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# BY VIVIEN DEAN

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## YESTERDAY'S NAMES AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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## CHAPTER 1

Nothing says procrastination better than a trip to a local bar.

I can't even say it was an arbitrary choice. I spent fifteen minutes Googling gay bars in Rome—fifteen wasted minutes, I might add, since my command on the Italian language consists mostly of tourist phrases I'd picked up to help me on my trip and not the ability to read conversational reviews posted by other desperate gay men.

All right, the desperate part of that description is probably obvious transference on my part. It's been a stressful couple of months. I'm not feeling as nice as I usually try to be.

Anyway, my Google-fu failed me, and I wasn't comfortable asking the concierge at my hotel for help. What do you say in situations like that? "Hi, I'm trying not to think about the

emotionally draining week I have ahead of me, so I'd really like to spend the night getting well and truly fucked by the prettiest Italian guy I can find. Any tips on where I can do that without getting arrested or making a complete fool of myself?"

Simple, right? Yeah, not so much.

The other option was to not go out. I was still jet lagged, I wasn't supposed to be in the country for a vacation anyway, pick your rationale. But honestly, the prospect of being alone more than I already was—more than I had been and would be again once I got back to Ohio—terrified me. Once upon a time, I'd been able to handle the loneliness, because my life had made a certain kind of sense, and I'd found ways to overcome the feelings when they set in.

But once upon a time, the most important woman in my life had still been alive. I hadn't faced each day with the knowledge I'd never see her again, and I'd been willing to blithely accept the consequences of choosing to remain in my conservative hometown. I wasn't strong enough to be all noble and self-preserving tonight. I needed the release of forgetting for a few hours, the permission to be Not Me.

So I picked a name at random from the list and went out.

The night was stifling, the early August temperatures worse within the confines of the city than they might have been closer to my final destination. Staying in Rome had been another deliberate choice. I could have stayed in Anzio or Nettuno and spent less money, but once my duty was done, I would have been stuck there, too close to be able to forget why I'd come to Italy in the first place, too far away from Rome to sneak up and distract myself. I would have to rent a car to drive down tomorrow, but when it was over, I could come back with impunity. Besides, I rationalized—

something else I'd been doing a lot in the past couple months—this would likely be the only trip I'd ever be able to afford to Rome. I should take advantage of the vacation while I could, see the sights, experience the city. That's what anyone reasonable would do.

Though I doubted anyone back home would consider losing nights in anonymous sex was the best way to spend time in one of the oldest cities in the world.

The bar was called Coming Out, which I thought was a little funny when I'd seen it online, and was located near the Coliseum. I heard the throbbing music from a block away, and as I rounded the corner, stopped short in my tracks. Young men in varying stages of dress poured onto the street, laughing and dancing and drinking in time with the beat. The occasional woman broke up the sea of testosterone, but their presence only exaggerated the sense that I'd just inadvertently walked into a gay block party. This wasn't what I'd been expecting. I'd envisioned something dark and mysterious, where I'd find a partner from the touch of a hand, not the flash of a dimpled smile. These guys were all so young, twentysomethings and lower carousing like it was the end of the world and this their last blowout. I didn't know if this was what I wanted at all.

Though...if I could get laid anywhere in Rome tonight, this would be the spot. I wasn't that much older than them to be completely out of place. Maybe sheer volume of opportunities would work in my favor for a change.

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My throat closed. This was a bad idea. I couldn't even bring myself to skirt the couple and keep on going. It would take a lot more nerve to find someone to spend the night with. Bars weren't my preferred method for hook-ups back home. It was ridiculous to think things would be different here, just because I was someplace new.

I backed up as stealthily as I could. My gaze darted around, drinking in the last vestiges of the jubilee I wouldn't get to revel in, memorizing the hypnotic sway of bodies and the seductive tattoo of music to recreate later in the hotel shower, my hand around my cock, my eyes squeezed shut to make it as realistic as possible. It

wouldn't be the same, but it was all I would get. I'd take it.

My back collided against something hard, and more startlingly, something warm. I jerked forward and would have stumbled over my own feet if a strong hand hadn't wrapped around my elbow and kept me upright. Looking over my shoulder was instinct. Staring at the man I'd bumped into was not.

He regarded me with a half-smile, wide-set brown eyes friendly and inquisitive. Soft hazel flecks in them caught the evening sun. His dark, shoulder-length hair was combed off his face, tucked behind his ears like it annoyed him rather than as a fashion statement, and the shadows of the beard making itself known for the night barely masked the adorable cleft in his square chin.

"Hello," he said, his soft voice carrying through the dance music.

Somehow, I managed a croaked, "Hi." Mr. Personality, that's me.

"You are leaving?"

I blinked, my brain caught in the moment's web. I wasn't going anywhere. My feet weren't moving. "Huh?"

His smile widened, and the fingers still curled around my arm began to massage the tense muscle. "Do not go yet." His accented English was near perfect, its inflections more musical than anything I'd heard from the hotel staff. My heart skipped a few beats. The romantic in me I'd thought dead imagined it was searching to match the cadence of his voice. "You have only just arrived."

That's when I remembered my attempt to flee, and flushed in embarrassment. "I wasn't..." The lie died in my throat. I couldn't do it. His gaze was too steady, too knowing, to get away with it. "I shouldn't have come." The benefit of being true didn't actually

make the words taste any better.

He shook his head. "No, I do not believe that is true. You watch them too long." When he tugged at my elbow, I actually followed a step. "We go inside, yes?"

I offered a modicum of resistance, though the notion of going anywhere he might lead was tempting. "I don't even know who you are."

"Davide. And you...?"

"Jonathan."

"And now we both know." His hand slid down my arm to capture my fingers in a dry, caressing grip. "Come. One drink. One dance. Then you may decide again whether or not you should have come."

I went. I'd like to say it was because I'd finally snapped out of my fugue, but that wouldn't be true. I let Davide lead me through the crowd because he'd told me his name. I yearned for some kind of human contact. Apparently, that was all it took.

He ignored the masses crowding the tables outside and took me straight for the front door, his hold tightening as if he was afraid of losing me. The temperature on the street hadn't prepared me for the blast of heat that assaulted us when we entered, and I gasped in shock, my lungs shriveling up and refusing to work. I must have been louder than I thought. Davide glanced back in more than mild concern, and for the first time, looked less than confident about taking away my choice.

"I'm fine," I said to his unasked question. Because I was, mostly at least. I nodded toward the stocky bartender. "Didn't you say something about a drink?"

I must have sounded more convincing than I felt. Davide smiled, squeezed my hand, and let me go.

I couldn't follow the stream of Italian that passed between the two men, but within moments, Davide turned away with two glasses of red wine in hand. "As I promised."

My mouth watered, as much from the hope for refreshment as it did from the sly tilt of Davide's smile. I reached to take mine, but he held it away, using it to coax me to a table in the farthest corner.

It wasn't hard.

The rats of Hamelin had nothing on me.

The table he chose pressed us side by side to fit, thigh pressed to thigh, shoulder to shoulder. He eased the closeness by stretching his arm across the back of my chair, but he kept his hand polite as he sipped his wine.

"You are American."

The wine was dry and tart. My lips tingled in its wake. "Did I do something really stupid that gave me away?"

"No." His lashes dipped. He was looking at my mouth. I was suddenly self-conscious enough to let my tongue dart out in search of a stray droplet, then realized too late that only drew more attention to it. "Your accent. Though you might have been Canadian. You had not said enough for me to be completely certain."

I smiled at his teasing gibe. "I guess that means we need to talk some more, then."

"Except you already told me you were."

This time, I laughed. "Right. I walked right into that one."

"Are you here on holiday?"

The reminder of why I was in Italy dampened my mood. "Not exactly."

"Work?"

"No, not work, either."

"What else is there to do in Rome but work and play?"

"You're the native. You tell me." My attempt to deflect his queries failed miserably. He kept watching me over the rim of his glass, waiting for me to continue. I sighed and took another sip. I needed fortification. One drink wouldn't be nearly enough. "I'm not here for Rome. I'm driving down to Nettuno tomorrow."

"Ah. You're a historian."

I frowned, genuinely confused. "How'd you know that?"

"Because the only Americans who visit Nettuno do so for the memorial."

"Oh. That's what..." That made more sense than the conclusion I'd jumped to. "I thought—never mind."

"No, what did you think?"

"Well..." I was blushing again, and not because of the heat. How many different ways was I going to step in it tonight? "I actually teach history. I couldn't figure out how you knew that. And now I've given that away, too."

Davide leaned close, turning his mouth toward my ear. His cheek brushed against mine, and the corresponding prickle went straight to my cock. "I will only take what you are willing to give," he murmured. A hint of his wine-scented breath drifted to my nose. "You must only say the word."

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the way he smelled, the musky cologne undercutting all the sweat and wine that already filled my head. Clean and woodsy, with an almost sweet chaser. Intoxicating in the way vodka drinks often are, the subtle way they sneak up on you, wooing you to have more until it's too late and you're drunk on your ass.

I didn't have a word, but I had something else I thought would

be just as effective. A slight downward tilt of my head, and my lips touched the border between stubble and skin. Davide moaned, and then everything detonated. The breath so hot in my ear skipped every which way, and the arm around my shoulders locked. Even if I'd wanted to escape now, I couldn't. He would resist it at every turn.

But flight was the last thing on my mind. My flesh had taken over—finally, thank God—and my mouth traced the line between coarse and smooth all the way to the tiny dip in his chin.

"I'd like to negotiate that dance now," I said. At least, that's what I think I said. It might have come out completely gibberish, considering the way my brain had switched off.

Davide's answer was a shallow retreat, then a quick glance in my eyes before sealing our mouths together. Either I'd said I wanted a kiss or his English wasn't as flawless as it sounded.

Either way, I wasn't complaining.

I opened immediately to let him in, cupping the back of his head when the first sweep of his tongue left me dizzy. He flicked across my lower lip in a tantalizing tease, and when I moaned, plunged deep inside again, like he wanted to devour every last bit of me. He was an expert kisser, pausing at all the right intervals to let me catch my breath, relentlessly returning as soon as the room stopped spinning. I clung to him with growing desperation, my cock aching, sweat dripping between my shoulder blades as I tried not to climb onto his lap then and there.

When he eventually eased back, his mouth was kiss-swollen and smiling. His eyes met mine again and searched for several seconds. He must have liked what he saw there because his smile brightened.

"You are not so sad now," he said. "Good."

I was too on edge to process exactly what he said right away. My lips still tingled from the amazing kisses, and none of the blood in my body had any desire to return to my head. I think I actually blinked at him once or twice while it all sank in, too.

He'd kissed me because he'd wanted to cheer me up? My erection started to deflate a little. I didn't want to be pitied. I wanted to be desired.

"I'm not sad." I reached for my wine. It was easier than looking at him and feeling a little ridiculous for my overreaction to some positive attention. "I just needed to get out of my hotel for a few hours."

"Perhaps."

It bugged me that he wasn't moving his arm, or doing anything but what he'd done before he kissed me. I gulped down the rest of my wine, barely tasting it, and started to rise.

"Thanks for the drink," I said. "I think it's time for me to head back now."

I made it all the way to my feet before he caught my wrist. "We still have our dance."

"I don't—"

"You promised."

I hadn't. But he wasn't interested in semantics.

Without letting me go, he stood as well, and pulled me around the table's curve. He left our glasses behind, his still mostly full, and I twisted to gesture toward them.

He ignored me, or he didn't hear me. The effect was the same. We navigated through the crowd until we were back outside, and I found myself headed back to the spot where he'd first approached me.

The groping couple was gone, leaving that section of the

sidewalk deserted. Davide stopped in almost the exact place he'd found me, and pulled me closer into his body. I was taller than he was by a couple of inches, but he was broader, his arms easily folding around me to find the perfect fit. The logical half of my brain didn't want this. I might be a thirty-four-year-old high school history teacher whose longest lasting sexual relationship had been online and long distance, but just because I didn't get a lot of opportunities for hook-ups didn't mean I had to sacrifice my dignity for this one.

But then I felt him. I mean, really felt him. His hips aligned well with mine, and the definite line of his erection pressed into the junction of my groin. He was excited, maybe as excited as I'd been back in the bar, and he wasn't bothering to hide it.

"One dance," he said.

Now that we were poised, he didn't move. He waited for me to respond to his prompt, maybe giving me an out if I was serious about refusing him. We were far enough now from the bar for me to get away without too much difficulty. Something told me he wouldn't chase me if I decided to run.

"One dance," I heard myself confirm. I dropped my free hand to his hip, stretching my fingers to cop an illicit feel of his tight ass, and began to sway to the throbbing music.

I'm not a dancer. I would love for that commonly held belief that all gay men are blessed with a sense of fashion and rhythm to be true, but it's just not. On the few occasions I venture into Toledo and the clubs, I always have to concentrate when I get on a dance floor, which takes some—okay, most—of the fun out of it. But my lack didn't seem to dampen Davide's ardor or attention. He smiled and matched my movements, keeping it slow and easy as I relaxed.

Away from the people, away from the sweltering heat, in his loose embrace, the scent of his body came rushing back. So did my erection. It was impossible not to react to the seductive slides of his body, or the way our dicks kept rubbing together when I least expected it. I wouldn't have been surprised if there was some kind of pheromone in his cologne that got me hard, too, but by the time the song ended and the next began, I didn't care.

His hands opened to let me go, the muscles tensing as he prepared to pull back. Panic shot through me as I realized he was honoring his earlier statement, and I tugged at his ass to slam our hips back together.

"I'm not ready to stop," I said in response to his lifted brows. Davide smiled. "Good."

It wasn't the dance I wanted. To show him, I led him deeper into the shadows until my back hit the building, and blindly, sought his mouth.

My first aim missed. I touched the corner of his lips, and felt them part, ready for me, hungry for more. Each of us shifted, and there it was, the perfect fusion, the flick of his tongue across mine, the soft suction as he drew me inside. I was the one to explore this time, wanton and carefree while I let my reason take a backseat to desire. I traced his lips, nibbling at the edges, and I learned the shape of his teeth with the tip of my tongue whenever I could tear it away from curling around his. That wasn't often. His tongue was dangerously addictive.

I like kissing. A lot. And I don't get to do it nearly enough, partly because of my circumstances, partly because it seems like most guys I find who are willing for a hook-up have very specific things they want from it. Kissing inevitably takes a backseat to blow jobs. Not that I can really blame them, because if you're

desperate enough to resort to Craigslist, you don't want to waste what you get when you find it.

Davide was good at it. Even better, he seemed to get off on it as much as I did. He made all these little sounds in the back of his throat that zeroed in on my cock, and when I held onto his ass to grind our hips together, he made some more. I'd never been with anyone who made me feel so sexual before, both as an object of lust and the predator on the hunt, but Davide fulfilled both with an ease that would have been scary if I'd wasted time thinking about it.

Who had time for thinking when wrapped around a hot Italian? Not me, not now.

All pretenses at dancing were gone. His hand slipped beneath my polo and skimmed along my waist. I'm usually ticklish, but I was too far gone at this point to care. His fingertips scorched wherever they touched, but their absence was even worse, my skin flaming when he reached my fly and went to work on the buttons.

I pushed at the back of his T-shirt to get it out of my way. My nails scratched over the sculpted muscles, but when my hands got caught in the garment, I growled in frustration.

Davide chuckled. "So impatient."

"Your fault," I said, panting for breath. In an effort to slow down, though, I leaned against the building and extricated my grip. I wanted this, but I didn't have to look so easy now that I had it.

He had no such compunctions, going so far as to slide into my now open jeans and mold his fingers over my cock. I bucked into the touch, wishing I'd been brave enough to come out commando, but even the added pressure of the heel of his hand wasn't enough. He stroked up and down, using the cotton of my underwear to add delicious friction against both my crown and my balls. If he kept it

up, I was going to come without ever knowing how hot our skin would be together, without the impediment of clothing.

The best way to make it last was to take my mind off what he was doing. And the easiest method for that was to touch Davide.

Since I'd failed so miserably at his shirt, I went for the pants instead. I managed the zipper with a greater ease, seeking out the arousal he'd been teasing me with. The wet tip poked out the top of his boxer briefs, clear pre-come rolling from the slit. I swiped my thumb over, then went back, smearing the fluid around to coat the entire head. If the flared crown was anything to go by, not to mention the bulge, he was thick, far thicker than I would have expected on a guy his size. My ass clenched at the thought of it working its way into my hole, and how hard he'd have to push even with lube to fill me up.

It would be easier on a bed.

The little voice in the back of my brain was insidious, because we both knew what it was inferring. It wanted me to take Davide home, or in this case, back to my hotel, so I wouldn't have to worry about getting caught, or getting hurt. I could take my time enjoying what he had to offer. I could pretend I really was on vacation, and Davide was interested in more than a casual hook-up, and that tomorrow, he wouldn't have to ask me what my name was when we woke up, caked in dried come.

Tempting, all of it. And also dangerous, not the least because I didn't know who Davide was, or his last name, or whether or not he was an escaped patient from a mental asylum. There might be a level of danger in indulging our desires out in the open like this, but it added a certain thrill to it, too, that giddy fear that at any moment, we might get caught. Or seen. For some reason, that seemed like the best reason of all to stay outside.

I don't know what went through Davide's head, if he was just so used to nearly anonymous hook-ups that this seemed perfectly commonplace to him, if he was as excited as I was and didn't want to stop, or if he didn't trust me completely either. I was as much a stranger to him as he was to me, though it dawned on me as he finally pushed my underwear out of his way that he knew a lot more about me than the other way around.

"Davide..." But my voice faded away as he sank to his knees, his eyes oddly bright as he looked up at me from that position. He shoved my underwear beneath my balls, the elastic framing them almost lovingly as the skin stretched to shiny proportions. I felt like I was going to explode, and that feeling only intensified when he grasped my cock at the root, tilted it away from my stomach, and licked around the head.

So much for hoping to make this last. Everything in me sizzled. One hand balled into a fist at my side, and the other lifted to my mouth, my thumb disappearing between my teeth as I sucked away the lingering taste of his pre-come from my skin. Damn, did he taste good, sticky and a little sweeter than I would have expected, like the scents of his cologne had permeated his entire body. I sucked harder at the pad until all I tasted was my sweaty thumb, then wished I could still reach his cock to get more.

I made the mistake of looking down, though how I could have anticipated it would have that effect on me, I have no idea. Davide cradled my cock against his palm, keeping it in place, and ran his lips down the side of the shaft. Not so uncommon a blow job technique, at least in my experience, though it felt like he left a trail of fire in his mouth's wake. What got me was the tilt of his head, the way he watched me the entire time, moving so expertly around my cock anybody else would have thought he spent his life

on his knees worshiping it.

My windpipe tightened. I wet my lower lip in hopes that would ease it, but I don't know who I thought I was fooling. I'd been having a hard time catching my breath about Davide since I bumped into him. From surprise, to kisses, to this—hell, they were all surprises. He was a surprise. A great one, like someone on the Fates Board of Directors finally looked down, saw Jonathan Percy Lynch was having a pretty crappy summer so far, and decided, "You know what? Let's give the guy exactly what he needs."

Davide took his time, which helped me regain some measure of control. Some. Note that. Because I didn't for a second think I would make it long once he took me into his mouth. I'm as good at self-delusion as the next closeted gay guy who hopes for a little bit more, but that would stretch my abilities to the snapping point.

His nose nudged against my balls, sending sharp jolts of electricity down my already traitorous thighs. Though they were in close confinement in their current pinned state, somehow he managed to suck one past his lips, his tongue never stopping to map over the taut skin. My hand dropped to his head. I just meant to rest it there, maybe play a little with his hair, but instead my fingertips found his ear and traced the outer shell. It wasn't a perfect curve. At the uppermost point, he had the cutest little crinkle, like if he had been a molded statue, it would have been an imperfection formed when someone's finger slipped in the wet clay. I hadn't noticed it when he'd been on his feet, but then again, I hadn't been paying attention to his ears.

I touched it now, back and forth, fascinated by its flaw. Davide tolerated it for several seconds, but on the fourth or fifth pass, he released my sac and shifted to the other side, obscuring his ear from view

"You have interesting tastes," he said, laughter in his voice.

I flushed, though thankfully, it was too dark now for him to see it. "It's cute."

"Cute?" His teeth grazed along my shaft as he inched his way back to the tip. "You are cute. I am...charming."

His self-description made me laugh, both because of how accurate it was and how bluntly he'd claimed it. It carried along with the music from the bar, loud and clarion clear, and I remembered too late that we were still out in public, and that drawing attention to us when I was on such display might get me arrested before I had the chance to do what I'd come to Italy to accomplish.

My sudden silence faded Davide's smile. "No," he said. "Stop thinking."

It was on the tip of my tongue to argue that one of us should be on the lookout and that I was in a much better place of seeing who might approach than he was, when he licked over my cock, opened his mouth, and sank down my length.

He didn't stop. He went all the way down, lips tight, pressure tighter, until his nose pushed hard into my pubes. Now, when I deep-throat, I can't just do it. I have to work up to it, and even then, before I can swallow a guy's cock, I have to take a moment and catch my breath. Davide didn't, or if he did, I wasn't aware of it. I was too focused on all the other sensations to notice if he really had just taken me into his throat in one fell swoop.

There was pressure like you wouldn't believe. Heat and wetness and a glorious tongue that somehow curled around my cock in all the most interesting places. Thumbs pressing into my pelvis where Davide held my hips steady, not quite painful, not quite pleasurable, just right to keep me grounded in the moment

and the way he started swallowing. Each one was a tiny massage, somehow hitting the most sensitive spots on the head. My knees started trembling almost immediately, and if it wasn't for his strong hands, they might have given out entirely. I had to grab onto his shoulder for balance.

Then he pulled off and gasped a moment for air. The switch from his hot mouth to the summer night shouldn't have been as shock-inducing as it was, but I might as well have stepped into a freezer for the effect it had on me. My legs locked, all tremors gone. All I wanted was his mouth back on me, his body against me, his anything, and maybe it wouldn't have been such a bad idea to take him back to my hotel—

He sucked me down again, faster this time, harder, not satisfied to keep me in his throat but to slide back up, then down again as he fucked his mouth on my cock. Because it sure wasn't me doing the fucking. That would have required me having some kind of control over the whole situation, which I really hadn't ever since bumping into him in the first place. Davide was taking everything I had and spiraling me beyond the borders of pleasure I'd reached in the past, obliterating all thought, destroying all memory until all that was left was here and now and my willing cock and his talented tongue and that hot, tight, exquisite mouth.

Within a couple minutes, my orgasm surged from deep in my balls. I held it at bay by digging my nails into my palms, but eventually even that little pain sharpened my pleasure, giving me nowhere to go but hurtling toward release, breakneck and brainless. I gasped a warning, in case Davide wanted time to get off before I finished, but he ignored me, choosing instead to add fresh thrills by gently twisting my sac.

I came hard, deep in his throat. I might have shouted. I

definitely grabbed onto the back of his head and held him still, because the way he kept swallowing around the end of my dick was driving me insane, setting off tiny explosions of fireworks behind my closed eyes, turning every sound to reach my ears into a ringing that echoed the vibrations racing through my body. In my experience, orgasms weren't this intense. They were great, don't get me wrong, but comparing those to this was like comparing a Big Mac value meal to a gourmet burger with hand-cut steak fries. They both got their jobs done, but that's where the similarity ended.

Davide came off my cock slowly, gradually, cleaning every drop of spunk off along the way. My arm fell lax to my side, and I leaned heavily against the wall, utterly drained. He was the one to tuck me back into my jeans and do them up, and they were his hands that kept me upright when he straightened and looked me in the eye.

He smiled. "Thank you for the dance."

I was fuzzy, but I could recognize a goodbye when I heard one. "What about you?"

"I am good." Like he had something to prove, he leaned in and kissed me, softly this time, the taste of my come still on his lips. "Are you ready to go?"

Though I didn't know how I was going to put one foot in front of the other, I nodded. "Are you going?"

His response was an enigmatic smile. Stepping back, he quickly did up his pants, then looped an arm around my back. The thought of protesting only flickered before I squashed it like a bug. I'd let him lead me this entire encounter. Why should I stop now?

We didn't go far. He pulled me into the line at a taxi stand, holding me close to his side like we were boyfriends. The glow left

from my orgasm remained a lot longer than it might otherwise, because of that. The fantasy of having someone like this all the time was almost more delicious than the sex had been. I live a life of closed doors and whispered secrets, where denying who I am is as natural as breathing, where having someone walk next to me only means one of my students is having problems and is trailing beside me in hopes of help. Men didn't walk me home, or slide their hand into my back pocket as a show of ownership. So I was going to enjoy this as long as it lasted, even if none of it was real. Because for tonight, I was going to pretend it was.

The line moved quickly, and I had my full faculties back when it was finally our turn. Davide opened the back door on the white taxi, then closed it behind me, stopping me in mid-slide across the seat to make room for him.

"Don't you need a ride somewhere, too?" I said through the open window.

"I am not far." He leaned in close and smiled. "It was good to meet you, Jonathan. I hope your dreams tonight are pleasant."

"That might be an understatement."

He slapped the roof and stepped back, giving me a small wave before disappearing behind the others waiting for their turn for a ride. I settled back in the seat and told the driver the name of my hotel, but as he pulled away, I couldn't resist twisting around to look for Davide again.

He stood on the corner, his face in profile as he looked down at the phone in his hand. He was oblivious to the world around him, lost in his own.

Rather like the one he'd created for me, whether intentionally or not.

That was the memory I would carry from this. The one I'd use

to get me through tonight so I could face tomorrow without breaking down.

This time, procrastination had been worth it.

# CHAPTER 2

According to the map and directions I had, Nettuno was southeast of Rome, about a forty-five minute drive, unless Italian traffic went slower than American. I could have taken a train—an hourly service ran between the two cities—but I didn't like the idea of being stuck there if I wanted to leave quickly. A rental car gave me freedom, and considering I had no idea how this entire day would go, it was better to have more options than less.

I woke early, surprisingly well-rested. My night had been a mixture of erotic dreams and haunting memories, but none had disturbed my sleep. That honor went to the sun streaming through the curtains I'd forgotten to pull. I probably should have closed them and gone back to bed, but I wasn't tired, and frankly, the prospect that maybe this time the memories would beat out the sex

dreams scared me into getting up for the day. I was on the road by seven, out of the city by seven-thirty, and exiting the Via Pontina an hour later. My driving time estimate was off, but I was still early. I parked and simply stared at the entire purpose of my trip.

The Sicily-Rome American Cemetery and Memorial had been erected for all the American men and women who'd died and gone missing in the region during World War II. Sicily's liberation. The landings at Salerno and Anzio. More battles than could be counted. I had first heard about it when I was seven, the year I moved in with my grandmother, but this was the first opportunity I'd had to see it in person. It was more awe-inspiring and beautiful than any of the pictures had ever been.

I knew the facts, of course. I teach American history, but my specialty has always been WWII. Over ten thousand people were memorialized on the seventy-plus acres, those who had been found and those who were still considered missing. I was here for one specific grave, but the echoes of all those other names called out to me, ghosts from histories I would never own. Sitting there, gripping the steering wheel, it felt like I had been preparing for this moment my entire life. Or at least, from that fateful day a seven-year-old Jonathan Lynch had one life torn away from him, and another one given.

The cemetery opened at nine. Nobody else was around, but that wouldn't last long. People flocked here all the time, tourists and families alike. Davide had been right about that. If I hadn't been so overwhelmed by his presence, I would've caught myself before making such a dumb error last night.

Thoughts of Davide brought a smile to my face. The encounter had been nearly perfect, only marred by my own stupidity. At least Davide was persistent, though I still wondered why he didn't let

me suck him off, too. I would have done so, gladly. Or let him fuck me, if he preferred. I'd taken a condom specifically for that, so it wasn't like I wasn't prepared. He'd been excited, and so damn affectionate as he helped me get a taxi. It didn't make sense that he wouldn't have wanted something in return, something more than what he got.

But he'd done what I thought would be impossible and put me into a good mood for the duration of my ride back to the hotel. He'd broken up my string of nightmares, so I could get a decent night sleep. I would have thought he was some kind of guardian angel if I hadn't been able to smell him in my clothes long after I'd left him behind. For that, for everything, I would always be grateful.

It was easier to let go of the steering wheel at that point. I felt stronger, braver, like I had a right to go into the cemetery, like my entrance wouldn't defile everything these soldiers had fought for. I grabbed the backpack from the passenger seat and got out, slinging it over my shoulder. I didn't know if staff would conduct a search before letting me go in, but it didn't matter. The only things that were in the pack were items that belonged in the memorial.

The day was already warm, and promised to get more so before too long. My sunglasses did more than protect my eyes from the brilliant glare. They would hide the ravages I was positive this day would take out on me. I don't want to admit that I was afraid of blubbering like a baby, but, well, that's exactly what I thought was going to happen. I'd held back on crying since June. My stay of execution was about to expire.

When I heard the car pull up behind me, I looked back out of habit. I wasn't actually curious about who had arrived. It was one of those autonomic reflexes. You know, like a dog pricking its ears

when it hears a distant sound. You look, because it's there, and then you keep on going because now your brain has put it into its rightful place.

Except it wasn't a stranger who got out of the blue Fiat Punto. It was Davide, and I blinked as if that would fix what was obviously an optical illusion.

The jeans and T-shirt from last night were gone. Today, he wore a long-sleeved dove-gray shirt with white French cuffs, paired with black pants, perfectly creased. His shoes were black leather, and though he didn't have a tie or jacket on, he looked like he could have been heading to work. Even his long hair tucked behind his ears looked professional, sophisticated instead of sloppy.

The small crinkle in the outer shell of his ear proved he wasn't a dream. So did the small smile he wore when he noticed me standing there, staring at him.

My feet were as frozen as my eyelids. I didn't make a move as he approached.

"I'd hoped your plans were for the morning," he said, his smile unshakable.

His words broke my stasis. "What're you doing here?"

He gestured toward the memorial behind me. "This made you sad when you spoke of it last night. Like you were sad when I found you. I thought you would like a friend today. Some things should never be done alone."

His quiet voice was calm and reassuring, but it was the sincerity in it that undid me. He had no idea who I was, not really, or why I was here. Yet, he extended a hand of friendship, using some of the same words from last night. He'd called me sad then, too, and I'd gotten angry at it. Because it was true, and I didn't

want to face it, not two months ago, not last night, not now.

The problem was, I couldn't escape it here. It was already demanding my attention. He was just offering some company so I wouldn't have to do this alone.

When I didn't answer him right away, he reached into his pocket. "Here." He held out a slim billfold and flipped it open to reveal an ID card behind the front plastic. "To show you I mean you no harm."

His tiny photo smiled up at me. *Davide Tosatto*. It wasn't a driver's license, but instead, a work badge, with a circle emblem in the upper corner, an eagle in a sea of blue with "United States of America Embassy" ringing the white perimeter.

"I'm a translator," he said. "So see? I can be of use to you. More than friend."

It looked real enough. And he felt real. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I'm not required until this afternoon. That is why I hoped you would be here this morning."

I handed it back. "I don't need a translator. Everybody who works here speaks excellent English." I lifted my head, and though our glasses prevented us from seeing each other more closely, I imagined he could, the way he'd done last night. "But I could use a friend. Today is going to be...tough."

I'd never admitted it out loud before. Plenty of times in my head. I had a running record of excuses set to repeat ad infinitum. But every time someone back home had offered condolences, or tried to draw me out, I smiled gratefully and then shut them down. Nobody could understand. They would try, and some of them might get close, but no matter what, they would never know the full story, because nobody in my life but Gran knew I was gay.

Funny how the only person I could open up completely to was a near-stranger halfway across the world. It might have disheartened me further if I wasn't already so low.

Davide fell into step beside me as we entered the cemetery. He made no overtures to take my hand like he'd done leading me to the taxi stand, but his presence was oddly comforting, his arm solid where it brushed against mine. I realized I was disappointed I couldn't smell his cologne. I don't know if he wasn't wearing it today, or if all the fauna and greenery overwhelmed it. In the bottom of my heart, where selfish, unattainable desires usually lurked, I hoped I'd get another whiff of it before the day was through.

The pictures didn't do the cemetery justice. A pool flanked by Italian cypress greeted new arrivals, sloping upward to the cemetery itself. More trees shaded large portions of the perfectly tended grounds, majestic without overwhelming either the buildings in the distance or the purpose of the rolling landscape. The lush grass was broken by the occasional dryer patch, but from its jewel tones sprang rows upon curved rows of crosses, with the occasional Star of David interspersed, each marking the grave of another fallen soldier. Serenity prevailed. Everywhere I looked, I saw peace.

I faltered. I wasn't prepared for the sheer magnitude of it. The site spanned almost eighty acres, and while some of it housed the actual memorial and a chapel, the vast majority was devoted to the headstones.

Davide touched my elbow. "Do you know where you want to go?" he asked gently.

Home. But my pack weighed heavy on my shoulder, and there was no way I could say that out loud and not feel shame up the

wazoo for wanting to run away.

"I need to talk to someone in the Visitor Building. They've got the information on where everyone is."

"So it's someone specific you're here for?"

"Yes." I swallowed the lump in my throat. "My grandparents."

The Visitor Building was part of the memorial located at the end of a long, wide path. It resembled something out of classical Greece, with austere, white columns and beautifully carved friezes on each end. My pace slowed as we approached, my reluctance growing with each yard, but Davide didn't stop, ensuring I kept up as he climbed the few steps.

I'll be honest. I don't remember what I said to the woman at visitor information. I only remember it was a woman because she was a tiny thing and I had to look down at her. But I must not have bumbled it too much, because she typed the name I gave her into her computer and told us exactly where to go, even offering to escort us so we wouldn't get lost.

Smiling, Davide shook his head. He said something to her in Italian, the words musical and swift, and then touched the small of my back in assurance when she nodded and turned away to her computer again. Within two minutes, we were back in the sunshine, a map of the cemetery with the grave I wanted clearly marked in hand.

Not all of the crosses bore names. I tried not to look at them too closely as we walked by, but when we passed the third one with the same inscription, I pulled my glasses off to scrub at my eyes.

Davide immediately stopped. He waited patiently for me to pull myself together, silent and present, the only two things I needed right now.

If I was losing it over, "Here rests in honored glory, a Comrade

in Arms, known but to God," how did I ever think I was going to make it with a grave I actually recognized?

Part of me wanted to go back to the memorial and pretend to be a tourist. There was a fantastic display of maps and dioramas about the war and the Anzio invasion, recreations that put the events in a perspective few could ever see. I would have loved to bring my classes here on a field trip if it wasn't on the other side of the ocean. They would be able to see the scope for the first time in their protected little lives and maybe, just maybe, they'd be able to take a step out of them. How valuable would it be to know firsthand there was more to life than our little corner of Ohio? Even if they didn't care about the people who had protected their futures, maybe it would teach them to look beyond their invisible walls and hope for something more. A teacher could only dream.

If the displays weren't enough, there was always the chapel dedicated to the unknown soldiers. A grate kept visitors out, but you could still look inside and see the wall with all the missing soldiers' names engraved on it. I'd found somebody's pictures online in my research, and the intricate zodiac on the chapel ceiling had been breathtaking, even in such an awkward format. I could easily get lost in the chapel's history, and never bat an eyelash. Just so many different ways for me to spend my time.

The thing was...none of them actually mattered.

When I resumed walking, my pace was slow, but at least it was steady. "Probably not what you signed up for, huh?"

"Was there a sign up?" Davide teased. "I must have missed that."

I appreciated the lighter mood. It helped make the other seem less dire. "Why are you so willing to do this with me? I was under the impression this kind of thing was a no-no for Americans to

do."

"A no-no? Being a friend is bad?"

"No. This." I swept a hand toward the rows beside us. "When I was doing my research for my trip, one thing I was told was that there are three things you never talk about with Italians. Politics, religion, and World War II."

Davide laughed. "Sound advice, but not always true. And you forget. I work with Americans every day. I am used to your...singularities."

"Ah, now I can tell you work for the Embassy. Very politically correct of you."

"But not wrong."

"No, I guess not."

We passed another two rows, his strides matching mine. "Is this why you teach history?"

I had to stop and think about it for a second to figure out the skips his thought processes had taken to get to that particular question. "Indirectly, I suppose. It's all I've ever known."

"Because of your grandparents."

"You really want to hear about this? It's boring."

"Only to someone who already knows the story." Davide flashed him a smile. "And you have never struck me as someone who is boring."

Warmth kindled deep inside my gut, melting away the frigid temperatures that had taken up residence there hours earlier. When he looked at me like that, I almost believed it, too. His sincerity was contagious, if not appropriately placed.

"All right," I conceded. "But it's not a long story. It's not even that original."

His soft smile said he didn't really care.

"My parents died when I was seven. An accident on the highway. My mom was estranged from her family, and the friends they'd set up as my guardians in their wills had moved away when I was three. They really couldn't afford to take me in, anyway, so they signed over guardianship to my grandmother. My dad's mom."

I could still remember the hotel they'd been staying at, a Motel 6 where the stale cigarette smoke permeated everything. I'd gotten one of the beds all to myself, but the nightmares about being alone had only just started for me, and I'd thrashed around in the sheets until I was so caught up in them, I thought the bed was going to eat me. When Gran showed up the next day, I'd been sitting on the edge of the only chair in the room, my hands tucked beneath my legs, my back ramrod straight. She told me later I refused to talk to anyone. For the longest time afterward, she and my teachers wondered if I would need psychiatric help, but since Gran didn't believe in it, nothing ever materialized.

I wonder if I'd be having all these problems today if I'd only had a therapist to talk to back then.

"Gran lived in this small town in Ohio, very quiet, very conservative, so that's where I went. It was just her and me, all the way until I graduated from high school. I went to Ohio State, but as soon as I got my degree, I got a job back in my hometown so I could move back there."

"You missed her."

"She needed me. She wasn't young when she took me in. By the time I graduated from college, she was in her seventies."

"What happened to your grandfather?"

The paper shook in my hand. His question didn't spark it. The fact we'd just reached our destination had.

"There." I pointed at the cross. The name "John Lawrence Lynch" was etched across it. "He was killed in the landing at Salerno. Gran never remarried."

Davide was braver than I was, stepping forward and crouching down to better read the markings. With the exception of the name and dates, it looked just like the thousands of other crosses, possessing no individual power but the power that I gave it. I knew I gave it more than it probably merited. If I'd come two months ago...but I wouldn't have come two months ago. I was still in denial then, refusing to believe she was actually gone.

"You have his name," he commented.

"Kind of. Gran always said my mom liked Jonathan better." He tilted a small smile in my direction. "So do I."

I couldn't approach it, not yet, though I let my pack slip from my shoulder and dangle from my hand. "Gran's house was a shrine to him. Every picture she ever had, every letter she ever got from him, it was all on display. Sometimes, she talked about him like he was coming back, like any day, he was going to step through the front door and sit at the kitchen table and ask her for another helping of meatloaf." My eyes burned, and I took a deep breath to quell the rush of emotions. "Those were not the best days."

"She loved him." He said something else in soft Italian, but I didn't ask him to translate and he didn't offer.

"But see, the thing of it was, she was great. Amazing. She was funny and smart, and she didn't have patience for idiots. People liked her, even though a lot of them felt a little sorry for her that she never got over my grandfather. Everybody was always playing matchmaker. And I mean everybody. People at church, people at the grocery store, the guy at the gas station. Even our pastor tried it once, but when she realized it was him, she cornered him in front

of the whole congregation and told him off." The image of her small, thin form standing in front of Pastor Grant's three-hundred-pound bulk still made me smile. "You didn't mess with Gran. Which is why I never questioned the pictures, or the letters, or any of it."

"You showed her respect, which was the right thing to do," Davide said. "This always surprises me in you Americans. I hear stories about what people think of their parents, their aunts and uncles, anyone who has lived for some time. I have never understood why it is so many of you do not honor what others have done."

"Living a long time isn't a matter of honor." My gaze flickered to my grandfather's headstone. "Sometimes, it's just a trick of fate."

"It is not the age that should be respected, but the lessons learned." Davide straightened and stood in front of me, though thankfully, not blocking my view. He gripped my shoulder and squeezed, smiling in reassurance. "I do not mean you. You understand these things. You study them because you respect what they have to say. Not everyone does. That is all."

"Maybe." That was as much as I was willing to concede. There was more to it than Davide could possibly get, but the fact that he'd hit on this much of the truth without knowing me very long was more than a little frightening.

After one more small squeeze, Davide released my shoulder and edged to my side, his hand settling in the small of my back. "She was your true family."

"Yes. When I got into high school, I thought about getting in contact with my mom's family for a while. I even wrote her parents a letter."

"And?"

"I never mailed it."

"Why?"

It had been a hot summer day. I'd written and re-written the letter eight different times, changing the words, neatening my penmanship, altering the message. I'd finally decided on something short and sweet, and included one of the few pictures I had of myself, a photo taken at the Easter Sunday breakfast my church youth group had organized. I thought it showed me in the best possible light, that I wasn't a troublemaker, that I had friends, that I wouldn't be a burden or embarrassment to them if they wanted to claim me. I didn't have envelopes, so I'd taken one of Gran's, from her secret stash she used for special occasions or for people she really liked. The paper was heavy and slightly textured, with a faint watermark that made me think it was expensive. Another subliminal message to tell these unknown relatives that I was doing just fine without them, but if they wanted to get to know their grandson, I was more than amenable.

"Gran found it."

"Did she not want you to contact them?"

"No, not exactly."

I'd thought she was in town with her knitting group. Though her arthritis had already started to kick in, she still indulged in the activity, for the socializing as much for the crafts. She never missed a meeting. But on this particular Thursday, she came home early. Audrey Case had gone into labor prematurely, and since she was the host that week, the meeting broke up. Pastor Grant pulled up in front of our house to drop her off at the same time I was lifting the flag on the mailbox. She waited until he was gone before asking me who I was writing. I couldn't lie. Not to her. I opened

the box, took out the letter, and handed it over, watching her the entire time.

She turned it over in her hands to read the address. For a long time, she just stared at it. Her head was bowed, so I couldn't see her face. I was already six inches taller than her by that point. But I didn't need to. I felt the sadness come from her like a cloud. I'd lived with it for too long not to recognize it.

When she finally looked up, she was smiling, but it was one of her better masks. "You have such beautiful handwriting when you put your mind to it," she said. Then, without another word, she put it back in the mailbox, closed the door, and went inside.

"I decided I couldn't get anything from my mom's family that I couldn't get from Gran," I told Davide. Which was mostly true, though the other part of my decision was my inability to hurt her more than I already had. Neither one of us ever mentioned the letter again. But I always wondered if that day marked a change in our relationship, one I could never undo.

The sun crept higher, shortening the shadows thrown by the trees. In the distance, I saw other people walking slowly among the rows, though nobody was stopped in front of one like we were.

"Gran's the only one who ever knew I was gay, too," I said.

"You trusted her enough to tell her. That is good."

"Actually, she figured it all out on her own. It was half the reason I went to Ohio State. She wanted to get me out of town so I could have a chance to meet someone."

"And did you?"

"Yeah, but it didn't last. Do college romances ever last?"

Davide ignored my attempt at lightening the mood. I don't know when, but he'd taken to rubbing tiny circles in the small of my back, kneading muscles I hadn't realized were so tense. "I

would have liked to know your grandmother, I think," he said.

The slight wistfulness of his voice tugged me from my melancholy. "You say that like you don't have one."

"No, I do, but..." He sighed. "They are very Catholic. They do not approve of my choices."

I hated hearing homosexuality referred to as a choice, but I understood what he meant. According to them, according to a lot of people, it was one. "You're a stronger man than I am. I've never been able to come clean. I'd probably lose my job if I did."

"My job is the only reason I am still in Italy. The Embassy is my family now. And the friends I make."

On that last, his smile returned, and his hand slid all the way around to wrap around my waist. I liked the way it molded me into his side—maybe too much—but I didn't fight it, and somehow found the wherewithal not to lean into him even more than I was.

The backpack weighted my arm down, reminding me of my purpose. Summoning what little courage I had, I broke free from Davide's casual embrace and dropped to my knees, the grass thick enough to cushion my position. I found what I wanted in the outside pocket, a small jam jar I'd painted black to obscure its contents, and withdrew the folded piece of paper from the binder within.

"Gran died in June," I said without turning around. "She hadn't been well for a while. The arthritis crippled her hands and made it hard for her to get around without a wheelchair, but she was okay with that. She found ways to work around it, because that's just what she did. But she had problems fighting off a lot of common stuff. She caught colds a lot, and complained about food upsetting her stomach."

I unscrewed the lid. The air was completely motionless, no

breeze to disrupt what I needed to get done.

"About a week before the end of school, her heart just gave out. I was getting ready to go to work, and she hadn't made a sound all morning, which was unlike her, even at the end. She loved waking up with the sun. That's the way she described it. So I knocked on her door to see if everything was okay, and when she didn't answer, I went in. The doctors say she must've gone in her sleep." The words choked in my throat. It wasn't a balm, no matter how many times they tried to assure him.

The grass rustled at my side. Davide's leg pressed to mine where he joined me. "You come here to remember her?"

"Sort of." I tipped the jar. A slow stream of pale ash poured onto the grass at the base of my grandfather's cross. "I wanted her to be with him. After all those years, I thought...she deserved this. Nobody had more faith than Gran. Nobody could love as hard and long as she did. It's not much, but I thought that if I brought her here, they might be able to finally have some kind of peace."

Pastor Grant hadn't been happy when he found out I was taking some of Gran's ashes. "Let her rest," he'd argued at me.

"I am," I'd said.

In spite of the lack of wind, some of the ashes floated up and wafted off. Most of them stayed, however, binding to the exposed earth and the white stake embedded in the ground.

That was just like Gran.

My hands were shaking when I unfolded the poem. I'd debated long and hard about it. When Gran's friends pressed me into reading something for the small funeral, I'd almost chosen this. In the end, I'd opted for something more traditional from Gran's Bible, but this was better anyway. It was one of the poems my grandfather had written her before he'd been shipped off to Europe

and his ultimate death. For years, it had hung in a cherry wood frame next to the window over the kitchen sink. I had always thought it was a weird place for a love poem, but Gran explained that she spent a lot of time standing at the sink doing dishes. Hanging it there guaranteed getting to read it at least three times a day.

I never asked about it again. I hadn't even taken it down from its hook until the day before I left for Rome.

My voice cracked on the first line, but after clearing my throat, I read the rest of the poem without interruption. Davide's hand returned to my back, comforting in its silent solace. When I was done, my eyes were damp, but the fingers that dug the lighter out of the backpack were rock solid. I flicked a flame into existence and held it to the corner of the paper. It caught almost instantly, burning away within seconds. I held it as long as I could by the opposite corner, then dropped it to the grass and tamped it out before it spread.

"Bye, Gran," I whispered.

Somewhere, wherever she was, I'll bet anything she was smiling.

### **CHAPTER 3**

As soon as I got back to the hotel, I crashed. I barely got my shoes off before falling asleep on top of the blankets. Once I'd laid out Gran's ashes, I couldn't bring myself to leave. All that time I'd hemmed and hawed about getting there, and then, once the deed was done, I didn't want to go. Davide's quiet reminder that he had to get back to the city for work had eventually done the trick. We walked back to his car in silence, I took him into a full double-armed embrace without requesting permission, and I breathed him in, stealing his strength, thanking him as I knew I had to for his company. Then, I let him go, wishing I didn't have to.

Irrational, I know. I barely knew him. But it felt like I did, and for a few hours, I could drop the pretenses and expose everything I was at the core, without fear of recrimination. For that, I would

eternally be grateful.

My nap was long and deep, with no dreams to plague me. When I woke, the sun sliced through my window in orange and red, sunset approaching to herald the end of another day. I stood and stretched, smiling at how good it felt to crack my back. I needed a shower to wash away the day. I could face the night, then, refreshed and oddly strong.

It felt a little weird to be as...well, buoyant as I was. I'd dreaded this day for so long, it was hard to remember a day when I hadn't. Because it was a choice I'd made, not a request I'd been asked to fulfill, I know I could have cancelled the arrangement at any time. I also knew that was never going to happen, because it would have felt like failing Gran, even if she'd never asked me to do this for her in the first place. She belonged here.

My mood lasted only until I stepped out of the shower. That was when I remembered I still had the whole rest of my vacation ahead of me, time I would spend on my own. After that would be more alone time, back home, returning to the life I had to hide behind for fear of being found out. One battle was fought and won, but the rest remained for me to conquer.

I debated my options as I dressed. I hadn't done too bad last night when I'd gone to Coming Out. I could go back and take my chances again at finding company. I might even make less of a fool of myself this time with the weight of the memorial lifted from my shoulders.

But thinking of Coming Out made me think of Davide. The images that filled my head weren't the ones from the club, though I doubted I would ever forget the taste of his mouth on mine. No, I remembered him in the sunlight, the slight pressure of his hand on my back, the lyrical cadences of his voice as we talked more about

our families. I had learned he had three siblings he hadn't seen since he'd come out, and nieces and nephews he'd never seen at all. He'd told me about moving to Rome, and his first boyfriend, while I talked about how excited I'd been the first time I'd been able to kiss a guy without worrying Pastor Grant was going to catch me and renounce me for a sinner.

I didn't want to spend the night with a stranger. I wanted Davide.

I tried the Embassy first, but it was after hours, and the recording wasn't able to connect me to a low-level translator who may or may not have his own phone line. It wasn't enough to discourage me from my search, though. I got online and checked the white pages, and when that didn't yield a result, Googled his name.

Still nothing.

My stomach felt like it had rocks in it. I hadn't known how badly I'd wanted to see him again until I realized I couldn't. Even the prospect of going out anyway and finding someone else had lost all appeal. Nobody else would understand why I was in the country without me having to go into lengthy explanations that I just wanted to put behind me. Nobody else would have that sweet, musky smell that made my head spin. Nobody else would have that smile.

I sat heavily on the edge of the bed, hard enough to knock off the backpack I'd dropped on it when I'd returned earlier. When I bent to pick it up, I noticed a small business card sticking out of the side pocket, the one with the jelly jar in it. I hadn't put anything else in that pocket, or so I'd thought. I pulled it out, and relief rushed through me.

Davide Tosatto. Translations.

He must have slipped it in when we were hugging next to his car. That was the only time I could think of he had access when I wasn't paying attention. The when and where didn't matter, though, because now I had his phone number. More than that, I had his implicit consent to call and ask him out.

He answered on the third ring. I swear I could hear him smiling when I said hello.

"You found it."

I turned the card over in my hand. "I did. You're sneaky."

Davide laughed. "Like a fox."

"Is the fox busy tonight?"

"That depends."

"On?"

"What your plans are."

"I'd like to take the fox out to dinner."

"Then I am free, and I accept."

Heat billowed beneath my skin. "I'd like it to be someplace nice. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Where are you staying?" When I told him the name of my hotel, he hummed in approval. "Very nice. I know just the place. When would you like to meet?"

"I'm ready whenever you are."

"Meet me downstairs in...half an hour? We can walk there. It is a lovely night."

"Or..." I took a deep breath. I wanted this, but I had to be the one to do it this time. "You could come up to my room first. We could have some wine, maybe relax a bit before we go out to eat."

"Ah..." His response was a long, satisfied sigh that left me tingling in the best, forbidden parts of my body. "I like this plan better. Yes. We'll do that."

I gave him my room number and, after a few more minutes of flirting, hung up. I was already hard for him. Just the sound of his voice was enough to do it, though the memory of how good he'd felt pressed against me didn't hurt, either.

I would have expected that thirty minutes to drag, but he was knocking at my door before the wine I requested from room service had even arrived. He hadn't changed his clothes, though the sunglasses were gone. Before he took a single step into my room, I caught his hip, pushed him firmly into the wall, and sealed my mouth to his.

Two could play his little game. And I planned on playing it very, very well.

His surprise lasted only for a moment. He opened to my questing tongue, allowing me to take every ounce of pleasure I could from that first contact. His hands rested on my waist, and while they didn't do anything but sit there, their weight was such a potent reminder of his proximity that morning that I moaned.

This was how I wanted to spend the rest of my time in Italy. Wrapped around this man. I didn't want to associate my visit with sadness and loss. When I thought of Rome, I wanted to remember it with a smile, with a hardening of my cock and a flush of fire through my veins. That's the way Gran would have wanted it.

He was breathless when I let him go, his mouth swollen, his eyes nearly black. "I did not think I would be your meal for the night," he teased.

I nipped at his lower lip. "You underestimate your appeal."

Taking his hand, I pulled him inside the rest of the way. The accommodations weren't fancy, but with him there, it could have been one of Raphael's rooms at the Vatican. He didn't even seem to notice, though, his gaze drinking me in as if he hadn't seen me

in weeks.

"I am glad you called." He stopped us at the end of the bed, bending my arm behind my back to mold us together again. "I was afraid you would have had your fill of me."

The idea of ever being tired of Davide was laughable. "Never happen."

"Today was...difficult."

"That's not your fault." I ran the tip of my tongue along his jaw, enjoying the way his stubble prickled my taste buds. "You made it better. A lot better."

"Good." He tilted his head to allow me better access. "That was my wish."

The scent was back, clinging to his skin and driving me crazy. I had meant to take it slow—well, after that initial kiss at least—but the more I touched, the more I wanted. His collar prevented me from getting to his shoulder, but I could still reach his neck, strong and sinuous and oh-so-delicious. My teeth sank into the muscle, and his body jerked hard against me.

He muttered something in Italian. Without letting go of the arm behind my back, he lifted his free hand to cup the back of my head, keeping me there to ravish freely. I had already felt his erection, but the jolt I'd created had driven our lower halves closer together, grinding cock to cock in a simulation of our dance from last night. I wanted him inside, sooner rather than later. I could only hope that his desires ran the same course.

The back of my knees bumped against the bed, knocking us off balance. As we fell, Davide let go of the hand at my back, using his to catch us from hurting ourselves unnecessarily. I didn't stop tasting his neck, though, licking and biting every salty, roughened inch I could reach. The future had never tasted so good.

When Davide rolled us to the side, I was forced to divert my focus, and returned to his succulent mouth. My only regret at this point was not stopping to get clothes off. His had too many buttons. Mine required Davide to let me go. Neither option filled me with glee. I wasn't even sure if my fingers would work very well right then. They trembled where I threaded them through Davide's hair. I hoped he didn't realize how on edge I really was.

He broke away first. "Last night..." He panted. "Did you dream of me?"

I had to swallow a couple of times before I could speak. "Yeah."

"How?"

"In me." Multiple times.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "That is what I dreamed, too."

"Is that what you want now?"

I held my breath, waiting for his answer. I ached for it to be a yes.

He smoothed a hand down the middle of my chest, his gaze following the path he took straight to my waist. His fingertips slipped beneath my shirt, grazing along my skin in slow, methodical strokes. My stomach twitched with each one. I wanted to shout at him to get on with it, but this carefulness had been part of why I'd reacted so strongly to him last night, and why I wanted him back after his companionship in Nettuno. I had to wait until he was ready, because I knew that in the end, it would be worth it.

"I wish to see your face." He lifted his questioning gaze to mine, waiting for some kind of answer.

My desire-dazed brain took a few seconds to realize what he was asking. On my back. That's how he wanted me. "Of course." I sat up and began to work at my clothes. "Whatever you want."

He caught my wrist and stopped me from pulling my shirt off. "I also want this."

We stayed locked in that position long enough for me to know not to move. When he released me, his hand slid up my arm, and in spite of the fact I couldn't feel him skin to skin, goose bumps erupted along the way. He had to sit up when he reached my shoulder, and in that position, he pulled at the back of my pullover, tugging it up and over my head so my torso was now exposed.

His gaze dropped to my chest. I usually get self-conscious the first time I'm with a guy. I'm not a gym rat. I don't obsess about my body. I've always been on the lean side, which means I'm trim but not necessarily sculpted. But the way Davide looked at me...it didn't matter. I knew straight off he liked what he saw. If I'd doubted my decision about him at all, it would have vanished right then.

He unbuttoned his shirt slowly, taking his time with the elegant cuffs, but it joined mine on the floor in a careless heap. Our pants came next, first mine, then his, and he pressed me back onto the bed, aligning our dripping cocks, captivating me with another kiss.

I think I stumbled onto the one man in the world who enjoyed kissing more than I do. My lips were beard-chapped, my head spinning, when he eventually lifted his head.

I saw the question in his eyes before he spoke the words. "In the nightstand drawer." I'd put them there in hopes this would happen. Someone bolder than I would have put them on top, but I had learned one lesson very well before I made this trip. Never take anything for granted.

The time it took for him to lube me up was enough for me to regain some semblance of self-control. I touched him the entire time, unable to stop. He was even more beautiful than I'd

imagined, with the most endearing quirks the more I explored. Like a spattering of freckles below his collarbone that looked like the Big Dipper. And the single gray hair in the trail that led straight to his groin. And the noticeable curve in his thick cock, pronounced enough for me to clench around his probing fingers when I realized it was angled perfectly to hit my prostate.

Coming together elicited sighs from both of us.

Davide dropped his brow to rest on mine, collecting the beads of sweat that had formed on my upper lip with the tip of his tongue. "I cannot believe it was only yesterday we met," he murmured.

"I know." The distance he had come with me in the past twenty-four hours boggled me, even now.

"Perhaps it does not have to end. Perhaps..." His mouth moved across mine, its tenderness a sharp contrast to the burn spreading through the lower half of my body. "...we may find a way to make it last."

My heart skittered out of control. The most I'd hoped for was tonight. Here he was, offering tomorrow, too. "Perhaps."

I felt him smile. His next kiss was deeper, distracting me from the moment when he began to move.

I wrapped my arms around his back and held on, with everything I had.

#### VIVIEN DEAN

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multipublished author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

For more information about Vivien and her books, visit her website at

http://www.viviendean.com

\* \* \*

#### Don't miss *Aries: Riddle Me Wicked* by Vivien Dean, available at Amber Allure.com!

On his first day on a dig in California, gunshots awaken Ian Tunbridge, an assistant curator of classical antiquities at the British Museum. The only way to save his life is to run for it, but luck is not on his side. At least, not until he meets Lucas Arpini, the brash American photographer who seems to have some sort of clue what's going on. Together, they're supposed to be the tools in

finding an artifact nobody believes is real—nobody, that is, except Lucas and the man who has kidnapped both of them.

Ian doesn't know what to believe. His colleagues are dead, he's injured, and he has no choice but to put his faith in a gorgeous stranger. Their escape should lead them straight to the police, but when Lucas shows him pieces of the puzzle they were meant to solve, Ian is too intrigued to walk away. He wants to solve the riddle as badly as Lucas does.

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