too far too fast. "If you wanted to go as my date, of course. No pressure."

"So you're saying I'll have an excuse to get dressed up, meet celebrities, drink fine wine, eat fine food, and get to spend time with you?" Christian tilted his head. "I guess I could be pressured into that."

Trip grinned. "Good, because most of the time, they're a bloody bore. I end up having to make my own fun."

"And they keep inviting you?"

"They like to live dangerously." He took Christian's hand, scooping up his camera with the other, and led him back toward the fields. "They're goin' to be gobsmacked

when I show with a proper gentleman.”

“That’s probably not why they’re going to be gobsmacked.”

“Oh? So what’s goin’ to do it then?”

“That somebody who has his pick of models, actors, and singers, if the tabloids are to be believed, is showing up with a literal nobody.”

“You’re not nobody.” Coming to a halt, Trip tugged Chris to him, bending his arm behind his back in order to hold him close without letting go of his hand. He skimmed a kiss across Christian’s swollen mouth, relishing the warmth before looking up and adding, “Not to me.”

Chapter Twelve

The next three days passed in a haze. Now that Christian didn't have to count, and agonize over, each second, he found the time flew by. The day after their visit to the vineyard, they left Lecce and boarded a boat in Brindisi for Sicily. Every time Chris thought of the vineyard, his face warmed, his fingers tingled, and his stomach clenched. He was so confused in so many ways, and in other ways, everything seemed so clear.

Christian kicked the sand through his toes as he wandered down the beach, staying just out of reach of the waves. This hadn't been on the original itinerary, but Trip had surprised him with a key to a large villa—with a private beach. Christian wished they could stay there. Forever. Of course, he had enjoyed nearly every minute of their holiday, but he couldn't remember being this content. He knew it wasn't just the private beach that made him happy.

Trip made him happy.

Christian knew he needed to think about the shift in their relationship. But it was hard, because he was so pleased he could think about what he and Trip had as a relationship. A relationship with a future. Trip thought he had a future with him. Somehow. How had Trip decided this? When? At what point did Trip look at him and think, *yeah, there's something here?* At what point had Chris looked at Trip and decided the same?

Or could it be narrowed down to a single point at all? He couldn't pinpoint the moment he fell in love with Andrew. He knew the moment he fell in lust with Andrew, and he knew when he became infatuated with Andrew, but he never could trace the moment he fell in love with Andrew. He couldn't trace that moment in any of his love affairs.

Not that he was in love with Trip. He wasn't. Yet. But he thought he might be one day, soon. Especially if Trip was serious about seeing him in London. He thought Trip was absolutely serious. He had an intensity in his eyes when he looked at Chris, when they talked, that Christian didn't even have a name for. He had never seen anything like it.

Christian bent and picked up an orange and white shell the size of his palm. Holding it up to the light, he studied the pattern of colors against the blue sky. What would London be like? How often would they actually be able to see each other? What about the parties? Would he ever be able to go to bed and wake up beside Trip? God, he didn't even know where Trip lived.

There was no barrier or obstacle so great they couldn't get over it. Even if Trip couldn't change his schedule, Christian had some flexibility. And so what if their lifestyles were diametrically opposed? When they were together, all of that seemed much less important. And so what if he was regularly surrounded by some of the best looking men in the world?

Christian sighed and tossed the shell into the waves, the water lapping over his feet. His skin felt tight in the sun and the salty air. He wouldn't be so pasty white when he returned to London. His shoulders and back were already darker, and so was his face. He liked the way he felt on the beach, liked the way the fresh air felt against his bare skin.

He liked the way he felt when he was with Trip.

Chris wanted to trust Trip. But when Trip was out all night, or on location for a shoot, or just not with him, would he be able to quell any suspicious thoughts? Christian wasn't by nature a jealous person, but he thought now he would be. He didn't miss the irony that his newfound suspicious nature was a result of Trip. He wasn't sure what to do about it, though.

He buried his hands in his pockets and began walking again. This time, he didn't avoid the water. Chris knew he should go back to the villa and put some food together. It was too late to be breakfast, and too early to be lunch, but he was trying to be considerate of Trip's sleeping patterns. Which totally made a mess of his own natural rhythms, but a well-rested Trip was a happy Trip, and that always meant very good things for him. He didn't alter his course from the coastline yet. He knew if he returned with the intent to cook, he'd stop to look in on Trip. And then he'd be compelled to join Trip in bed. And then they would have sex, which was always a desirable outcome, but he was trying to think.

What would Andrew think? He didn't plan to tell Andrew, or discuss it with Andrew, or talk to Andrew ever again, but he would find out. He and Trip had a wide circle of friends, and word would get around. Especially if Trip and Christian started appearing in public together. The past two weeks had revealed many shocking things about Andrew, but there was one thing he always knew—Andrew was possessive. If he considered Trip as his—his friend, his fuckbuddy, his whatever else—then he would no doubt have a few words to share with Chris. He needed to be prepared for that.

Not that he knew *how* to prepare for that. He wasn't prepared to fight with Andrew at all. They rarely had had a cross word with each other. They had agreed more often than not. They had mostly the same sort of tastes, and where their tastes diverged, Chris managed to keep his interests alive on the sidelines. Christian didn't know this vicious person Andrew had become. It must have been Lexie's influence. Did Andrew realize he became a horrible person when she was around?

He knew Andrew. He knew Andrew could be sweet, charming, affectionate. He was a great lover. He could be very loyal at times. He was funny. He could be damned near enchanting if he wanted to be. Christian wasn't worried about his own feelings for Andrew getting in the way of his future with Trip. Christian always had absolute faith in Andrew, and he had casually destroyed it, shredded it, and then spit on it. That couldn't be put back together again.

But Trip loved Andrew. Andrew had said some horrible things to Trip, but had he destroyed the very bedrock of their relationship? Christian had no way of knowing that. He only had Trip's word. And Trip had lied to him, too. So where did that leave them?

Christian dropped to the wet sand, putting his hands flat against the ground so the water rushed over his fingers. His legs and ass were soaked within seconds, and a bird he couldn't see called out to its mate. The sun sparkled on the impossibly blue waters. How could the sea be bluer than the sky?

He was happy with Trip. For all the concerns he had, for all the possible trouble, he was happy with Trip. He was happy Trip wanted to be with him. He wasn't prepared to sacrifice this sort of contentment and satisfaction to nebulous concerns about Andrew and male models and sleeping schedules. Even if he wasn't in love with Trip yet, the possibility was there, ready to blossom. It was exhilarating.

A movement in the corner of his eye turned his head, and Chris smiled when he recognized Trip's lean form approaching from the villa. With his camera hanging around his neck and a basket swinging from his hand, he looked completely at home in the Italian landscape, even with the dark glasses shading his eyes. It didn't matter that his expression was hidden. Chris knew that behind the shades, Trip would be smiling, too.

"You're wet," he commented, as he approached, glancing at Christian's damp trousers.

"It happens on the beach." He brushed his hands over his thighs. "I'm covered in sand, too. What have you got there?"

Trip held up the basket. "Lunch. Remember that café in the village? Got that lovely old bird to send something up for us. I thought it would be nice to have a picnic on the beach."

"Here I was, thinking you were sleeping the whole day away, and you were busy sweet-talking old ladies out of food. I guess you probably don't want to eat in the water." He pushed himself to his feet and nodded at the camera. "You going to take some pictures this afternoon?"

There was a flash of a smile before Trip caught his hand and led him further away from the surf. "Already did."

"You already did? Of what?"

"You."

Christian came to a stop. "Me? When? I wasn't doing anything."

Trip continued another step before the tangle of their fingers prevented him from going further. "Did it while you were walking," he said. "You okay with that? You said before you didn't mind."

"No," Christian said quickly. "I don't mind. You can take my picture any time you want." He began walking again, allowing Trip to lead him to a flat area of the beach. Trip took a blanket out of the basket, and each man took a corner. "Do I look particularly interesting when I'm mulling?"

"That's when everybody's most interesting," came the response. They stretched the blanket over the sand, and Trip set the basket at the edge, pinning it down before sitting. "They're focused on their thoughts and not how they're presenting themselves. It lets me see inside without having to work too hard."

Chris settled on the edge of the blanket, though his pants were already beginning to dry. Trip was so off-hand, so casual about his explanation. He said it almost like it was common knowledge. "You didn't learn that little trick by taking photos, did you?" Chris asked. "You use it for that, but that's not where you learned it."

Trip's smile was almost shy as he emptied the basket. "Learned it from watching people, is all. You might think the pictures are about talent or whatnot, but all I do is pay attention. There's no real skill in that. Common sense, if you ask me."

"No," Christian countered. "Paying attention, and knowing what you're looking for, takes a great deal of skill. Most people just float through life, and they never see anything. Occasionally, something startles them awake, but not often." Chris privately thought that's what made Trip's work so compelling to him. The photographs were about being *awake*.

"Brought this." He held out the bottle of wine, label up for Christian to see that it was one of the Brindisis they'd purchased at the vineyard. "That good for you?"

Christian grinned. "That's perfect for me. Have you done that before? Taken pictures of me when I'm not paying attention?"

"No, this was the first. Was tempted a few times, though. Like when you got lost wandering through that town center?" He grinned, tearing open a container of cold pasta. "Was *very* tempted then. You looked bloody adorable trying to read that map."

"You could have helped, you know," Chris said, digging through the basket to find the corkscrew. "I think I'm going to learn some Italian. If we ever come back, I don't want to be wandering through the countryside like a fool again."

"We have to come back." He was so intent on doling out the food, he didn't bother looking up as he spoke. It made it harder for Christian to determine whether or not Trip was being completely serious. "This is our place now, isn't it?"

Christian looked around. "It is? All of Italy? When do you want to come back?"

Trip shrugged. "You're the one with the nine-to-five. You tell me."

"Based on the past decade, I'd say we'll be coming back in about five years," Chris said, opening the bottle of wine. "On the bright side, I should know the language by then. What do you think? Do you want to make a date of it?"

"You want to make me wait five years to see you back here?" He held out his glass, watching the colors of the wine refract and scatter across the sand. "I was kind of hoping it could be an annual anniversary."

Christian had been teasing, but he didn't think Trip was. He was pleasantly surprised, once again, by how damned *serious* Trip was about this. "I think I might be able to swing an annual holiday. Other people do it all the time." Chris sipped from his glass, and the alcohol seemed to go right to his head. It was the sun. "But we could go other places, too. I've always wanted to see Moscow."

Stretching out on his back, Trip seemed more interested in gazing up into the cloudless sky than eating any of the food he'd brought. He rested his wine glass on his stomach, toying with the thin stem. "Moscow's nice. Ever been to Japan? I had a shoot there once. Best bloody time I ever had on one."

"Never been to Japan. I've been to Italy, once. And Scotland." Chris rolled to his stomach, resting his head on his forearm and watching Trip. "But I hear Japan is a great place for debauchery."

Though his head didn't turn, Trip's mouth curved into a smile. "Oh, I get it now. You're just using me to see how many places in the world you can get shagged within an inch of your life."

"You're onto my evil genius plan. Is that a problem?"

"Nope." He let a stray hand reach out and absently stroke Christian's face. "Looks to me we both come out winners with that plan."

"We do," Chris agreed. "Big winners." He closed his eyes, concentrating on Trip's touch. "What happened in Japan? And does whatever happened in Japan happen to you often?"

"Japan was..." The strokes grew softer as Trip searched for whatever word he wanted. "Japan was unexpected. Happened about three years ago. And no, it doesn't happen to me often. That one was the only shoot of mine Andrew ever went with me on. Right after he divorced Lexie."

Christian knew by the time Trip finished speaking that they were never going to go to Japan together. It may not have been logical, but he didn't want to compete with that

memory.

“What do you think he’s going to do when he finds out this is more than a fling?”

“Try to tear my head off my shoulders.”

Chris frowned. It was true he expected some sort of problem, but in Trip’s scenario, Andrew’s anger was flowing in the wrong direction. “Why would he do that?”

Trip’s hand returned to his stomach, curling around the wine glass again. The sheer fact that it took him nearly a minute to respond was enough to tell Chris how much he didn’t want to. “Because he’s going to think I’m using you to get to him.”

Chris supposed that made sense. It fit with Andrew’s ironically suspicious nature, and maybe it wasn’t out of character for Trip. “That’s just diabolical. Not very smart, though. If you were going to use that plan, you should have got the ball rolling six months ago. Or even six weeks ago, when he still wanted me. I think you deserve more credit than that.”

Setting aside his wine glass, Trip rolled onto his side, propping his head up in his hand to gaze at Chris. “What about you?” he asked. “How do you see Andrew when he hears about us?”

“I don’t think he’ll be very happy with me,” Chris said slowly. “I don’t know anything about your relationship with him. At all. And what I thought I did know was wrong. But I wouldn’t be surprised if this was not your first fight over Lexie. And I won’t be surprised if he thinks this will all just blow over, the way it’s obviously done in the past. I know how possessive he can be over what he thinks is his. So if things don’t go back to normal between the two of you, he’ll...well, I expect he’ll have more choice words for me.”

“If he does that, he’s goin’ to have me to deal with.” The sudden vehemence in Trip’s voice startled Chris. “Because this isn’t any old scrap we’ve got ourselves into. What he said to me on the phone...we’ve had our words in the past, but Andrew’s *never* said anything like that to me before. Which means he’s finally been pushed far enough to tell me how he really feels. And you might not believe it, but I’m not so blinkered that I’m goin’ to pine after someone who holds such a low opinion of me.”

“You don’t need to pine after someone like that anyway.” Chris grinned. “Not when you could pine after somebody who has a very high opinion of you.”

With a sly slant of his mouth, Trip leaned forward and grazed a soft kiss over Christian’s lips. “If you want other photos,” he said when he pulled back, “I don’t mind doing something a tad more conventional. That was probably what you were expecting anyway.”

“Conventional? With you? I wouldn’t dream of such a thing. But do I sound vain if I say I would like some more photos of myself?”

“You sound greedy.” Trip’s smile widened. “Greedy is good.”

“You think so? I always thought it was one of the deadly sins.” Chris popped a canapé in his mouth. “Like gluttony and sloth and lust.”

“Then I’m goin’ straight to hell.” He reached and caught a crumb on Christian’s lip with his thumb, pressing it into his mouth for Chris to suck clean. “Wanna join me?”

Chris rolled to his side and inched closer to Trip until their bodies were pressed together, Christian’s thigh sliding between Trip’s legs. “Absolutely,” he murmured, before tilting his head to kiss the corner of Trip’s mouth. As soon as Chris touched his lips, he forgot about the food and wine. He didn’t even hear the waves crashing against

the sand.

Chapter Thirteen

They returned to Rome two nights before they were scheduled to fly back to London, sun burnt and exhausted. The final week of their holiday had been spent touring through Sicily, visiting the ruins of Pompeii, and exploring Capri, before they took the train back from Naples to Rome. Christian didn't remember any of it. He remembered the way Trip's skin tasted saltier when they were on the coast. He remembered how it felt to fuck Trip while they stood on the balcony of their villa, overlooking the crystal blue waters of the Mediterranean. He remembered falling asleep with Trip still curled around his back. But he didn't remember much of Italy itself.

Unfortunately, at some point in their debauchery, Trip suffered a deep sunburn that covered his face, neck, shoulders, and most of his back. All he wanted to do was stay in their cool hotel room and sleep. Chris offered to stay with him, but Trip shooed him out, insisting he not waste his final day in Rome. Chris wasn't happy to leave Trip behind, but he couldn't resist the opportunity to visit places he didn't get to see before because he was loath to tear himself away from Trip.

The Villa Borghese was first on his list, and the most important. Rome had so many treasures that it seemed silly to prioritize what should be seen and what could be missed, but Christian did not want to leave Italy without exploring the Borghese galleries, especially Bernini's sculptures.

Pluto and Prosperina stunned him to the point that he couldn't move, couldn't look away, only stand in front of it and stare. The attention to detail was startling, and awesome in the oldest sense of the word. It inspired nothing but wonder. Christian was so captivated by the sculpture that he didn't notice anybody else in the small room with him until a strange hand grasped his shoulder.

"Christian?"

Chris tore his gaze from the art to look into Giovanni's eyes, which were captivating in their own right. He smiled. "Well, fancy meeting you here."

"I am studying. I come here to see the collection every day I'm in Rome."

"Every day? Isn't that a bit excessive?"

Giovanni shrugged. "There is much to study."

"Maybe you can give me the guided tour?" Christian suggested.

All Giovanni needed was the invitation to speak, and he was off. Christian listened attentively to each description, and he realized he was much more interested in the art than the man telling him about the art. Giovanni's knowledge and eagerness to share it had been charming before, but now it seemed almost tedious. Christian's mind kept wandering to Trip.

"Let me buy you a drink," Giovanni offered, once they emerged from the galleries to step into the gift shop. He gestured at the small cafeteria. "All this talking has made me thirsty."

"I'll buy you something," Chris said. "To thank you."

Giovanni smiled. "It was my pleasure. There is nothing better than a captive audience."

They both selected sparkling water, and Christian ordered a large piece of pizza for

lunch. One excellent benefit of traveling with Trip was that, even though he ate well, he always burned those calories. Otherwise, he'd be returning to London twenty pounds heavier.

"My roommate is in Napoli this week," Giovanni informed him as they settled at one of the small, round tables.

Christian frowned. Why was Giovanni giving him that information? The eager light in his eyes and his hungry smile cleared up the confusion.

"It's tempting, but I can't," Chris said with an apologetic smile.

"Oh? Do you have a new lover?"

Christian nodded. "Trip. The guy I'm traveling with. You'd be stepping on his toes now."

"Ahh," Giovanni said. "I am not surprised. The night I met you at the club, he was looking at you with possessive eyes."

"He was?"

"Yes. It's very exciting, no? Being with somebody new."

"It is. Trip is...very exciting."

"Does he know about the man who left you? What is his name? Andrew?"

Chris took a bite of his pizza and nodded. "They are...were friends. So he knows everything."

Giovanni nodded in approval. "It is good that he knows. I once dated a man, very handsome, but he did not tell me he just left his lover. When he left, I was very disappointed."

Christian shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

"He was on the...how you say in English? The rebound, yes? He just needed somebody to keep him company while he sorted his life out." Giovanni shrugged. "I don't mind. I don't have the time for more than that anyway, but I was hurt he didn't tell me. Honesty. That's important, no?"

"It is. But I'm not on the rebound..."

"Did I take care of that for you?" Giovanni asked, his eyes unwavering. "You were with your former lover for a long time, Christian. It takes more than a few weeks to forget a year, does it not?"

Christian wanted to lash out. What did Giovanni know? Giovanni didn't know him. One drunken conversation and one shag in a closet did not make Giovanni qualified to talk about Christian's life, or Christian's relationships. Or Trip. But at the same time, Chris recognized the source of his sudden anger. It wasn't what Giovanni said. It was that Giovanni was right.

"It's different with Trip."

Giovanni shrugged. "I do not know. Maybe you do love him."

"No," Christian said slowly. "I don't know if I love him."

"But you are having a good time? You enjoy his company? You do not think about the pain you have when you're with him?" He took a long swallow from his water. "That is important. Does he love you?"

"No. No, it's much too soon for that. We've both been..." Giovanni arched his eyebrow, waiting for Chris to finish his sentence. "You know, I hate to eat and run like this, but I've got to go."

"Look me up if you ever visit Florence. It's a beautiful city. I'll show you."

Chris stood and offered his hand. "*Grazie. É un piacere.*"

Giovanni shook his hand with a smile. The sort of smile that would have melted all of Christian's defenses three weeks earlier. The sort of smile he never would have noticed when he was with Andrew and he barely noticed now. "It was all my pleasure, Christian."

Chris left him in the cafeteria, forgetting about the prints and postcards he wanted to buy as souvenirs. Giovanni had unwittingly given him too much to think about. He needed to sort this out before he returned to the hotel. They needed to sort it out before they returned to London.

* * * *

The worst part about the sunburn was getting stuck inside with only the telly for entertainment. Part of Trip regretted insisting Christian go out for the day, but he knew how badly the other man wanted to sightsee and he wasn't going to be the one to say no. Besides, if Chris was around, the urge to fuck would be strong, and shagging with the burn was not the most fun. It was better this way. It was *boring* this way, but still, in the long run, both of them would be the better for it.

But as he flipped through the stations trying to find something interesting to watch that he didn't have to work too hard to translate, Trip really wished Chris would come back soon. This was their last night in Italy. He rather wanted to spend it together.

When he heard the key in the lock, he tried not to be too eager and leap from the bed to intercept Chris. He even kept the television on. Trip was very proud of his restraint.

"Back just in time for a bit of supper," he said with a smile.

"Yeah, do you feel up to going out? How's your burn?"

Trip sat up from where he'd been lying on his stomach. "Better, but I thought we'd get something in. Just the two of us."

Christian sat on the edge of the bed and toed off his shoes. "That sounds good. I wanted to talk about something anyway. It's probably best if we stay in."

Reaching out, he looped a finger beneath Christian's waistband and tugged him off-balance, pulling him down onto the bed so they were stretched out alongside each other. "You make it sound all serious. Now I'm wondering if maybe we should go out."

"It's a little serious," Christian said, resting his hand on Trip's thigh. He rubbed it absently, his fingers curling against Trip's skin. "I've been thinking about us. And about what's going to happen after we get on that plane tomorrow."

Though he remained calm on the outside, something about Christian's tone set off a warning in Trip's head. Fantasizing about what dating him would be like had been the best way to pass the time since getting burned so badly. He knew Chris had his own ideas, but every time Trip tried to talk about how he thought it would go, Christian would turn it into a joke or a tease. Maybe it was easier for him that way. It looked like the time had come to finally address it.

"What happens is we land in London," he said, smiling.

Chris sighed and took his hand away, breaking contact. "This is...well, about as hard as I thought it would be." He looked down. "Trip, I think we're moving too fast. Much too fast."

His gut clenched. If he'd been considering worst case scenarios, this would have rated high on the list. "What's too fast?" he countered. "We've been here for three

weeks.”

“I know, but... Trip, look, I like you a lot. And I think I could... well, I know I’m falling for you. Hard. But we started fucking not even two days after Andrew dumped me. Dumped us both, in a way. You don’t think there’s a connection between Andrew’s actions and what we’re doing here? We both... we both needed somebody.”

“Maybe you did, but I sure as hell didn’t. I wasn’t in Andrew’s back pocket like you were.”

“Maybe you were just angry at first, but you were hurt after what he said to you,” Chris said softly. “He told you that he couldn’t love you... and you immediately focused one hundred percent of your attention on me. And almost made it impossible for me not to.”

The last made Trip withdraw, rolling away from Chris, in spite of the sting it brought to his skin. “So you think I *forced* this thing between us on you?” he said. Now that he was on his feet, he paced the length of the bed. “If you didn’t want it, all you had to do was say something in Brindisi. And you didn’t. I gave you every out you needed.”

Christian sat up as well. “No. I don’t think you forced it on me. And I wanted it then. I want it now. I want to go back to London and have everything be great between us. But Trip... can you tell me you weren’t feeling a little... vulnerable? Can you tell me what he said didn’t cut right through you? Because it cut through me, and I barely knew you then. Not like I know you now.”

“That’s not the point. People get hurt. It’s a fact of life.”

“Yeah, it is. It’s also natural to seek out a bit of solace.” Christian ran his hands through his hair. “I’m not explaining myself well. I know you want more than just a fling. But it takes a lot of work to build a relationship, and you need to have something to build it on. Look at what I’m doing here. I’m starting something on the rebound when I’m hurt and I feel like shit, with the guy who was sleeping with my now-ex-boyfriend behind my back. And you’re so intense about it and it... scares me a little.”

The way Chris kept throwing more stuff at Trip, stuff he hadn’t said or intimated at since that awful phone call from Andrew, was making his head spin. “This is who I am, Chris,” he said. “I’m not any different now than I was when we sat in the pub together. And it was good enough for you then. What the bloody hell’s so different now?”

“The difference is, if we’re going to be together, really together, I need to know we’re doing it for the right reasons. Not because we want to spite Andrew, or because we’re both still smarting from a vicious blow, or because we’re trying to hold on to something we captured here. And I just don’t know if we are.”

“No, you don’t know if *you* are.” His body was tightening in anticipation of a fight, a reflex to being cornered whether that’s what Christian meant or not. He didn’t react well to people telling him what he felt, and Trip knew he had to stay well away to keep from lashing out. It was the last thing he wanted. “I know damn well why I’m doing this.”

“Trip, please, don’t get angry. I’m not trying to pick a fight with you. I’m not trying to say we shouldn’t be together, or that I don’t want to be with you. I just... I don’t know. Why are you doing this?”

“Because I love you, you daft git. Or is that too scary, too?”

“You love me?” Chris said the words like he wasn’t sure how they would fit in his mouth. “How long ago did you decide that?”

The declaration had taken Trip as much by surprise as it had Christian, but he wasn’t

about to back down from it now. “Who *decides* they’re goin’ to love someone?” he said. “It just happens. Can’t control it. Can’t predict it. Hell, you can’t even stop it when you want. Look at us and Andrew.”

“Yes, look at us and Andrew. I’m done with him. Three weeks ago, if he had shown up here and told me he was sorry, that would have been enough for me. But not now. Are you finished with him, Trip? Can you honestly tell me there is nothing he can do to make you forgive him? Or will I have to worry every single day if this is going to be the day you two reconcile?”

The implication stung. Trip stared at Chris, his eyes burning. “You must think I’m right pathetic if you think I’d go crawling back to Andrew after what he said to me.”

“No, I don’t think that. I think you’ve known him for fifteen years, and probably loved him for nearly that long. I think you have a history with him that I can’t even begin to touch. And it only takes one moment of weakness, Trip. One mistake. One last hurrah for old time’s sake.”

“You’re right. I have loved the bastard that long. But what you don’t know is that I never fucked around with him when I was in a relationship with somebody else. I don’t do that.”

“You’re right. I don’t know that you don’t fuck around when you’re in relationships, but I know it doesn’t bother you when he’s in a relationship. And all I have is your word, and fuck, Trip, I want to trust you. Do you think this conversation makes me happy? I want to believe you and apologize for starting this at all and go back to talking about parties in London.” Christian stood, but he didn’t approach Trip. He moved to the opposite side of the room and braced himself against the edge of the window. Looking out over the city, he said softly, “I want to tell you that I love you, too.”

“But you don’t.”

There were other points that he wanted to argue, like how he wasn’t anybody else’s keeper and if they chose to cheat, that was their business and not his, but as soon as Christian turned his back on him, all Trip could think about was that he loved Chris.

And Chris didn’t love him.

“What happened to your promise? You said you’d give us a chance. Now you’re killing it before we even get off the ground.”

“I don’t know if I love you. I don’t trust myself right now, Trip. What if what I think is love is just a combination of lust and infatuation and gratitude that somebody, anybody, still thinks I’m worth loving?”

He couldn’t believe he was having this conversation. “Well, at least I know you’re *grateful*,” Trip said, more than a hint of bitterness in his tone. Grabbing his shirt from where he’d left it on the chair, he yanked it on, welcoming the pain of the fabric scraping across his burned skin. “Nobody can tell you what love is, Chris. And if you can’t figure it out for yourself, well, that’s not my problem.”

Except it was. Because Trip didn’t want Chris to be unsure. And as long as Chris didn’t know, it was going to hurt.

“Trip, that’s not what I meant.” He turned around, his brow furrowing. “Are you leaving?”

“Need some air.” He grabbed his boots and sat on the edge of the bed to yank them on. “Been cooped up inside for too long.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Chris approached, sitting beside him on the bed. “Trip, I just...I

want to be clear. I don't want to...I'm not trying to end things between us."

Trip snorted. That was sure as hell what it felt like. "Do you even know what you're trying to do?" he said. "Because nothing I'm saying seems to be making a difference to you."

"Because it's not about you. It's about me. I don't know what the hell I'm doing, Trip. My mind is telling me one thing, and my gut is telling me something else and I...don't want to hurt you. Ever."

Did Christian even know he was giving the, *it's not you, it's me*, speech? Trip was pretty sure not. He seemed so genuinely contrite and confused that a small measure of Trip's anger dissipated.

"So what do you want to do?" he said. "Just tell me. Think that's better than me trying to guess any more."

"I need a little bit more time, that's all. When you talk, you talk about what's going to happen months and even years from now. You're telling me you love me. I feel like I'm caught up in some sort of whirlwind and I don't know where it's going to set me down. Can we just focus on today and maybe getting through the next week and leave the rest for later?"

Today. The story of Trip's life. Even as Trip nodded and squeezed Christian's knee in agreement, he felt a small corner of his heart crumble. Maybe Andrew was right. Maybe all he was good for was a good time. He had just hoped that Chris was the one to finally want all of him.

Maybe not.

Chapter Fourteen

Christian didn't know if Trip was angry with him, but he was certainly withdrawn. His normal displays of physical affection vanished, and he fell asleep practically hugging the opposite edge of the bed. Chris tried to tell himself it was because of the sunburn. He was hot, the room was hot, the bed was hot, and adding his body heat was unnecessary. But when he was sure Trip had fallen asleep, he inched across the small mattress and draped his arm over Trip's stomach, careful not to touch any of his reddened skin.

The flight was worse, and Christian couldn't help but think of how much happier he had been on the journey to Italy—and he had been miserable then. Trip let him hold his hand on the flight, but he wasn't responsive to Christian's questions. He didn't allow himself to be drawn into a conversation, and Chris was eventually forced to give up. He didn't give up Trip's hand, though.

He had fucked up everything. He never intended to fight with Trip. When Trip told him he loved him, Chris didn't know if he should immediately return the sentiment, or tell him not to be ridiculous, or let the warmth of the declaration wash over him and forget all his previous concerns. He knew Trip shouldn't be punished for Andrew's sins, but hadn't he just learned a very hard lesson? Namely, people didn't always mean it when they announced they were in love.

Chris didn't know if Trip hated him, but he hated himself. Had this situation always been so complicated? Or did he over-think it until everything was tied up into a hopeless knot? He needed to think of a way to fix it. Because he still didn't relish the thought of living without Trip in his life. Maybe he should tell him that. Maybe after they emerged from the terminal, he should pull Trip aside, kiss him, and tell him the rest of it didn't matter, he knew they could work things out together.

Christian was about to do just that when he caught sight of a pair of familiar brown eyes.

At his side, Trip muttered, "Oh, bloody hell."

Andrew stood amongst the throng greeting the new arrivals, hands stuffed deep into his pockets, his broad body aching familiar in the tight t-shirt and jeans. His eyes flickered only briefly at Trip before returning to Christian, though Chris imagined he saw a trace of anger in the draw of his brows before Andrew smoothed over his features again.

He stepped forward as soon as they came out from behind the dividers and drew Chris into a quick hug before he had the chance to stop him. "Welcome home," he said when he stepped back. His gaze traveled up and down Christian's body in obvious appreciation. "Italy looks good on you."

Chris was unable to stop his smile. "It was all that sunshine." Trip immediately stepped away from them both, and Chris realized what he had done. His smile faded, and he too took a step back. "What are you doing here?"

Andrew didn't even look in Trip's direction. "I'm here to see you." He ducked his head for a moment and sighed. "I fucked up, Chris. I'm here because I need to tell you how sorry I am."

"Well, this is a familiar tune," came Trip's wry comment. "Fortunately, I've danced

to it before. Seeing as this is Christian's first time, though, I'll leave you to it." He caught Christian's eyes for a brief but flaring moment. "Good luck. You're goin' to need it." With that, he turned on his heel and pushed through the crowd.

"Trip, wait!"

Christian tried to follow him, yelling his name again, but Andrew grabbed his arm. He considered pulling away, but Trip had already disappeared into the crowd. It would be impossible to find him now. *Fuck*. He turned to meet Andrew's eyes. "I think you already told me everything I needed to know."

"No, I didn't," Andrew insisted. "I'm not with Lexie anymore, Chris. That's over. For real this time." He slid his hand up to Christian's shoulder, squeezing it as if in reassurance. "I should never have said any of those things to you. Please. Why don't you let me give you a ride home and we'll talk, okay? Give me a chance to explain things."

Christian didn't want to go anywhere with Andrew, but he didn't want to have this discussion in the middle of Heathrow. The last thing they needed was to attract the attention of security by getting into a shouting match. But he didn't believe a word Andrew said. Sure, it was over with Lexie. Until the next time she crooked her finger at him.

And maybe he'd spot Trip on the way out if they got moving now. "Yeah, thanks, that'd be fine."

Without asking, Andrew took Christian's suitcase from him and began leading him toward the short term multi-story. "You really do look great, you know. I wish I'd been able to be there with you."

Christian didn't know what to say to that. Andrew spoke like it was some sort of family emergency or scheduling conflict that kept him from attending. Like Christian wouldn't have done everything in his power to convince Andrew to go with him, if only Andrew hadn't slammed the door in his face. And now Chris couldn't even say he regretted Andrew stayed in London. He didn't regret it at all.

"You would have enjoyed it," he said neutrally. "Capri and Sicily were beautiful."

"Did you get to do any of the sightseeing we'd considered? Those vineyards you told me about sounded fantastic."

Christian's heart twisted a little, remembering the promise he had made to Trip in earnest. A promise he still intended to keep, even if Trip didn't believe him. "Yes, we took tours of several vineyards while we were there. We had a good time. Trip even had the opportunity to take some photos."

If he'd thought mentioning Trip was going to garner a response, he would have been disappointed. All Andrew did was nod.

"It looks like he might have been out in the sun a little too long," he said. "He's going to be a bitch to be around for awhile, probably."

"Yeah, he got a burn." Chris kept his voice even, though the thought of Andrew and Trip spending time together made him sick. He wished he trusted Trip more than that, even if he didn't trust Andrew. He didn't speak again until they were settled in Andrew's car. "So, what happened? Why are you and Lexie really, really over this time?"

Andrew took his time answering, concentrating on the heavy flow of traffic getting out of the multi-story. "I caught her with another guy in my bed a few days ago," he said. "Apparently, the debts I thought I was helping her clear up were his. So I told her to make a choice." He rolled to a stop at the exit booth and inserted the paid parking pass,

not answering until after the barrier was lifting and they were easing out into the sunshine. “She laughed at me. I kicked her out then.”

Christian stared at him, waiting to see if there would be more, but that was it. Andrew had decided to try to patch things up because, once again, he was reacting to what Lexie wanted. Was he supposed to cheer because Andrew had the balls to kick out the woman who was stealing his money, fucking around behind his back, and laughing at him? Christian would have laughed, too, if he had been in Lexie’s position. He almost felt like laughing now.

“That sounds rough. It must have hurt like hell to see her like that with another man, huh?”

Andrew’s grip tightened on the steering wheel. “You were right,” he said. “Hell, even Trip was right. I should know better by now, especially considering how many times she’s done this before.”

“Yes. One has to wonder...how many times you can allow yourself to be taken in by a person who has a complete disregard for your feelings, before you learn your lesson. I don’t know if I’d be as keen on second and third chances as you are.”

As they turned onto the motorway, Andrew reached across and rested his hand on Christian’s knee. “I know I hurt you. I’m sorry. It’s not going to happen again, Chris. I love you too much to lose you because of one stupid mistake.”

Christian looked down at Andrew’s hand and only felt a mild recoil of disgust. “Fucking around behind my back for as long as we were together is not one stupid mistake, Andrew. If this were just about Lexie, I’d probably forgive you. But it’s not, and don’t make the mistake of thinking it is.”

Though Andrew stiffened, he didn’t move his hand. “Whatever Trip told you, you know it wasn’t true, right? He’s got his own perspective on the world, and to say it’s fucked beyond belief is to put it mildly.”

Christian’s jaw clenched, and he reined in the desire to jump to Trip’s defense. If he did that, they would start fighting about Trip. He didn’t want to do that. He wanted to keep the conversation focused on Andrew, so Andrew would understand exactly why he wasn’t going to win this round.

“Do you deny that you’ve been fucking Trip for the past year?”

He heard the clicking of Andrew’s teeth as he ground them together. “You make it sound like I was jumping from you to him. It’s not like that. What happens with me and Trip...it’s just every once in a while. Usually when he’s drunk and it doesn’t mean a thing.”

Christian thought it was interesting Andrew skipped right over apologizing and went straight to excuses. “You don’t even talk about it in the past tense, Andrew. Like in your mind, it’s going to happen again next weekend. And you know what? It means something to me.”

“I know it was a bad way for you to find out, Chris. I’m sorry about that, but Jesus, I’d just found out about the credit card, and that Trip was there with you, and can you really blame me for getting upset? Just tell me he didn’t take advantage of you, because then I’d have to kill him.”

“Take advantage of me? You’d have to kill him? My god, Andrew, I’m not your twelve year old daughter.” Christian took a deep breath. “And tell me, please, what the fuck are you talking about? You do realize you’ve only apologized for the way I found

out, right? Not for the actual act of cheating on me, and lying to me, and betraying my trust.”

The car was accelerating, and Andrew veered into the next lane in order to pass a long lorry. “For one thing, it’s not cheating,” he said. “It’s *Trip*. Sometimes fucking him is the only way to get rid of him.”

“If you didn’t think you were doing anything wrong, Andrew, why didn’t you tell me? Why did you use it as a weapon against me?”

Andrew’s exhalation was audible. “If I’d told you, you would’ve left. That was the last thing I wanted. Especially because I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“And it would be unreasonable for me to leave you after I found you’re fucking another person? In the interest of fairness, Andrew, please explain it to me. I want to understand. I do.”

“I don’t know...” He sighed again, clearly growing frustrated with the situation. “Trip’s been in love with me since we met at uni,” he tried again. “But I never returned his feelings. Not the way he wanted. He never understood that I didn’t think of myself as gay, and that a lot of his antics just annoyed the shit out of me. We wanted different things. But...he was the first guy I ever had sex with. And the sex was...the sex was really good.”

“Yes, sex with Trip is pretty fantastic. I can totally understand why you’d rather have sex with him than me, and why you’d lie about it. So you actively chose to use a person who is in love with you for sex, while lying to another person who was in love with you about it. What did you think, Andrew? You’re so magnificent that we wouldn’t mind being used and lied to?”

“I never used Trip. He knew I was never going to love him.”

Christian had never had such a surreal conversation, and he worked in customer service. He knew he should just let it drop, but his curiosity got the best of him.

“Andrew, what do you want from me? Do you want me to come back to you with permission to still see Trip on occasion?”

Andrew reached across to touch his leg again, obviously taking Christian’s questions as a window of opportunity. “I want you back in my life,” he said. “If that means I don’t see Trip anymore, then that’s what it means. I’ll cut him out of it completely. For you.”

Christian wasn’t expecting that answer. From the way Andrew offered justifications and excuses, Chris half-expected him to jump on what he was suggesting with both feet. But here Andrew was, offering him just what he wanted, just what he needed to hear. Andrew loved him. Andrew wanted him. Andrew was willing to cut his oldest friend out of his life for him. It all sounded wonderful.

Except for three small problems.

“I’m sorry, Andrew. I am. But you’ve shown me a side of you I never met before, and I don’t like it. I can’t trust you. You are utterly without credibility. And I don’t want Trip out of my life. I like Trip. I like him a lot. I intend to see him again, and I intend to be with him.”

Andrew glanced over at him, and the car made a dangerous swerve before he had to snatch his hand back and straighten it out. “What do you mean, be *with* him?”

Chris shrugged. “What do you think I mean? Trip isn’t just a fling, somebody I’m going to use and toss aside. He’s important to me.”

For some reason, his statement seemed to deflate some of Andrew’s tension. “Look,

Chris, I know how charming Trip can be. And I know you were hurting about what happened with Lexie. But whatever face Trip showed you in Italy, that's not really him. You don't know him like I do. He's temperamental, and easily provoked, and even more easily distracted. I can understand you being infatuated with him, but you're just the flavor of the week for him. I guarantee you, he'll have a new guy on his arm by the weekend. And you deserve better than that."

Again Christian wanted to defend Trip, to insist that he liked the fact that Trip was temperamental and easily provoked. He wanted to insist that Trip wouldn't be distracted by a new guy, because Trip loved him, and that meant something...but none of those words would come.

"I deserve better than that? You mean, I deserve you. So in a few weeks or a few months, when you get bored, we can do this all over again. You dump me for Lexie, you fuck Trip, maybe there's a whole other person that I don't know about. Somebody else from your past." Christian shook his head. "I'm done, Andrew. I'm done with you. I'm done with this mess. I'm just done."

Andrew shook his head. "You don't mean that. You love me. I know you do."

"I don't know. Maybe I do. Maybe I always will. But I can't trust you. And the fact you don't even know what you've done wrong doesn't help your case." Andrew pulled to a stop outside of his building and Chris immediately pushed the door open. He pulled his case out of the back seat, but paused before he walked away. "As they say in Italy. *Vaffanculo. Ciao.*"

Andrew gaped at him, like he couldn't believe Chris had just said, *fuck you*. "That's Trip talking, not you, Chris."

Christian tilted his head. "Come to think of it, Trip might have taught me that one. He taught me a few things. But I guess I don't need to tell *you* about that, do I?"

He slammed the car door and turned on his heel, hoping that Andrew wouldn't see fit to follow him. He began to tremble once he reached the lift, and he thought he might vomit by the time he unlocked his door, but Andrew didn't follow him.

Chapter Fifteen

The crack of the cue sent a satisfying surge through Trip's veins, and he smirked as the black ball shot into the corner pocket. "That's fifty quid you're up to, mate," he said to the man glowering at the opposite end of the snooker table. "Ready to double up on another game?"

The man didn't say a word as he set the stick down and reached into his back pocket. As he watched him pull out his wallet, Trip picked up his pint and drained the rest of his Guinness. It should have been more satisfying than it was. He was in his favorite pub, with his favorite drink, up over two hundred pounds on his second favorite pub activity. He should have been happy.

He wasn't nearly drunk enough yet to even see happy on the horizon.

It had been a week since he and Chris had returned from Italy. Well. Eight days. Eight days, seven hours, and...

He glanced at his watch.

And eleven minutes.

A lifetime, it felt like. Probably because he hadn't seen or said a word to Christian since witnessing how he'd brightened at Andrew's obvious compliment.

The kicker was, Trip knew he should've seen it coming. Christian had practically warned him their last night in Rome. Chris might have thought he wanted a relationship with Trip, but as soon as Trip spilled his guts about loving him, everything had fallen apart. Trip was the good-enough-for-now bloke. He was—and it made him cringe just thinking the phrase—Christian's rebound guy. The exact thing Chris had feared when he'd initiated the conversation. So the fact that he'd been blindsided was his own fault.

He knew where Chris would be now, most likely. With Andrew. Because Andrew had shown up at the airport, in full *forgive me* mode, and Christian was an Andrew apology virgin. He wouldn't be able to resist. There was nothing to resist for.

Trip was the rebound guy.

Trip wasn't the guy you fell in love with. Trip was the guy you fucked while you were looking for the one to fall in love with.

Chris loved Andrew. Chris didn't love Trip. End of bloody story.

He snatched up one of the notes his last opponent had left on the snooker table and shoved it into the hands of one of the kids watching the matches. "Go get me another Guinness." He pointed to another as the first scuttled off. "Set 'em up again." And louder, to the general group, "Who's the next victim?"

"That would be me, Trip. Though maybe you'll just want to hand over your money now? You never can beat me when you've been drinking."

The familiar baritone went straight down Trip's spine, and he tilted his head to look over his shoulder at where Andrew lounged by the sticks rack. The bastard looked good, arms folded over his broad chest drawing attention to his biceps, long legs powerful in his tight jeans. Trip's body reacted on instinct, even while the bile rose in the back of his throat.

"I only let you win then because otherwise you'd cry like a big girl's blouse about losing to me all the time." His eyes narrowed as Andrew selected a stick. "I'm not

playing you, you wanker. So sod off.”

“If you were only letting me win all those times, then you shouldn’t be afraid of putting your money where your mouth is,” Andrew pointed out, approaching the table. “Been watching you. What are you up to? A couple of hundred?”

“Three,” Trip lied. If the idiot was going to insist on playing, then Trip was going to make it worth his while taking his money. “But let’s make this interesting and say five.”

Andrew nodded. “Fine. If you win, I’ll double your money. But I don’t want your money, Trip. If I win, you come home with me tonight.”

The suggestion made Trip jerk in surprise. “What about Christian?” he blurted.

“What about him? What you and I have has nothing to do with him.”

There was a brief moment of ache hearing Andrew referring to what they had together. It was almost instantly replaced by a flare of anger.

“He’s your bloody boyfriend! Considering you’re lucky to have him back at all, you might want to stop thinking with your dick for two seconds, and start thinking about how you can make it up to him for tearing out his heart and then pissing all over it.”

Andrew smiled slowly. “Well, now, isn’t that interesting? I thought after his impassioned speech in the car, he’d toddle right upstairs and give you a ring. I guess maybe you’re not as important to him as he insisted.”

Trip’s mind raced. Andrew’s implication was clear, that he and Chris weren’t together as Trip had thought. But Chris hadn’t called Trip, either. Not in a week. Not in the eight days, seven hours, and eleven minutes since he’d last seen him. If Chris wasn’t with Andrew, and he hadn’t rung Trip, then where was he?

Didn’t matter. He wasn’t with Andrew. He wasn’t going to have to go through the heartache of Andrew thinking he could take whatever or whoever he wanted at a whim. That was enough for Trip.

“So you thought you’d come and see good ol’ Trip, is that it? Think you’ll just crook your little finger and I’ll come running?”

Andrew held up his stick. “No, I thought I’d have to win you in a game of snooker.”

Trip’s jaw locked, and he glared at Andrew for a long moment before deliberately tossing his stick onto the table. It disturbed the cluster of red balls, and a few went rolling softly toward the sides.

“If memory serves,” he said, his voice low and grim, “I’m not a prize to be won by your standards. So let’s not waste either of our time with this farce, yeah? Tuck your tail and get out of here, Andrew, because my tail isn’t up for offer any more.”

“Come on, Trip.” Now Andrew broke out Charming Smile Number Twelve. It was one of his more devastating tricks. “You know I didn’t mean that. We’ve had spats before. Let’s go somewhere quiet, and we can talk this out. You can even pay me back for decking you before.”

It was tempting. *So* tempting. The opportunity to level Andrew, to vent every ounce of frustration as he pounded into him was enough to make Trip consider it for a fleeting, brilliant moment. But in the next, the image of Chris huddled at the bar the night before they left for Italy rose in his mind’s eye. How broken Andrew had left him. How Andrew hadn’t even cared how broken he had left him. Trip wasn’t so blinkered not to realize that if he left with Andrew right now, what would start as a fight had very good odds to devolve into something carnal. That was the exact thing he had sworn to Christian wasn’t going to happen.

Even if Andrew and Christian weren't together, Trip wasn't going to go back on his word. Chris might not have been interested in keeping his promise, but it was the least Trip could do for him.

"Contrary to the opinion of the almighty Andrew, I do have a brain," Trip said. "Though Chris is obviously smarter than me. He saw through your show and gave you the boot. And if you were trying with him, that means Lexie gave you the boot, too. Your ego's taken quite the hits, hasn't it? And that only leaves you one option. Go see Trip. He'll make you feel like king of the hill again. Because the idiot loves you, no matter what you do to him." He grabbed his coat and shrugged into the leather. "Well, no more. I'm done."

Andrew took a step forward, but stopped short of grabbing his arm. "Temper, temper. You're angry. Still. I get it. But you need to hear me out. I've missed you, Trip. It's been a month since we talked, twice that since we've shagged. You're going to tell me that you haven't missed me?"

"You know who I miss?" Trip stuffed his hands into his coat pockets to keep from throwing a punch. "The bloke I met at uni. The one who once locked us in a bathroom to keep me from making what could've been one of the biggest mistakes of my life. The one who actually cared about other people's feelings more than his own." He let his gaze sweep pointedly over Andrew. "I wonder whatever happened to him."

He didn't wait for a response. He walked past him with long strides, making sure to shove into Andrew's shoulder enough with his own to make Andrew stumble backward.

* * * *

Christian was in pieces. He didn't know if he was experiencing some sort of delayed reaction to the break up with Andrew, or if he was just missing Trip to an acute degree. Christian thought it was the latter. It wasn't Andrew he dreamed about, and it wasn't Andrew he reached for in the middle of the night, and it wasn't Andrew he thought about calling. He had started to dial Trip's number a dozen times, only to back down, change his mind, convince himself that if Trip still wanted him, Trip would have called him.

Which was childish, he knew. He didn't want to live his life in limbo. The adult thing would be to call Trip and demand to know where he stood. And to explain what happened when Andrew dropped him off, to tell him he meant it when he said that he no longer wanted Andrew.

But then, maybe once Trip settled back into the routine of his life, and he wasn't drugged by the sun, and the alcohol, and the lust, it was easy for him to forget all about their time together in Italy. Maybe he even regretted declaring he was in love. Maybe he was relieved to have an excuse to get back to what he deemed normal?

Christian didn't believe that, though. Trip wasn't the sort to say things he didn't mean. He meant what he said, and he owned his emotions, and he wasn't a big coward. Like some people.

The days blurred together, like they do. His patience for work waned. He wasn't interested in helping people solve their problems when he couldn't even solve his own. Even if "helping" meant listening to people vent for twenty minutes before calmly suggesting a solution that should have been offered long before the customer even reached him. What the hell was wrong with his subordinates? Christian wanted to fire the lot of them and start over fresh. The situation couldn't be worse. Firing everybody would

only make things better. Unfortunately, he didn't have that authority, so he gritted his teeth, smiled, and worked through the unending queue of callers, dealing with paperwork, meetings, and office politics between calls.

It took him over a week to venture out of his apartment for something other than work. The pub seemed like a good idea. He wouldn't get drunk again. Not like he did when Andrew dumped him. Not even like he did in Italy, when he and Trip would stay up all night talking and drinking and fucking until they simply passed out. He had been sitting in the corner, congratulating himself on his brilliant plan when Trip walked in. He was trying to screw up his courage to approach him when Andrew suddenly appeared.

Christian thought discretion was the better part of valor in this case, and he sunk low in his booth, trying to make himself one with the wall. He tried to tell himself that if they left together, it would be his own fault. If he didn't want Trip to hook up with Andrew, he should have called Trip and told him what happened. But he didn't and Trip was an adult, free to do as he pleased, and if it pleased him to be with Andrew again, then there wasn't much Chris could do about it.

He wasn't close enough to hear the exchange, but he didn't need to know the specific words to understand what was happening. Andrew approached the snooker game like he owned the pub. Christian waited for that familiar tug of attraction. Andrew moved through life with a casual ease that made everybody else look like fools for trying so damned hard. Christian had always admired that. In some ways, Trip was precisely the opposite. He was too tightly wound, too ready to be provoked, too wary of failure, or at least, the possibility of failure.

Christian wanted to march across the pub, take Trip by the shoulders, press him against the wall, and kiss him until they were both breathless and aching for more.

But he didn't make his move while he had the chance, and then Andrew was there, smiling, trying to coax Trip into forgiving him. When Andrew picked a cue and took out his wallet, Chris stiffened. Were they just going to enjoy a friendly game of snooker? Even that seemed too awful to consider. He didn't want Trip to have anything to do with Andrew ever again, which was entirely unreasonable and far too possessive, but he couldn't deny his feelings.

Christian sipped his beer and never took his eyes off the two men. He watched the initial exchange and tried to imagine the conversation. His eyes widened as Trip abandoned his stick and the table, every well known line of his body tense for a fight. He watched Andrew shift tactics. When Trip left, Christian didn't know if he should be happy or devastated. Andrew followed hot on his heels, but it was clear they weren't leaving together. Chris had rushed to the door, just in time to see Trip take off. Alone. Leaving Andrew behind.

Christian should have called Trip that night. He went home and stared at the phone, Trip's number in hand, and wondered when he regressed nearly twenty years. How many relationships had he had since he was sixteen? More than enough to know how to behave. More than enough to know how to be an adult about it. He had happily pursued Andrew until Andrew finally accepted an invitation to dinner. He had chased an earlier boyfriend, Grant, halfway across the country and showed up at his door in the middle of a rainy night, and dared the object of his affection to turn him away. Nobody liked rejection, but Christian had never let that fear control his life.

But now it seemed nothing but fear controlled him. Fear that Trip didn't really mean

it. Fear that he'd allow himself to fall completely in love with Trip only to get burned again. Fear that he wouldn't be enough for Trip. He couldn't shake these concerns, even as he understood that he was giving Andrew too much power. Yes, Andrew had crushed his self-esteem and made him question his entire self-worth, but that didn't mean he couldn't pick up the goddamned phone and take a chance because how many chances like that did he think he was going to get? How many times had somebody like Trip blown through his life?

Trip was the only one like Trip.

Christian was still debating with himself three days after witnessing Trip and Andrew in the pub. The parameter of the argument had changed, though. Now he wasn't wondering if he should call Trip; he was wondering why Trip hadn't called him. Surely, Andrew had mentioned that Chris had turned him down? Had Andrew lied about what happened between them? He supposed that was more than possible. Or maybe Trip had already moved on...

A large envelope was waiting for him in the post. It didn't have any marks to betray its origins. Nothing but his name and address in large, block letters. With DO NOT BEND printed across the back. Christian entered his flat, turning the envelope over and over in his hands, trying to find another clue. There was only one way to figure it out.

Chris opened the sleeve carefully and extracted a half dozen large, glossy photographs.

His mouth fell open. He recognized them immediately. Two of the vineyard. Two of himself on the beach, utterly lost in thought, an almost dopey grin on his face. *That's what I look like when I'm thinking about Trip.* Two more of him on the beach, but they were shots that he had posed for. He had learned why it wasn't a good idea to get naked on the beach, but the shots had been worth it.

There was no note, no message, nothing but the photographs. Christian slid down the door, sinking to the floor, his eyes never leaving the prints. Trip didn't need to include a message. As usual, his photographs did the talking for him. Christian's lips thinned. A phone call wouldn't suffice. He needed to do more than that. It wouldn't be enough to merely meet Trip halfway on this one. He had to make up for wasted time and ill-chosen words.

Chapter Sixteen

Work was a godsend. His prolonged absence from London meant Trip returned to messages and messages from his assistant Helen, and though he had been lax in returning them those first days after Italy, too busy feeling sorry for himself, running into Andrew gave him a new lease on life. That night, he called Helen and began combing through the offers, sorting through the jobs that would take the most time. He wanted to be busy. He didn't care what he did.

He stumbled across the shots of Italy when he was organizing his cameras. So caught up in the drama of rebounds and fights, Trip had forgotten about all the pictures of Christian he now had for his own personal use. Each was beautiful, from those that Chris had posed for to the candid Trip caught on the beach. Even the panorama of the Brindisi vineyard made his chest tighten. He sat and stared at them for hours, remembering every nuance of Christian's smile, every shade of blue in his eyes.

He had picked out his favorites of each and sent them off to Chris before he talked himself out of it. Chris deserved to know how Trip had seen him, if only to prove once and for all that he'd meant every single word he'd uttered.

Throwing himself into work, then, stopped Trip from dwelling too much on what Christian's reactions would be when he got them.

He was dragging in from an all-night shoot in Leicester Square when his phone rang. Helen's number flashed on his display. Trip frowned. He'd shipped her home in a taxi an hour earlier, doing most of the clean-up himself. Had she forgotten something?

"Why aren't you asleep?" he said, in lieu of a greeting. "We had a bloody long night."

"I couldn't remember if I reminded you about your dinner meeting tonight. Tomorrow. Well, technically tonight. Anyway, I decided even if I did, another reminder couldn't hurt."

Trip frowned. He had no clue what she was on about. "What meeting?"

"A new client. To discuss a travel spread he wants to do." When he didn't speak right away, she sighed in exasperation. "You said it'd be a lark, that maybe you'd get another holiday out of it, remember?"

He didn't. None of what she said sounded familiar at all. "When did I agree to this?"

"Yesterday. Between the disaster with the bird and Nigel disappearing with the spare make-up kit."

Wearily, Trip ran a hand over his eyes. In the time period she described, all hell had broken loose. He vaguely remembered Helen cornering him with her PDA in hand, but the details of what they'd discussed escaped him.

"Do you want me to cancel?" she said. "I can, though I think you should do it."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Free meal and no commitment. You have to eat, and you don't have any other conflicts anyway."

Helen had a point. There was a reason he let her organize his professional life. "Email me the details," he said, unlocking his flat door. "And I plan on sleeping all day, so no more ringing me."

“You’re the boss.”

Trip shoved his door open with his shoulder. Already, he was forgetting the details. All he wanted was to rest.

And not dream.

* * * *

The meeting was at the Thistle off Hyde Park in an expensive, private suite. Trip didn’t care about dressing to impress, but in light of the money being spent, opted to wear black trousers instead of jeans, and a white linen button-down instead of a t-shirt. He soothed his rebellious tendencies by leaving it untucked and the sleeves rolled up. It wouldn’t do to offer any false advertising, after all.

The suite was on one of the restricted floors. After confirming his identity, an assistant manager escorted Trip to the lift and down the carpeted corridor, unlocking the door of the suite and then stepping out of the way for him to enter. Trip pressed a ten-pound note into the young man’s hand, gave him a friendly nod, and sauntered inside.

The lounge was empty. Behind him, the door whispered shut.

With a frown, Trip paused in the middle of the room. “Hello?” he called out. The door to the bedroom was closed, the rest of the lounge immaculate. A table was set off to the side, covered with a white cloth and dressed for dinner for two. At its center, an open wine bottle waited to be poured.

When no sound came from the bedroom, Trip went to the table and picked up the wine to read the label. He froze when he recognized it.

Brindisi.

“I didn’t know if I had to trick you into seeing me,” Christian said from behind him, “but I figured, if nothing else, your schedule would be cleared for a few hours.”

Trip stifled the sudden tremor in his fingers by gripping the bottle a little more tightly. Slowly, he turned around and immediately smiled when he saw Chris standing in the open bedroom doorway. He was wearing a tux. A very smartly cut tux. The only thing missing was the martini in his hand.

“Now why didn’t Helen tell me there was goin’ to be a dress code for this meeting?” he teased.

Christian ran his hands over his jacket self-consciously. “It isn’t so much a dress code. I just wanted to show off a bit. Please, have a seat. The food will be here in about ten minutes.”

Setting the bottle back down, Trip circled the table and took the far chair, so that Chris—for as nervous as he looked—didn’t have the distance to walk. He rested his right ankle on his left knee and leaned back, grateful that his shirt hid the line of his growing erection. Showing off worked for Chris. It worked well. Well enough to make Trip forget for a moment why he was supposed to be there.

But only for a moment.

“This isn’t really about a travel spread, is it?” he asked.

“No,” Chris said, taking a seat as well. “I actually had three things I wanted to cover. The first, of course, was showing off. Like I said before, I don’t get much occasion to wear this and the bloody thing cost me enough. Secondly, I wanted to talk about the photographs you sent me. Mainly, I feel, you didn’t send me enough. I’d like to see the rest of the shoot. And the third thing is, I wanted to tell you that I love you to your face,

instead of going with my first instinct of leaving a voice mail, or sending a telegram.”

The invitation to come to his studio was on the tip of Trip’s tongue when Christian uttered the last. Then it dissipated into nothing, to be replaced with a shocked, “You what me?”

Christian poured the wine into two glasses and passed one over to Trip. “I know, that wasn’t the best way to say it. I had something else planned. Over dessert. But...” He sat back in his seat and offered a wry smile. “I have been so lonely for the past few weeks. I think about you from the moment I wake up until I go to bed, and then I dream about you. Nothing in my life is right. And I’ve been meaning to call you, but I didn’t even know if you wanted to hear from me. Then I saw you at the pub with Andrew and then you sent me the photos and...I’m babbling.” He sipped his wine, wetting his lips. “Maybe it’s too soon to say I’m in love with you. This hasn’t been a great month for me, emotionally. But I don’t intend to take it back.”

“No, don’t,” Trip blurted, then colored at how desperate that sounded. Any attempt to maintain any insouciance disappeared, and he leaned forward, reaching across to touch the hand Chris had resting around the stem of his glass. He kept it light, as if the effort was so fragile he needed to treat it as such, and swallowed against the hammering of his pulse in his throat. “Thought you were done with me. That’s why I didn’t call. If I’d known...wait. You were at the pub that night?”

Christian nodded. “Went out to get a drink, and then you came in. So I watched you play and I wanted to say something, but Andrew showed up. I was too far away to hear anything. I wasn’t spying on you or anything. But I did see that you didn’t go home with him. And why would you think I was done with you?”

“Because I figured I was the rebound guy. And you didn’t call. And I obviously was thinking about it too much.”

“I suppose that’s my fault,” Chris said softly. “I was the one who introduced the idea in your head, after all. But if you were the rebound guy, I wouldn’t have spent the past two weeks missing you. I would have been thinking about the guy who broke my heart.”

Trip started stroking the arch of Christian’s thumb, letting his fingers glide up the inside of his wrist before coming back to the fingers. “All you had to do was call me.”

“I was scared,” Chris admitted, looking at Trip’s fingers instead of his eyes. “About a lot of things. I didn’t want to get burned again. Even if the risk was small...” He finally looked up. “Maybe I just needed a few weeks to recover.”

He wanted to kiss him. He wanted to stand up, walk around the table, sit in Christian’s lap, and drown him in wet, open-mouthed kisses that left both of them breathless. He wanted to tell him he loved him, he was glad he’d played his trick, he was sorry he hadn’t called. He wanted so much, but more than any of it, he wanted Chris to be happy about his decision.

“So are you recovered?” Trip asked, his voice low. “Is this about...not being scared to give us a try?”

Christian nodded. “Yeah. That’s exactly what this is about. I was so afraid of trusting you that I was making myself miserable and nearly lost you, too. It wasn’t worth it.”

“I’m not lost. You can have me whenever you want.”

“I want you right now, but the food is going to be here in,” Christian checked his watch, “two minutes. What I want to do will take longer than that.”

Trip’s heart leapt. “I haven’t kissed you in two weeks,” he said, tightening his hand

around Christian's to pull both of them to their feet. "You're not fobbing me off for food that easily."

Before Chris could protest, Trip had his face cupped in his hands, fingers molded over his skull as he guided their mouths together. The very first touch made his jaw tremble, and he sighed into the caress as his tongue traced the familiar curve.

"God, do I love you," he breathed.

Christian molded his hands down Trip's back, smiling against his mouth. "You forgot the daft git part."

It was impossible not to chuckle at the reference. "Guess we both kind of blew how we were goin' to say it."

One hand moved to Trip's hip, the other to the back of his neck. "We can both have do-overs," Chris said, before claiming Trip's mouth completely.

It started slow, with good intentions, but it only took seconds before the turmoil and raw emotions of the past weeks completely overtook them. The kiss was hard, demanding the sort of satisfaction that could really only be given once they were stripped of clothes and wrapped around each other again.

Trip had his fingers beneath Christian's jacket, tugging at the shirt in order to free it of the waistband, when a discreet knock came at the door. The unexpectedness of it—in spite of Christian's earlier warning—made Trip jump, and he cursed under his breath as he looked back at the interruption.

"You don't think I actually want to eat food, do you?" he commented. His voice was ragged, and his cock ached, his body already demanding contact with Christian's. "Send them away."

Chris straightened his clothes. "I think you'll be interested in this food." He stole a quick kiss, his hand resting over Trip's obvious erection. "Trust me on this one." Releasing Trip, Chris gently pushed him back to his seat, then went to answer the door.

Trip expected just one waiter, but there were two, each with a large cart of covered dishes. He watched as they parked the carts next to the table and then bowed. Chris pressed a note in each of their palms and wished them a good night before turning back to Trip.

"Where would you like to start? Your choice."

The smells made his stomach unexpectedly growl, and he inhaled deeply, savoring the varying scents. Picking up the nearest cover, he salivated at the sight of the swordfish, cubed and skewered, resting on a bed of glistening wild greens, a bowl of chili sauce at its side.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. "I stand corrected. This is absolutely gorgeous."

Chris beamed. "I'm glad you think so." He whisked another top away, revealing a large shrimp cocktail, and a third dish boasted prawns covered in a creamy, garlic sauce. It smelled heavenly. "I tried to order things I saw you eating in Italy. Or something close to it."

It was only when Chris mentioned Italy that Trip drew the connection. He was going out of his way to do everything he could to woo Trip. The food, the tux, the ambience, everything was done specifically for him. Trip didn't think it was necessary—he wouldn't have hesitated if Chris had simply called him—but it was overwhelming. Nobody had ever gone to such lengths for him. Nobody.

When Christian reached for Trip's plate, Trip caught his wrist. "Sit," he said,

standing back up. "You've done more than enough. I'll serve."

"Trip, I think I should..." He paused as Trip tightened the grip on his wrist. "Have a seat. If you're sure you want to serve."

"I'm sure that I want to show you how much I appreciate all of this."

Trip tugged Chris closer, skimming a kiss over his mouth as their arousals rubbed together. Christian's soft intake of breath was the only warning he had that things were going to spiral out of control again if he continued, so he quickly pushed him back to the chair, letting him go to focus on the food.

Though the skewers were tempting, Trip picked up the cocktail and moved it to the center of the table, setting the wine out of the way. Selecting the largest of the shrimps, he dipped it into the cocktail sauce, deliberately letting some of the extra drip off before guiding it to Christian's mouth.

Chris obediently opened his mouth, catching another drop of the pink sauce before it hit his shirt. He curled his tongue around the prawn, drawing it into his mouth. Trip didn't let go, and Christian's lips brushed against his fingers as he pulled the flesh from the tail. Trip kept his finger on Chris' lips as he swallowed the fish, unwilling to break even the light contact.

"You should try one," Christian murmured.

Reluctantly, Trip tossed the empty shell onto a small plate before reaching for another. "Are we still taking this slow?" He took a deliberate bite into the juicy shrimp. "That's what you were worried about in Rome."

Chris sat back in his chair. "What speed would you like to take it?"

Trip swallowed, his mouth canting in an amused smile. "Now that's a loaded question."

Christian's smile matched his. "I just want you to know that I'll go as fast, or as slow, as you like."

"I want to say fast," he murmured. "I want to tell you to pack your bags and move in so that I can wake up to you every morning, fall asleep with you every night. That's what I would like, but that's not what I'm going to suggest."

Christian blinked. "What...what are you going to suggest?"

"Something in between that and not ringing me for two weeks." Trip dipped another shrimp and licked stray sauce dripping down its length. "We date, like normal blokes. Find time in our schedules to see each other when we can. And if sometimes, we stay out a little late and it's better if one of us sleeps over..." He guided the shrimp to Christian's mouth. "I've got lots of drawer space and a big bed. You're welcome to share both."

Christian's lips closed around the shrimp and Trip's finger, his teeth scraping against both. He chewed thoughtfully and then nodded. "That sounds like a brilliant plan. I have a small bed and a little wardrobe, but you're welcome to anything I have."

"Small bed means I'll just have to sleep on top of you."

Chris took Trip's hand, their fingers entwining. "I've missed that. I don't know if I've mentioned how much. I think this food will keep."

Trip shook his head, extracting himself from the tangle of their hands. "You went to a lot of effort on this meal, and I, for one, want some of that swordfish." He retreated to the cart and doled out the skewers, spooning some of the sauced prawns alongside them. "Do we have the suite for the night, or just for dinner?"

"I was feeling pretty optimistic, so I reserved it for the night." He smiled, almost

shyly. "I ordered breakfast, too."

"And no work tomorrow, yeah?"

"No work tomorrow," Christian confirmed. "But your assistant wouldn't let me schedule a weekend-long meeting, though I tried."

He'd forgotten about Helen's involvement. Sliding into his seat, he picked up his fork and tore off a piece of the swordfish. "How much did she know about what you were going to do?" he asked. "Do I need to give her a huge raise for getting my love life back in order?"

"She might deserve a raise anyway. She sounded very nice." Christian watched him with a hungry gleam in his eye. "I told her that this wasn't a business meeting, and that I really needed to speak with you and work some stuff out. She asked me if you'd be more pleasant if she agreed to schedule this meeting. I told her it was a distinct possibility." Chris tilted his head with a grin. "Have you been unpleasant, Trip?"

Trip snorted. "I thought you were with Andrew for most of the past two weeks. What do you think?"

"I think you were probably a real bastard," Chris said, still grinning. "That's okay. If I had a little bit more power, all my coworkers would have been fired several times over by now." He sobered. "I can't believe that you thought I'd go back to Andrew."

Trip took another bite of his fish before answering. It had all made sense during the time apart, but now, with Christian's burning gaze fixed on his every move, he felt a tad ridiculous for ever doubting him. "He's an old pro at apologies," he finally replied. "And let's face it. You had a year with him and only three weeks with me. I don't think it was too much of a stretch."

"He's an old pro? That was the worse apology I ever heard in my life. He apologized that I found out the way I did. When I challenged him on the fact he cheated on me he said...well, the point is, he didn't say he was sorry about that." Christian shrugged. "Not that it would have mattered. He could have apologized until he was blue in the face. I don't like being lied to."

He hated what he was about to say, but... "Technically, I lied to you, too."

"Did you lie to me before or after you told me you wanted to have a relationship? Maybe I should have been more specific. I don't like it when people break their promises. I think honesty is an implied promise in any relationship. Andrew clearly disagreed."

It was pointless to argue with Chris, and frankly, Trip didn't want to. The less said about Andrew, the better. They were done with that chapter of their lives. All that mattered was what came ahead.

Reaching for the wine, he refilled their glasses. "Well, I'm not implying anything. I'll put it out there, however you want it. No more secrets. Anything you want from me, all you have to do is name it, Chris. I mean that."

"I..." Chris took a swallow of wine. "I realized something the other night when I saw the two of you at the pub. Namely, I can't stand the sight, or the thought, of you two talking. Or being in the same building. Honestly, I'm not thrilled he lives in London." Christian grimaced. "That sounds really crazy when I say it out loud."

Trip thought it sounded like jealousy. It was another first for Chris. Trip couldn't remember anybody he ever loved expressing the same vehement reaction. It made him love Christian even more.

"London's a big place," he said magnanimously. "And come on, don't tell me the

thought of rubbing you and me in his face isn't a little delicious."

"Maybe a little," Chris allowed. "It'll drive him crazy, and that's the least he deserves." He fiddled with his napkin, rolling the corner under his thumb. "Trip, he thinks so little of who you are...of your abilities...of everything that I love about you. That part was clear when he was trying to talk me back into his bed. In a way, he made me realize how important you are to me, because I wanted to punch him in the face."

"Now you know how I feel," he joked. "I want to thump him nearly every time he opens his mouth."

But it was the force of Christian's conviction that made everything else in the room disappear for Trip. Rising from his chair, he took Christian's hand, drawing him back to his feet. He didn't say a word as he picked up his wine glass, nodding for Chris to do the same, and led him toward the bedroom.

He didn't want food any more. He wanted to show Christian once and for all that his faith in Trip wasn't misplaced. If that meant he spent the next forty-eight hours or forty-eight years doing it, then that's what he would do.

Chapter Seventeen

Christian had an elaborate plan. It took him two days to pin the details down just the way he wanted. He spent more money than he really had on the suite and the food. He had his tux cleaned. He didn't want to leave anything to chance because he needed Trip. And then he had botched his entire plan by blurting everything almost as soon as Trip walked in the door.

Not that it mattered, Christian reflected as Trip took him into the bedroom. Plan or no, everything had worked out exactly as it should. He felt like he was going to crawl out of his skin, his tux—which had fit perfectly before—was far too tight, he could still taste Trip on his lips, and he ached. Two weeks. Two weeks was a long time. An eternity.

The bed was huge. Easily three times the size as some of the beds they had stayed in while they were in Italy. Christian barely had a chance to admire it before Trip was pulling at his jacket, freeing his arms, and then attacking his buttons.

"Hey," Chris admonished, tugging at Trip's belt. "Don't rip anything."

A sly glint appeared in those black eyes. "You saying you want it slow?" His hands nearly stopped, taking so long to undo a single button that Chris thought he was going to scream. Trip never looked away from him, and he caught his bottom lip between his teeth as he dragged his fingertips along the skin he'd just exposed to reach the second button. "I can do slow. I can make this last all night, if that's what you want."

Christian swallowed hard. He didn't want slow. The past two weeks had been slow enough for his taste. But he loved the look of concentration on Trip's face, and the way each deliberate stroke of his fingers contained a darker promise. "I don't believe you have the patience for that."

"Now that sounds like a dare to me." Trip lingered on the third button as he pushed away Christian's hand from his trousers. Sinking to his knees, he nuzzled the length of Christian's erection through the fabric before mouthing the same path. All the while, his scalding fingers continued to stroke the skin of Christian's stomach. "Wanna wager on who cracks first? Winner gets to choose who fucks who first."

Christian considered his options. He already felt like he was about to crack, but Trip was not known for his patience. Plus, what did he really care how they did it? All that mattered was that they *were*.

"Sounds like a good deal, either way. You're on."

The wicked slant of Trip's mouth accompanied the slide of his hand down to Christian's waistband. As Trip undid the button, he continued to mouth Christian's arousal, only stopping when he had to pull down the zipper. He slid his hands beneath trousers and pants, dragging them down Christian's thighs, but instead of going back to his now exposed cock and balls, Trip licked a path through the dark hair at the base, up and up and up until he reached where he'd left off with the shirt.

"Missed this," Trip murmured against his skin. "Missed the way you taste, missed the way you sound, missed the way you make me feel when you touch me."

Chris sighed. "Me, too." His hands returned to Trip's belt, and he managed to tug it free before unzipping his pants. Cupping the back of Trip's neck, he pulled him into a soft kiss, Christian's lips light against his. "Do you know that of all the pictures I took

and all the souvenirs I acquired, I don't have a single one of you? I didn't even accidentally end up with one of your shirts."

Trip ducked his lashes as he continued with the buttons, a soft chuckle warming Christian's cheek. "Is this where I admit to nicking one of yours?"

Chris began to work on Trip's shirt, pausing to caress each inch of skin he revealed. His mouth watered to taste Trip's skin, but he wasn't sure if pushing Trip to the bed and attacking him with his lips and teeth counted as cracking first. So he settled for tilting his head and drawing the tip of his tongue along Trip's jaw to his ear. He pulled the lobe between his teeth, nipping it gently.

"Is that where my black shirt went off to? When did you take that?"

"Rome. When I was holed up in the hotel."

They reached the tops of their shirts at nearly the same time, and Trip took a step back to allow each of them room to slide the garment from the other man. Each glancing stroke made Christian shiver. He itched to take Trip back into his arms once the shirts were gone, but was forced to watch as Trip stepped the rest of the way out of his clothes and tossed them aside.

His gaze raked over the lean muscles, hungrier with every inch. The wager was pointless, he decided. The sooner he got Trip to the bed, the happier they were both going to be. But then his gaze reached Trip's hips. His heart lurched at the same time his eyes widened.

A new tattoo adorned the flawless skin. Starting just below the hip bone, it snaked around Trip's side to his ass, a vine laden with tiny grapes curling and winding over his skin. He hadn't had it in Italy. He had to have got it since their return.

"Wasn't sure what you'd think of it," Trip said softly. Christian's gaze flew to his face and caught the almost embarrassed tint in Trip's cheeks. "But I got back, and I wanted something to remember it all by. Since I didn't think I was goin' to have you."

Christian could only stare, his eyes tracing the tattoo over and over. "Trip..." He dropped to his knees and reached out to skim his fingers along the newly colored skin. Leaning forward, he touched his lips to a small purple grape, then the next one, and the next one. "Is it still tender?"

"A tad," Trip admitted. "Worth every second of it, though."

He looked up and smiled. "Nobody has ever permanently scarred themselves for me before." Christian's fingers were drawn back to Trip's skin. "I think it's lovely. I don't have to get one too, do I?"

"No." Kneeling, Trip met Christian's eyes as he traced along his chest, encircling one nipple and then the other. "You're just right the way you are."

Chris nuzzled against Trip's neck, then dragged his mouth over Trip's shoulder. "That's good. I'm scared of pain." He covered Trip's upper chest and neck in small kisses. "Now, what are we doing on the floor?"

Trip smiled. "You're the one who got on his knees first," he teased. He tilted his head toward the bed, his eyes dancing. "This your not so subtle way of telling me to get my bum elsewhere?"

"The bed might be more comfortable. Not that I have anything against the floor." He stood and took Trip's hand, pulling him to his feet. He backed up until his knees hit the edge of the bed, then fell backwards, pulling Trip with him. Chris grunted as their bodies came together, and he immediately wrapped one arm around Trip, holding him in his

place as he sought out his mouth.

It could have been that first time they'd spent half the night kissing. Trip shattered Christian's preconceptions by keeping the pace languid, barely even rocking against his cock as he slowly devoured his lips. He threaded his fingers through Christian's hair, long fingers strong against his skull, and forced him to stay still as he licked and nibbled at his mouth.

"What do you say, we call the wager a draw?" Trip breathed between kisses. "Wanna ride you, and I don't want to wait any more."

Chris moaned. "Don't want to wait either. I brought everything...in that bag over there." He gestured vaguely with his free hand, his lips drawn back to Trip's mouth, his jaw, his cheek. "But one of us will have to get up. And I don't want to let you go."

"And I don't want to go." Trip's grip suddenly disappeared, and Chris opened his eyes to see him propped up on his knuckles, gazing down at him. "I've got this fantasy of being with someone long enough to make the condoms pointless," he said quietly. "Would love it if it that was you. But for now, I gotta play this smart, because I have to tell you, the thought of riding you bareback makes me ache. And if I don't get that bag now, I'm never goin' to move."

Chris nodded, letting his arm fall away. "You're right. You're right. Glad one of us is thinking." Trip moved to get up and Chris caught his elbow. "I want the same thing, you know. Being with you like that."

The pleased smile that curved Trip's mouth warmed Christian as much as his kisses had. He slid off the bed and bounded across the room, snatching the sack and returning so quickly, that Chris felt the absence for only a moment.

"Remind me to call down when we take a breather and see about booking us in another night," he said, tossing the bag onto the mattress at their side. He stretched back out along Christian's body, their cocks hard and heavy against the other's, and grazed another kiss across his mouth. "I want you all to myself until you have to go back to work on Monday."

"Glad you said that. I was worried you'd have to leave me tomorrow."

When Trip's lips brushed against his again, Christian caught him with his tongue, tracing the soft skin before probing deeper. He hadn't been with a huge number of partners, but Trip tasted different. He felt different. Christian had spent the past several weeks trying to decide what made Trip so special, why Chris could simply lay on the bed and kiss him for hours. It might have been his enthusiasm, the eagerness to allow Chris to do exactly that. It might have been his natural talent, or the texture of his lips, or the way his hard body fit against Christian's.

His groin was tight, and he could already feel Trip's tight walls around his shaft. He pulled Trip higher on his body, and allowed his heavy cock to slide against Trip's ass, slipping between his cheeks as the kiss deepened. Trip rocked back against him, moving his hips just enough to draw a moan from Chris.

"Want in, don't you..." His husky voice was accompanied by another glide of his body, catching the head of Christian's cock against his tight hole for an infinite second before continuing upward. "Dreamed about this. It was driving me mad. Started working myself to exhaustion just to stop 'em."

"Can't believe we wasted two weeks," Chris murmured, his hips rising. Trip's cock slid against his stomach, already a little sticky. Chris slipped his hand between their

bodies, wiping Trip's pre-come away with his thumb, and brought it across Trip's mouth, smearing the fluid on his lips. He moved quickly, kissing it away before Trip could lick his lips.

Trip growled. "Dirty pool," he muttered. "I'll show you."

Abruptly, he sat up, repositioning his hips so that Christian's cock was now flat against his stomach. With one hand, he reached for the sack, while the other gripped both their lengths, stroking them together before smoothing his palm over the wet tips. He dropped the sack on Christian's chest, a mischievous smile lighting his face.

"I got the goods," he announced. "You get to do the honors."

Chris pulled one of the foil packages out of the bag, his fingers slick. They felt thick, and Trip moved his hand over the top of Christian's cock again, the flat of his palm gliding over the tip. He fumbled with it, but was unable to get a good grip. Trip merely grinned and Chris bit the corner and pulled, ripping the foil in two.

"You're not going to help me even a little bit?"

"And miss this show?" He squeezed their cocks together hard enough to draw another moan from Christian's throat. "Not on your life. Though I'll slick myself up, if you want me to."

Christian's mouth ran dry, but he didn't immediately reach for the bag. Instead, he pushed Trip's hands away and carefully rolled the condom on, concentrating on the task instead of the image that Trip had put in his head. Once he was sheathed, he passed the lube over.

"Please do," he said thickly.

Running his tongue over his bottom lip, Trip slid backwards, off Christian's body and between his legs. There, he laid back, forcing Chris to prop himself up on his elbows in order to continue watching, and drew his knees up and out, so that the dark shadow of his ass was on clear display.

"I don't think I'm goin' to stretch myself much," Trip said. He squirted some of the lube onto his fingers and then tossed it aside. "I want to feel every inch of that gorgeous cock of yours when I ride you."

Chris was riveted by the sight of Trip's hands, tracing along the cleft, stopping at the tight pucker to trace it as well. With his index finger, Trip began probing his entrance, his head falling back and his eyes fluttering shut the deeper his finger got. One was soon two. Two became three. Each stroke buried the fingers all the way to the knuckles, punctuated by Trip's increasingly ragged breaths.

Christian's breath echoed his as he watched, captivated. He wanted to grab Trip and bring him down onto his cock, wanted to push inside of him with a quick stroke. But at the same time, he wanted to watch Trip's obvious pleasure, get caught up in his clear excitement. His body thrummed with anticipation, each muscle tensing and pulsing as Trip moved his wrist. Chris pulled his gaze away from Trip's ass to meet his dark eyes. They were electrified, his lips parted, the color high in his cheeks.

"Come here," Chris rasped. "Ready now."

The speed at which Trip moved meant he had only been waiting for the directive. Pulling his hand free, he straddled Christian's hips again, slamming their mouths together in a bruising kiss that stole the remainder of Christian's breath. Chris wrapped his arms around Trip, crushing their chests together, but as immersed as he was in the hot tangle of their tongues, he was very well aware of when Trip moved.

He felt the shift of Trip's body as he reached behind his back. He felt the tight fingers around the base of his cock, angling it toward Trip's hole. He felt the weight lift from his hips and he felt the pressure against his sheathed head when Trip got him into position.

Trip tore away from the kisses as he began to sink down the length and rested his brow against Christian's. "God, I love you," he rasped.

Chris couldn't respond immediately. He didn't have any air left to form words, nor was he capable of coherent thought. He knew Trip felt bloody amazing, but it had never been like this. Trip above him and surrounding him, his breath and body so hot against Chris's skin, and he didn't think he'd ever get tired of hearing those words.

"Love you, too. I do."

The words seemed to unlock the stasis that had captured the pair of them, and Chris moved his hands down to Trip's hips at the same time Trip fused their mouths together again. This was hardly the first time they'd fucked in this position, but everything about it felt different, even when Trip began to slide back off Christian's cock. Was it because it was their first time with everything out in the open between them? Maybe. Didn't matter. This was where they were now. This was what mattered.

Trip rocked up and down, taking him in short, shallow strokes, like he was reluctant to let Chris completely out of his body. He curled one hand behind Christian's neck, holding his head still as he devoured his mouth, while the other moved restlessly over Christian's body, caressing and tweaking and tickling so that every part of Chris burned.

Christian closed his eyes, completely caught up in every physical sensation, from the tight heat around his cock, to the slow glide of Trip's tongue against his, to the light touch of Trip's fingers dancing over his body. He kept his hands firmly on Trip's hips, anchoring himself, but he didn't give in to the temptation to change the rhythm or speed the tempo.

Trip was the one who broke first.

Coiling his legs around Christian's, he lengthened the slides of his body until only the head remained inside his ass with each stroke, squeezing around the crown for a moment before sinking back down the shaft. Chris almost whimpered when Trip's mouth abandoned his, but when he felt the hard suck at his neck, he shivered so violently that Trip chuckled.

"Your staff's goin' to have a field day on Monday," he murmured. "The boss covered in hickeys and in a good mood? Might have to show up myself to see how they react."

"If you do that..." Chris tilted his head back further, "I won't get any work done...the phones wouldn't get answered...it'd be chaos." Trip lapped at the skin he had just bruised before closing his mouth around it again. "Worth it though."

"It's all worth it," came the muffled response.

His mouth moved lower as he peeled away, licking away the sheen of sweat from Christian's chest before catching the hardened tip of his nipple between his teeth. The shock went straight to Christian's cock, and his hips slammed upward, driving his length into Trip's ass with an almost keen force.

"Fuck!"

Trip arched back and away, the tendons standing out in his neck as he gritted his teeth. His muscles clenched around Christian's shaft, making it impossible to move for a

few seconds. That was all right. If Trip moved, Chris was going to come.

Chris ran his hand down Trip's chest and gripped his cock. Trip clenched around him again, his body quivering. "Don't move," Trip whispered. "Just stay still."

Christian began stroking Trip's shaft, moving his wrist quickly. Trip tensed and shifted his hips like he intended to pull away, but Chris tightened his grip and shook his head. "No. Don't move."

Trip lowered his gaze, fixing it on Chris. His muscles were visibly trembling, and his eyes shone with love and lust. "I'll shoot all over you, if you keep that up."

"Good," Chris said between gritted teeth. "Want you to. Now, Trip."

Almost as soon as Chris finished speaking, Trip arched back, his cock jerking in Christian's hand as stream after stream of warm come splattered against his chest. Trip clenched around him and Chris forced Trip up, almost off his shaft completely, and then slammed forward again to his root.

"Oh fuck," Chris gasped, his body going rigid as he shot deep in Trip's ass.

Trip fell forward almost immediately, heedless of the come smearing across their chests. His arms curled around Christian's head as he attacked his mouth, lips trembling in spite of the fervor. It was only when Trip sighed into the kiss that Chris realized just how shaken he was from it all.

"Never known anyone like you," Trip breathed. "Ever."

"Then I guess we're even," Chris said, smoothing his hand through Trip's hair.

"Because you are a complete and utter surprise to me."

He shook his head. "Just a bloke. With a blind spot for getting himself into trouble." His eyes glittered. "And a soft spot for you."

Chris smiled. "Lucky me." He looked at Trip thoughtfully. "You know, in a way, we have Lexie to thank for this. In a way."

Trip's brows shot up. "You did not just mention that cow's name in our bed."

"I know, I'm sorry. But if it wasn't for that cow, Andrew would have never dumped me on the eve of our holiday, and I would have never met you at the pub, and you would have never flirted with me..."

"That wasn't flirting. That was simple appreciation."

"No, I think that was flirting. The appreciation came later, with the leather trousers."

"No, that one was lust."

Christian's smile widened. "Oh? Then after the lust came love?"

Something in Trip's face softened, and he rolled off, taking Chris with him so that they were both lying on their sides. "More of a same time deal," he murmured. "Think I started loving you when you followed me into the shower that day."

"That's when things started to change for me, too." He rested his forehead against Trip's. "When I saw what you were capable of...saw there was more to you than I ever suspected."

The touch of Trip's hand at the back of his neck was tender. "That's more than anybody else ever cared to see."

"Then everybody else was missing out. Is missing out." Chris licked his lips. His mouth and throat were parched. Glancing over Trip's shoulder, he noticed the wine they brought in and sat on the bedside table. "We shouldn't let that wine go to waste."

"Absolutely not." Trip sat up and reached for the glasses, handing one to Chris. "You do know by bringing the Brindisi, you've officially made that our place, right?"

Christian smiled. "Then let me make a toast." He lifted his glass. "To *our* place."
"Our place," Trip agreed. "And to *us*. My new favorite word."
As they sipped their wine, all Christian thought was, *Mine, too*.

Epilogue

Trip fumbled with the narrow card key, trying to figure out which end was supposed to slide in first. He shouldn't have had so much to drink. He should have stopped after the first glass of wine. But the ceremony had stretched on for hours longer than he'd anticipated, and he'd had to sit there and watch all the smiling, happy couples with nobody at his side. Winning for the Amnesty International spread had been only a mild compensation. He would have much preferred losing if it meant he hadn't spent the night alone.

The little green light flashed on the lock plate, and with a tired sigh, Trip turned the knob, pushing open his hotel room door with his shoulder. Sleep. Sleep would make it better. He'd set his award on the nightstand so that it was the first thing he saw when he woke up, and he'd put the night behind him. He was on a plane for London the following evening anyway. It would be good to get home. He had been gone too long.

He frowned when he realized the light was on in the suite. *Did I leave that on?* There wasn't time to contemplate the answer before he stepped out of the foyer and saw the lounge drowning in flowers.

And Christian, leaning against the back of the couch, smiling at him.

"I was thinking we could put the trophy on the bookshelf for now, but it should really have its own case," Chris greeted. When Trip didn't respond, Chris stood and crossed the room, taking his hand. "I'm sorry, I wanted to be here for the ceremony, but I had a late flight, and then that was delayed by an hour."

It took the physical contact to shatter the astonishment at seeing Chris in his hotel room. Using their joined hands, Trip pulled him into his arms, crushing their bodies together as he skimmed a kiss across his jaw. "Thought you were stuck in London," he said. "Had myself all geared up to show you how much I've missed you on this trip."

"Really? You'll have to save that for later," Chris said, his hand sneaking beneath Trip's jacket. "Because I'm all geared up to show you how proud I am of you."

"As long as it ends with me asleep on you." Trip nuzzled Christian's neck. Chris was wearing the cologne Trip had bought him for Christmas the year before. He knew it was Trip's favorite. "I've been sleeping for shit this trip."

"You don't look it." He stepped back, studying Trip with an approving eye. "In fact, you look pretty damned good." Chris pulled him to the couch. "I guess I was being a real bear this week. Helen *volunteered* to drive me to the airport. She said she didn't want to risk me missing my flight."

Trip sat heavily in the corner, but instead of curling up next to him, Chris knelt down and slipped Trip's shoes off his aching feet. At the first massage of his instep, Trip's head fell back against the cushions. "Oh, bloody hell, does that feel good," he muttered. "We have got to suss out a way to get you onto more of these trips. This you and me being separated business is for the birds."

"We're lucky I don't still work at the bank, or I wouldn't have the freedom to go on as many trips as I do now," Chris pointed out, working both thumbs just below his toes. He smiled. "Guess who's going to Johannesburg with you in March?"

Trip's attention snapped back down to Chris. "That's a month-long job. How'd you

swing that?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. Bribes, blowjobs...” Chris moved down his foot.

“Actually, I’ll be taking care of the accounts. In other words, I’ve got to make sure you stay on budget. I didn’t undermine her trust in me by pointing out that I can barely keep you on a weekly grocery budget.”

“Stop being such a bloody good cook, then. Problem solved.”

Chris set his foot down and picked up the other, his long fingers working the sore muscles. This had long ago become part of their routine—Trip getting home from a long shoot and Chris immediately making him comfortable. It was the only good thing to come from when they were separated. Even now, after four years together, Trip hated the time they had to spend apart.

“Are you on the same flight as I am tomorrow night then?” he asked.

“I’m not such a bloody good cook,” Chris said mildly. “You’re just not accustomed to eating something besides beans on toast.” He rolled Trip’s socks off, the tips of his fingers almost, but not quite, tickling the top of his foot. “Same flight if somebody cancels. So? Tell me, what was the ceremony like?”

“Boring. Long. What if I cancelled mine? Don’t mind staying on longer here if you’re about.” He grazed his knuckles across Christian’s cheek. “We haven’t had a proper holiday together in months.”

“I think we could work that out,” Christian said, his fingers moving away from Trip’s foot and beneath his pants, sliding up his calf. “Not a long one, mind you. But you’ve worked hard, you deserve it. That’s what I’ll tell Helen if she has a problem with it.”

“She won’t have a problem. I’m always sunshine and light after we’ve had a good couple of days of endless shagging.” Leaning over, he grasped Christian’s wrist and pulled him onto the couch, stretching out so that Chris was forced to lie atop him.

“Missed you,” he murmured. “Hated you not bein’ here with me.”

Chris kissed his jaw and throat, his lips wandering down to the patch of skin exposed by his open buttons. “Miss you, too. The flat isn’t the same without your wet towels strewn across the floor and your shoes in the doorway,” he said with obvious affection. “Speaking of, I was thinking about maybe getting a bigger place.”

Trip let his hands roam over the familiar landscape of Christian’s back. He wasn’t in a hurry to get their clothes off just yet; it felt too good just having Christian’s weight bearing him down into the cushions.

“What do we need a bigger place for?” he asked.

“A bigger kitchen, a dark room and maybe a studio for you, not to mention the fact we’ll need a place for all of your awards and commendations. I’d like a library. You know, I still have boxes in storage from the move that we don’t have room for.” His fingers fluttered over Trip’s forehead, brushing his hair away. “So I was thinking a house. Maybe in Kent.”

It was hard not to smile at Christian’s enthusiasm. “Where my mum only has to fuss with the bridge and the tunnel instead of the A13 and ring roads to get to me? Thought you loved me.”

“Hey, I like your mum. But maybe we can keep the location super secret.” He kissed the corner of Trip’s mouth. “It was just a thought. I’ll understand if you don’t want to leave London.”

Trip turned his head the fraction he needed to find Christian's lips with his own. His eyes fluttered shut at the first real kiss they'd shared in nearly two weeks, and he sighed as he tightened his arms around his back.

"Whatever you want," he murmured against his mouth. "The only place I need to be is with you."

Chris put his hands just above Trip's shoulders, bracing himself against the couch as he dipped his tongue into Trip's mouth. Chris kissed him slowly, almost lazily, not in any hurry. With the rest of the night ahead of them, and the week, there was no reason to rush things. When Chris finally broke the kiss to meet Trip's gaze, his eyes were dancing. "Good, because I found the perfect place." His lips brushed against Trip's mouth. "But I'll tell you about that later."

Trip's chuckle reverberated through his chest. "You cheeky bugger. You planned this all along." He slid his hands down to cup Christian's ass, pulling him tighter against his body. "For that, I get to fuck you first tonight."

"Oh? Is that supposed to be a punishment or a reward?"

"You tell me." He claimed his lover's mouth again, this time the sweeps of his tongue more possessive. "Love you, you daft git," Trip murmured.

"Still not tired of hearing that," Chris said, slipping a hand between their bodies to work on Trip's buttons. "Love you, too. More every day." He finished unbuttoning Trip's shirt and sat up, giving himself room to draw his tongue down Trip's chest. "Now, let me get you ready for my punishment."

Trip sighed and relaxed against the couch, resting his hand on the back of Christian's head. He knew he could happily spend the rest of his life with the other man, and clearly Chris felt the same.

This was his real prize. The lifetime he'd fantasized about with Christian on that fateful trip to Italy four years earlier had come to fruition. They had had their share of troubles, most stemming from their different lifestyles and their pasts with Andrew, but they had come through stronger. Most importantly, they had come through together.

The End

About the Author:

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in Northern California with her husband and two children.

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