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...Matteo laughed. "So now you must tell me about yourself, Gavin McGrath." When I opened my mouth to protest again, he shook his head, his young, soft eyes a little grave. "While you paint, of course."

It was nonsense. Didn't I say so? All of it. It couldn't be happening and it shouldn't be tolerated. But I got up from my chair and picked up the palette. Matteo nodded at me, encouragingly. I stood at the easel and concentrated on the top section of the canvas. The red paint had bubbled there; the light in the studio caught the top of each bump, reflecting and refracting, blending the dips and shadows. I could see the opportunity to paint the emergence of a life, bursting into existence, raw and innocent and clean. My vision was much clearer than usual and the pain in my chest had eased. For one brief, shocked moment, I thought I caught the scent of the orange, hanging in the air of the studio, tart and sweet. And as I painted, I started to tell Matteo about myself.

Several hours later, he stopped murmuring replies to me. I no longer heard the creak of the floorboards behind me as he shifted to get comfortable. Was he asleep? I wiped a bead of sweat from my chin, but for some reason I was wary of turning around to look.

"Matteo?"

There was a slight whisper—it might have been a draft under the door out of the studio. I tried for a careless, cynical tone.

"You never said who your artist friend is."

He sighed, then. "Concentrate on your work, Gavin. It's not important. And maybe you won't have heard of him? He uses the name of his town, where he lived and his parents died. It was before he came to Rome. He goes by the name of Caravaggio."

And when I whirled around, Matteo had gone. I never heard the door either open or close behind him...

ALSO BY CLARE LONDON

A Good Neighbor

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BY

CLARE LONDON

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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For Chrissy, Jordan, and Karen, who helped me so much

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The divorce papers from Ailsa cited my obsessive, erratic behavior, and my selfish inability to maintain an adult relationship. Oh, and almost as an aside, my preference for young men in bed. She called the whole marriage a sham—an abuse of her as a woman and a period of her life she deeply regretted.

Whether I agreed with her assessment or not, I didn't bother responding in my defense, much to my attorney's frustration. I think I set fire to the papers. Maybe I used them as paint rags. It would have been fitting, because the art studio was my domain where Ailsa wasn't welcome. I never wanted her there—she never relished visiting. And yet, ironically, she was indirectly responsible for my most inspirational work. Madness, serendipity, or fate? I never knew. I imagined the future, when it was hanging on a

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prestigious gallery wall and people came to admire it from around the world. Then I could tell the whole story in public.

But I wasn't going to see that happen, was I?

My ex-wife and I put each other through mental torture during the fifteen years we were legally, unpleasantly together. She never understood art, let alone mine. It was always the third person in our marriage, and that was discounting the real bodies that both of us consoled ourselves with. When we met, her only interest had been in associating with a painter who was, then, fashionable. Apparently, *I* was only after her money to promote my career. She ignored the fact I had inherited my family's home and was successful enough to finance the extension for my studio. It had been my money that supported her extravagant lifestyle for all those years. She protested—presumably with the cute pout that had momentarily distracted me when I was naïve and three-quarters drunk, just long enough to propose—that I misled her with charm which, after marriage, I maintained about as frequently as I got it up for her.

That day, she came to the studio unannounced. I don't think I even knew if she was in the house. I'd not been back there for a few days, obsessed by my preparatory work on the study of a young nude. My model was an art student, or maybe something in media. I can't remember exactly what. His gratitude for being immortalized in one of my paintings allowed me to seduce him at night on the couch at the back of the spacious room. He was also useful for periodically calling in some food for us both.

Ailsa burst in, angry as always, tearful as usual. "I'm leaving, for good this time. Gavin, are you listening?" I wondered how I was meant to avoid it. "I've packed up and the car is coming to fetch me any minute. I'm not putting up with this shit any longer."

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I glanced over at my young model, which was probably a mistake. He was posing against the wall, trying to give me attitude when all that came across was fidgeting boredom. At Ailsa's entrance, he snatched up a rather grubby cloth from the chair beside him and clutched it over his naked groin. Not much point really, it wasn't as if she hadn't seen a similar scene in here many times before.

Her voice tightened. She wasn't interested in his false modesty. "That's all you can think about, Gavin, the men and the sex. Your whole life has become a sordid mess. You're getting more introverted and antisocial by the day. You're arrogant and rude to visitors, and everyone's disgusted by your immature promiscuity."

"Everyone, eh?" I raised an eyebrow, hoping to amuse my model at least.

"When did you last attend a showing? Give an interview?" She was relentless. "There's a world outside this studio, and you need to cope with that. You're a fool if you think you can ignore it."

"I don't need it. Or the people in it." I should never have allowed her to bait me. "So long as they still buy my work, they're the fools."

There was a flicker of something like triumph in her eyes. "And that's the point, isn't it? I've seen the letters from your agent. I've taken the calls you can't be bothered to answer. They're *not* buying. Your talent promised so much—but never delivered." She grimaced. "I'm obviously not the only one finding that out. No one wants your hackneyed work anymore. Naked flesh that's not sensual; half-hearted, careless work."

And that stung. "You seem to think your sexual bitterness qualifies you as critic, Ailsa. I have plenty of commissions..."

She laughed. "And they're all propped up against the walls of

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this filthy little fuck-retreat of yours. No one's paying for them, Gavin. Things have moved on, out there. Whereas you're still creating the same paint-by-numbers nudes you did in art college." I heard a car's horn from the street outside. "My attorney will be in touch. I'll send for anything I've left behind." Her eyes met mine. "That won't include you."

I was still phrasing a smart comeback comment when she slammed the door behind her, so hard the walls rattled and the shelves vibrated with it. My easel skittered on its shaky feet; the model took a stumbling step backward, both bemused and nervous. And the large pot of paint on the shelf above his head tilted and fell.

We just watched, shocked and open-mouthed in that stupid cartoon way, though neither of us could have moved fast enough to catch it. The lid slid to one side, the pot itself to the other. Paint spilled from it, great looping puddles, hanging suspended for brief nano-seconds, then dropping like the liquid it was. A spray of rich, scarlet red paint, it fell in drops, in dribbles, in downright streams. Thick, glistening, viscous. The boy jerked back as some of it sprayed on his pale, bare torso. It plopped into the water jugs on my table like strange, alien rain. And the bulk of it splattered gleefully and devastatingly all over my current canvas.

* * *

I sent the kid home when I tired of his whining. He'd been a willing lover but hardly imaginative. My portrait of him would never be finished now, the outline vanished beneath the spilled paint. Dammit, maybe Ailsa was right—it wasn't that good to start with. He had good muscle structure but my drawing of his torso

had been lackluster. I seemed to have to let things go.

I'd left college almost twenty years ago, full of my tutors' praise and an invincible sense of my own potential greatness. Exceptionally good-looking and charismatic—I had that on the authority of many fans. The following years of hot media attention had turned my head and stuffed my bank account. My nudes were bold, innovative and outrageously collectible, so everyone said. I'd always been fascinated by the human body, captivated by its live sensuality as it twisted and teased, my artist's gaze coveting the performance of sinew and tendon. I'd blend the edges of acrid-smelling paint with my fingers, using its texture to shade the rise and fall of naked limbs and to accentuate the dark, budding promise of genitalia. My whole life had been devoted to painting the body, to revering it.

Somewhere along the way, I'd apparently learned to pillage and abuse it, too. That day, I stood alone in the silence of my studio, the spatters of red paint all over the bare floor like bizarrely colorful vomit, and I knew those days of reverence had long gone. I looked at the piles of half-finished, uninspired paintings stacked against the walls and I tried to remember the last painting I'd actually sold: the last work I'd truly enjoyed. Dammit, I didn't create in the studio as much as hide there.

Over in the corner of the room, a carelessly stacked picture slipped down a couple of inches, the wooden frame creaking. I never even turned around. My current canvas lay askew on the easel, mocking me. It was nothing now but a spoiled swirl of red paint, still shining, still wet. There were textures and shadow from where it'd fallen unevenly, a ripple effect from the center, mimicking the rings in the bucket outside the studio where I emptied my dirty water jars. But this display was slowly drying

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and would be permanent.

I felt strangely bereft. I stared at it until the light dimmed outside the studio and evening shadows began to creep over the easel. I stayed in the studio all that night, drowsing on the couch. Alone. I heard the phone ring back in the house, just once, then it fell silent. Ailsa didn't return; the gamin young model didn't creep back with some plaintive plea to be noticed again. Just me and the canvas. Red, even in the darkness of midnight, a vast, consuming, shining mess. Raw, resentful. *Madness, serendipity, or fate?* Did I fucking care? I didn't know how I felt about my work anymore, whether it excited or bored me.

And obviously that was seeping through to the buyers, too.

* * *

He first appeared the next day: the strange young man.

It was early morning and I'd rearranged the red canvas on my easel, examining it from a different angle. I was mixing new paints, too, with unusual concentration. When I glanced at the palette I was mildly surprised to find that they were all based on red. I'd blocked color on some of the canvas and sketched sweeps of complementary crimsons across its width. Just playing, of course. I'd probably still have to dump the fucking thing in the end. But an idea had been teasing at the edges of my mind involving a progression of scenes, based solely on feelings, on emotional threads and twists. Enthusiasm through to exhaustion; naivety through to numbness. Birth to death...I imagined that shades of red would work well for it. For the first time in ages, my pulse quickened with a flame of artistic excitement.

He cleared his throat behind me and I nearly dropped the whole

damned thing. I whirled around. “Who the fuck are you? How did you get in?”

He tilted his head, staring at me. That was the first thing I registered—the bright, wide, brown eyes under thick, arched brows. Young eyes, but full of something much older. Not startled or scared, merely curious. He wasn’t holding a parcel of art supplies or any canvases; he didn’t deliver me any message. I glanced at the board on the wall but there was no model scheduled for today.

I suppose my next look at him was in appraisal, in case he was looking for work. He was handsome, with a fine, straight nose and full lips. Average height and broad across the shoulders: stocky rather than the coltish look I preferred. His hair was uncombed, ill-cut, a mess of chocolate-brown curls. The clothes were slightly odd, of generic style, devoid of designer logos. He wore pants of some coarse fabric and a loose shirt, buttoned from midway down his torso. A smooth, elegant throat, dusky skin, a chest almost hairless from what I could see. My eyes lingered over the creased fabric between his thighs. No jeans. It was unusual enough for me to notice.

The bare feet were even more astonishing.

“Did Macy let you in?” Damned woman was meant to look after the house and occasionally bully me into eating, not let strangers wander through at any time. Without Ailsa to bully *her*, it looked like things were running wild already.

“I’m hungry,” he said. It wasn’t a moan or a plea, just a statement. His voice had a slight, lilting accent but was perfectly clear.

“So go home and eat.” I probably sounded either harsh or stupid. But if the kid couldn’t even answer a simple question...

He shrugged and smiled. His toes wriggled on my wooden floor. "It's not that easy. I do not have the funds."

I frowned. Did he think I was born yesterday? "Get lost. I'm not interested in whatever scam you're trying here. I don't know you, you haven't done any work for me. I don't owe you a thing."

He looked confused and his gaze darted around the room. His eyes widened even farther. "Where is this?"

"For God's sake." I was angry and disturbed. "The door's behind you, use it. I'm working and if you knew anything about artists, you'd know we hate being distracted."

His gaze returned to me and he smiled as if I'd reassured, not dismissed him. "But I do know about artists. Of course I do. That's why I'm here, obviously." He noticed the canvas behind me. "Is that what you're working on?"

It felt increasingly as if I'd walked into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. "What? This is a mistake. It's..."

"It's wild." He shook his head slowly, still smiling, and he walked toward me. His steps were confident, but his movements surprisingly graceful. I tensed but he didn't look threatening. I can look after myself, you understand, but I wasn't...well, it was only bronchitis, that was all, but it'd weakened me this winter. I didn't relish getting into some kind of a struggle with a burglar. *Burglar?* I wondered briefly what the hell I had worth stealing. Likely Ailsa would have taken it with her already.

"There are no people in it. No scene. Is it just this color?" He lifted a hand and I nearly cried out. But he didn't touch the painting, just traced in the air the shape of the central swirl. His fingers were thin and long, but the nails were bitten short and dirty underneath. It might have been paint, or something dirtier. "It's very beautiful."

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“Beautiful?” Why the hell did I sound so astonished?

He laughed softly, still looking at the canvas. “You’re lucky if you can paint to life like this and still get commissions. My artist friend draws people in his work. Portraits. Scenes. He has to do them, to earn money. To earn recognition.”

Goose bumps raised the hairs on my arms. “You *are* a model. So who’s this artist friend of yours?”

He shrugged. His hands dropped to his waist, teasing at the hem of his shirt, his hip jutting slightly to one side. Despite having the look of an artisan, he was the perfect poster boy for healthy, sensual youth. “I modeled for him, yes, but that’s over now. He’s found other favorites, and beside...” He spun around suddenly, his smile much brighter, his eyes focused sharply on me. “But I’m not sure you need me. How will you put me in *this* painting?” He didn’t seem to expect an answer, but laughed again and glanced around the room. “There are plenty more though, aren’t there? You’ve got very behind in your work. You’re weary, of course. Thank God I’m here now to help.”

Help? I stood very still, trying to calm my heart’s fast beat. “If you’re some kind of rent boy you can just fuck off. I’m not that desperate for inspiration.” *Was I?* I was angry, though I knew I should control it. I could ill afford the tight pain it caused in my chest. “I don’t know who the fuck told you to come here, what kind of sick joke this is...”

He raised a hand to stop me, looking stricken. “I didn’t mean to upset you! Look at your face, so pale. Are you ill? Shall I fetch you water?” He darted over to the table in the corner where I kept a jug of water and glasses. He poured one out for me while I stared at him. His tongue poked out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on his job, his lips a similar dark pink. He was very

attractive indeed, but he didn't look anything like the rent boys I'd known. And dammit, there'd been a few, well beyond the number that Ailsa knew about. This young man seemed to be missing the cynical awareness of his unique selling point—the knowledge that men sought and bought his body, not his personality. His grace was instinctive, not practiced. He showed none of the tiredness, the draining boredom. Or maybe that was just with me as a client.

I was the one feeling tired now, and I let myself down heavily into the chair on the other side of the easel. My palette clattered onto the small table beside it. The young man was watching me closely. He put the glass down within reach of my hand, then stepped back. His gaze flickered between me and the painting, and when he swallowed, a small drop of sweat at the base of his throat shivered. I had to drag my gaze away from it. “Not what you're used to, huh?”

He flushed very slightly. I only noticed because I'd been admiring the taut skin of his neck. “There are different kinds of art, I know that. My artist friend knows it, too. But sometimes what he wants to paint and what he can sell are so different...” He gave a soft sigh. His words were simple, his conversation normal, yet there was a disorientation to his speech that intrigued me. “He doesn't get peace from it. There is always trouble in his life, always conflict.”

“Trouble?”

He smiled at me. “You know what trouble there is, as a painter. He has plenty as a man, too.”

I nodded, encouraged by the dialogue although I couldn't have explained why. “You can't paint what isn't inside to start with. You can't create to order—you can't ignore the cries from inside your gut, demanding to be heard on canvas...” I fell silent. What

the hell was I saying? Way too much information to a stranger like this kid.

“What’s your name?” he said, quietly.

“Gavin. Gavin McGrath.” I felt suddenly, stupidly shy, like I was on a blind date. “Perhaps you won’t have heard of me...”

“No, I haven’t,” he agreed, quite calmly. My self-esteem hadn’t been slapped down quite so effectively for a long time. “It’s a strange name.”

What was I meant to say to that?

He smiled at me and I suspected he was amused at my expression. “But I’d like to hear about you now.” He glanced back at the table where the water jug was. I had a large bowl of fruit there. “My name is Matteo.”

Now I could place the slight accent he had. “You’re Italian?”

He frowned slightly, tiny lines on his skin bunching above his nose. He looked like he spent a lot of time outside, a healthy complexion where I knew mine was pale. “This room is warm, that’s good. I think you paint boldly, swiftly. I can tell that from your pictures. Your energy will return soon, though you shouldn’t delay any longer.”

“My energy?”

He smiled but distractedly, as if I should know what he was talking about and there were more important things on his mind. “Your appetite for it, Gavin McGrath...for your art.” He slipped a hand inside his shirt and scratched absentmindedly at his shoulder. “But I can’t pose if I’m hungry. It takes much energy, standing in one position for hours.”

I didn’t know where to start, especially as “fuck off” hadn’t made much impression on him. “I don’t want you to pose. Didn’t you understand? I never asked for you.” I looked around the room.

Some of the pictures stacked against the wall were face out. Many of them featured male figures, of course, in various positions. Obviously he...*Matteo*...was appraising me in return. *Arrogant little shit!* I bristled. "You've made your point. Take what fruit you want."

He nodded, unfazed. He selected a few apples, placing them carefully on the table as if lining them up for later, then picked up a pear and bit immediately and deeply into it. When the juice dribbled down his chin, he laughed, grunted and wiped it off with one of those long, slim fingers. I'm sure I didn't make any sound, but he looked back over his shoulder and caught my gaze. He lowered his eyelids and dropped his hand. His lips were still making the shape of his smile. They were moist and I knew they'd be sticky from the fruit.

It was such a combination of art, both careless and studied, that I laughed aloud.

Again he wasn't fazed. He actually looked pleased. "You should laugh more. It becomes you."

I stopped, startled. The familiar clench in my chest caught me unawares and I started coughing. He took a step toward me, his brow furrowing again, but I waved him back. "I'm fine. Mind your own goddamned business. I'm...look, just eat what you want, then go."

He chewed slowly, his eyes still on me. When he picked up an orange, his eyes lit up. "I like these best." His fingers were nimble and firm, peeling back the skin before I had time to offer him a knife. What the hell was I thinking, offering this trespasser my cutlery now? The pieces of peel dropped back into the bowl and he pierced the pith with his stubby fingernail, releasing a burst of dark, glittering juice. He sighed happily and his nose wrinkled

again. "It's sharp, this one. Can't you smell that in it?"

I felt cold, though the room was—like he said—warm enough. "I...it doesn't matter to me. I don't...I can't smell things as well as I used to."

Matteo stared at me for a moment. Something flickered in his eyes that I hoped to God wasn't pity. He split the peeled orange open and lifted half to his mouth. "You're a good painter, Gavin McGrath."

"Yeah. Right." I felt even wearier. Arguing with this man was like pissing into the wind. "You should tell my agent. That's if he answers the phone to your calls."

Matteo smiled in sympathy with my tone, but I had the impression he didn't know what I was talking about. "The red painting will be magnificent. I think it'll be your masterpiece. They will remember your name because of it."

I shook my head. "Dammit, I told you, all I'm trying to do is salvage the canvas, do you know how much they cost?"

Matteo yawned slowly, not self-conscious at all. Then, quite calmly, he dropped to the floor and settled himself cross-legged beside my easel. "You said it yourself. You can't ignore the cries from inside your gut. That painting cries to *me*."

Dear God. "And what does it cry to you, Matteo?" The sarcasm wasn't as sharp as I'd intended. "You said I painted it *from life*, but that's nonsense."

He sucked thoughtfully on the orange, his nose crinkling every time his teeth bit into it. It was an innately charming, affectionate gesture. "It cries life to me. Hurt. Love. Warmth. Death."

"Clichés," I snapped. I was surprisingly disappointed in him. He was nothing but a high school critic, a pretentious mimic. No better than Ailsa and some of the other fawning idiots who came

around, ostensibly to learn from me. *A trespasser.*

He shrugged again and reached for the other half of the orange. He'd sucked the first half quite dry and there were flecks of its flesh on his lower lip. He looked up at me from under thick, dark lashes. "It cries passion to me."

My breath stilled in my chest. I'd have been scared by the fierce concentration in his gaze if I didn't know all this couldn't be real. "That's not what I want. Not now."

Matteo laughed as if we both knew I was talking complete crap. Other people had laughed at me in the past, but their laughter was full of scorn and dismissal. Matteo's was...happy. *Fond.* After a moment, I smiled, too.

He snagged another orange and settled his back against the wall. He drew his legs up against his chest, well-developed muscles straining against the material of his pants, one hand resting on his knees. "But for now, you must also finish what you've started. All these paintings..." With the hand holding the orange, he gestured toward the stacked canvases. "You must decide on the good ones and make them better. Then sell them so you have enough money."

I shook my head, astonished at his boldness. "You know nothing about it. They're all crap, there's nothing new there." Or so my agent had said, both to my face and then in correspondence, because he was a coward. I wasn't an idiot, I knew my bad temper had increased over the last few years. I'd scared the shit out of him more than once and also alienated most of the gallery owners in town. Even hardened art journalists thought twice about approaching me nowadays. *What did I have to offer anymore?* I was at the end of the road on so many levels. I'd never have admitted my failures to Ailsa, but here I was, baring my rather

soiled soul to this weird, misguided young man.

Matteo laughed. Such a relaxed, untroubled sound. “But *I’m* here now.” He leaned his head back and planted his bare feet firmly on the floor, wriggling once more to get comfortable. “So now you must tell me about yourself, Gavin McGrath.” When I opened my mouth to protest again, he shook his head, his young, soft eyes a little grave. “While you paint, of course.”

It was nonsense. Didn’t I say so? All of it. It couldn’t be happening and it shouldn’t be tolerated. But I got up from my chair and picked up the palette. Matteo nodded at me, encouragingly. I stood at the easel and concentrated on the top section of the canvas. The red paint had bubbled there; the light in the studio caught the top of each bump, reflecting and refracting, blending the dips and shadows. I could see the opportunity to paint the emergence of a life, bursting into existence, raw and innocent and clean. My vision was much clearer than usual and the pain in my chest had eased. For one brief, shocked moment, I thought I caught the scent of the orange, hanging in the air of the studio, tart and sweet. And as I painted, I started to tell Matteo about myself.

Several hours later, he stopped murmuring replies to me. I no longer heard the creak of the floorboards behind me as he shifted to get comfortable. Was he asleep? I wiped a bead of sweat from my chin, but for some reason I was wary of turning around to look.

“Matteo?”

There was a slight whisper—it might have been a draft under the door out of the studio. I tried for a careless, cynical tone.

“You never said who your artist friend is.”

He sighed, then. “Concentrate on your work, Gavin. It’s not important. And maybe you won’t have heard of him? He uses the name of his town, where he lived and his parents died. It was

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before he came to Rome. He goes by the name of Caravaggio.”

And when I whirled around, Matteo had gone. I never heard the door either open or close behind him.

* * *

Matteo returned many times over the next few months. It was always unannounced. He never said if or when he'd be coming or how long he'd stay. He'd appear in the studio in the same clothes or similar outfits, with the same smile and healthy skin; the same wide, bright eyes. Sometimes his hair was longer than that first time, sometimes shorter. He still told me nothing more about who he was or where he came from—or what he was here for.

What the hell was happening? I found myself waiting for him.

I didn't invite any other visitors. In fact, I canceled a couple of scheduled interviews with local magazines that would have entailed leaving the studio and going into town. Macy reminded me they were hard to get and I needed the exposure, but I had no appetite for it. What I did find new enthusiasm for were the abandoned paintings in the studio. I dragged out a few of them, the ones I remembered being initially eager to work on. There were a couple of nudes, young men on an abstract background, in various poses, arrogant and challenging and amused. There was one of an older man, sitting naked on the edge of a bed, his head in his hands. One of a young man watching his reflection in the mirror, self-conscious yet vain at the same time. I'd forgotten how many of them I'd done and then discarded.

Matteo examined them with me and suggested which ones to work on. He never actually said that, of course—he deferred to me as the artist—but his eyes lit up at the ones he liked and his breath

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caught in his throat. The first few times, I turned to him with an ill-tempered protest. Who the hell did he think he was, telling me what to do? A young man who hadn't been invited in the first place, who didn't get the fuck out when I told him to, who was getting in my way...

But he wasn't, of course. And as he grinned at me, any protest died away. He smiled a lot, actually, and ate my fruit and biscuits, and sometimes drew small animals and birds in my sketchpad to amuse himself while I painted. He had talent, though it was immature. I labored away at the easel with my newfound zeal, and he hummed tunes I'd never heard, laughed at my cursing and fetched me water when I needed it, to ease my throat. He was just...there.

He posed for me, as well. I didn't call on anyone else—not the ingratiating students who still occasionally came to the house, not the casual tradesmen I used to pick up at the pub or club. Matteo seemed to be enough. Sometimes he just twisted into position and held it for a while so I could refresh the lines of the bodies I'd sketched. Then I'd paint quickly and confidently, blocking in the flesh, returning to shade in the skin tones later on. I didn't admit it even to myself, but I suppose I was nervous, not knowing whether Matteo would stay or go or...never return again. If I asked him about his daily schedule—did he *have* one?—he laughed and avoided the questions. I felt stupid when he was there—angry, confused, excited.

Delighted.

One day he stripped for me, to allow me to examine the pattern of his spine down to his ass. I couldn't get the dip down to the buttocks right in my mind, for one of my nudes. He stepped out of his clothes without any inhibition, exposing a strong young body,

just as I'd anticipated. His skin was darker than mine, the arms muscled, the calves rounded. I sketched his back, the skin taut across the bones, the bare crease of flesh at his waist when he bent to the side. His buttocks were small and tight, the shadow between them hinting a dusky promise. When I'd finished, he turned back to face me. His chest was mostly smooth, just a few hairs trailing down between penny-brown nipples, a light scattering of them on his taut belly. There was a scar above his hip, a few inches long. The skin was only slightly paler than on the rest of his body, but it had a glossy look, declaring it newly healed. My gaze drifted down to his groin. His cock nestled gently against his balls, framed by dark curly hairs, matching the hair on his head and body. Reaching for his shirt, he caught me staring at him, but he just stood there, smiling. His dick twitched gently and he put a hand to his belly, as if to calm himself inside.

"You're meant to be painting, Gavin," he said. Mischief lit up his eyes.

The paintings were a different matter, though. It wasn't just a matter of finishing them off. I changed the lines in some—the brushwork in others. They began to excite me again. Matteo didn't seem to say or do much to influence this directly, but once he leaned over my shoulder when I was working on the old man and said, "A blanket, Gavin. He needs a blanket for contrast. And it should be red." I painted a blanket across the man's knees, not to hide his nakedness that was still on view, but to lift the painting with color. Dammit, I'd never painted to someone else's recommendation; my arrogance refused to let me.

But it looked good. Somehow, the vivid red against the naked flesh added to the overall depth of the picture, rather than distracting from the character. The model's face appeared to flush

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with its reflection, suggesting emotion that hadn't been there before. It warmed the painted limbs; the veins seemed to shine under the thin skin. There was life in the old man.

The splash of color found its way into all of them, then. The youth at the mirror dragged a worn hand towel carelessly behind him; the other youths bore scraps of clothing, or cheap pendants around their throats, or colored streaks in their spiky, gelled hair. All red. Sometimes when I was finishing a painting, Matteo would come and stand behind me. He'd put his hand on my shoulder and sigh happily.

Each day, after I'd worked on the other paintings for long enough, I'd return to the red canvas. It didn't have a name. I wasn't even sure I had a plan for it. But it fascinated me. It was an unfamiliar, more abstract style than I was used to and I struggled with its composition. I scorned it, I railed against it, I resented the demands it made on me, yet I couldn't abandon it. And all the time I painted, Matteo was in the back of my mind. If he was there in the studio, I heard his steady, quiet breathing running alongside my own. If he wasn't there, I waited for him to come, with anticipatory delight and something that was frighteningly akin to thrill.

* * *

"It's looking very fine." His voice was soft today, laughter bubbling beneath it. I'd never heard him come into the studio. That wasn't anything unusual.

My heart started beating very fast, but I didn't turn around immediately. I grunted, pretending protest. "It's crap. I'll do my best with it, but it's not like my other work. I should have thrown it out after the stupid bitch herself..."

“Hush.” Matteo came and stood beside me, looking between me and the canvas. “Don’t upset yourself. Look, you’ve found a flow here, in this quarter. It’s very strong, very bold.” He turned fully to me, smiling...*that smile*. “Like you, Gavin.”

I laughed. “You’re a fool.” Some days I was far from strong and bold. Some days...but I refused to dwell on that. It was my problem, not his. But some days, it was only the promise of Matteo coming around that got me out of my bed and back to the easel. I didn’t dare admit that to anyone, the way things were going...*Don’t go there*.

There was hesitation in his gentle shrug. “Gavin. You look so tired.” His eyes were darker than usual as he searched my face.

Usual? How the hell could I justify that statement? This was a young man I saw at all hours of the day and night, at his own whim, with no explanation of how he arrived or from where. Young and strong, his skin glistening sometimes with sweat, his liquid-dark eyes resting on my work with strange, fierce interest. Resting on *me*.

“I’m fine,” I said, shortly. “For God’s sake, don’t fuss like some nanny, or you might as well get lost.” My heart stuttered with sudden fear. “Sit down if you’re staying.”

He smiled and settled on my chair while I painted. I had reached a more aggressive part of the work and it needed my concentration. The paint was thicker, laid on with a flat blade rather than a brush, and I’d mixed in small flakes of material to give texture and differentiation. The colors were blending into something darker—there was brown mixed in with the scarlet, a hint of crimson. It was fierce, vibrant, vital. The feelings the painting provoked in me reminded me rather disturbingly of my student life. There’d been no lack of energy and enthusiasm then,

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fueled by my own very horny, hedonistic nature. Everything had been exciting, every work had promise, my rather confused and greedy sexuality had never been *my* problem. I'd sold my early work for more than I'd made in a year stacking shelves at the store during college vacations. People were saying I had a glowing future, with careful handling. Well, I should have been more honest with them and myself. I was never going to submit to *that*, was I?

"My agent called again this morning," I said, trying to sound casual. Matteo didn't say anything though I knew he was listening. "I've sold a couple more of the Red series." It had been the stupid man's idea to give the paintings a gauche title, a *hook*. But the gimmick had worked. Not only had I sold several of the refreshed paintings, buyers were actually seeking more in the series. I'd been able to pay off some of my debts. Macy had stopped frowning every time the bills came, though she didn't know I noticed. In fact, many things were clearer to me recently. I noticed how she flinched whenever I came back into the house, expecting my anger and aggression—and the way she relaxed when it didn't come. I didn't feel as twisted up inside; didn't feel the anger as a tangible lump in my throat, flaring frequently as a bright, glossy light behind my eyes. My unexpected tolerance puzzled Macy, I knew that. Hell, there were plenty of things puzzling the shit out of *me*.

Today, there was a box next to the fruit bowl full of pebbles, wood chips, and leaves. I'd been using them for ideas of texture. Matteo picked up a smooth, flat pebble and turned it over in his palm. He flipped it, again and again, slowly, rhythmically. "That's such good news, Gavin. And how are *you*?"

"Me?" I stared at him. "What are you, my mother?"

He laughed aloud, then worry suddenly flickered in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, if I cause your mother offense..."

"Shit." I sighed. "She's been dead for years, Matteo. It's just a saying. You startled me, I don't know why you asked that."

He smiled tentatively. "There's a lot to do, Gavin. You get tired. You are not eating well and losing weight..."

"Fuck that. Maybe I don't like Macy's home cooking." But my cursing was shaky. I swallowed back a cough, tickling at the base of my throat. "I'm fine. It's just the flu, a virus, whatever. It hangs around these days."

He nodded, distractedly. The pebble lay in his palm and he ran a finger over it, stroking it. His hands were gentle yet the movements were assured. *The confident carelessness of youth*. His shoulders were slightly hunched and his head dipped so that his curls fell forward over his ears. The stretch of his neck was exposed. When he moved, the loose waist of his pants gaped open and I could see the line of his hips, my gaze following the shadowy dip of bone and flesh running toward his groin. His feet were bare as usual, the smooth skin tight, the toes long and well shaped.

I was suddenly—shockingly—aware of him as never before. I knew lust of old, but this was something else.

"Macy..." I cleared my throat. "I asked her. She never sees you come and go. She doesn't know anything about a visitor like you."

He shrugged. He moistened his lips and looked down as if concentrating on the pebble, not me.

There were so many things I didn't understand, it made my head hurt. His clothes were obviously not common; his hair was unruly in a natural way, not something teased with the help of hair gel. But he wasn't a derelict, either. I like to think I'd have recognized it in his eyes, a bleak and abandoned look I'd seen in others. No, Matteo was just the way he was—in his own place.

We didn't talk about it. *How come?* If anyone had asked, I'd have had to admit what we *did* talk about. The pictures, my art. My childhood, my unruly youth and the artistic talent that both saved me from complete meltdown and seduced me into adult dissolution. I talked about the stress of keeping up this monstrous family house; how much I missed my parents; what I'd hoped for from a career in art, and—much more personally—from my art itself. I confessed my grief at losing a man I was very close to several years ago; I admitted I'd disappointed both Ailsa and myself with our ludicrous, never-should-have-been marriage. I recounted the money I'd smoked and drunk away; the money I might now start to earn again. It was all about *me*. Nothing about Matteo.

Where the fuck was *his place*?

"Matteo, this thing about...you know. Your artist friend." I hesitated. I wanted him to know I understood the need for an expedient lie now and then. Dammit, I'd spent the early part of my youth lying and fucking around. Not that different from my more mature years, I'm sure Ailsa would have said. "If your friend is using that name as some kind of joke or fraud, they'll see through it in the end. It's a pretty dishonest way to start a career." Matteo was staring at me, his expression bemused. I laughed, a short, sharp sound. "Come on, you didn't mean *the* Caravaggio, did you? Look, are you afraid of telling me your real background? Are you on the run? I doubt you could tell me anything that'd shock me."

Matteo blinked slowly. "Gavin, I don't really understand."

I stared back at him. My heart was beating too fast again. "Dammit, don't lie to me anymore. Don't take me for a complete fool."

He looked horrified. "What are you saying? Gavin, I'm just

trying to be good to you, as good as you are to me. That's all I want. Tell me what's wrong, tell me how to make it right between us."

"Us?" I was confused and angry. "I'm just a hack painter, right? Whereas you're pretending to be some boy from sixteenth century Rome who posed for the great Caravaggio, God knows, maybe you were his lover, his great muse..."

Matteo flushed dark red. "Don't talk about him like that."

"I'll say what I like, it's not like he can talk back, can he?"

Matteo's eyes darkened. "Of course not, not here. Why are you being so cruel to me, Gavin?"

The bright light was behind my eyes, its intensity making the pulse throb at my temples. "Matteo, this is just ridiculous pretense."

He wasn't listening. "I'd have been more to him, if he'd wanted me. But it was just those few poses, he chose other models after that. I waited for months, until I was a man, until he might see me that way. I went after him in the night, to ask to be with him, I just wanted to be part of his work. But he knew Mario by then, he was always the favorite..."

"Who are you?" I shouted at him, the ache in my head severe enough to be almost tangible. "What the hell do you want from me?" My chest tightened and I started coughing. My knees buckled under me. Matteo stepped forward and caught me under the arms. His body was strong against mine, his breath warm on my cheek.

"Rest," he urged.

"I'm not a fucking invalid," I snarled back, though I crumpled down on to my chair as if I were. He knelt at my feet, looking up into my face, concerned for me. *God*, but he was beautiful. Not just

his looks but...Matteo himself. I wasn't some lovesick teenager any longer, if in fact, I ever had been. But the way he made me feel...

"It's not possible," I said. "*You're* not possible." My voice sounded hoarse. I didn't want to shout at him. I didn't want to hurt him. Far from it. I'd never known a reaction toward another man as strong as this.

Matteo's shrug was resigned. "I cannot explain it either, Gavin. It's just happened. When the red painting came into being, so did I. *Here*. I don't know why. I don't understand your words or your distress. I cannot be with my friend anymore, but I can be with you instead. I can be here for you. I can help make your art live."

I shook my head, fighting hysteria. My limbs felt heavy, all my nerves jangling. Macy would be furious if she saw the state I was in. "You're asking me to believe in some kind of time travel. That you've stepped through the fucking space time continuum to be here with me. That we can talk together in the same language, touch each other, that this isn't just a trick or some warped fucking humor. That we're not both psychotic lunatics..."

He gripped my hand so tightly that I stopped abruptly. "Do you think I don't know how strange this is, Gavin? That I'm not frightened?" It was the first time I'd ever heard fear in his voice. "I don't know this place, I don't understand it, but I find myself here, again and again. I'm *meant* to be here. But if you send me away, too..."

"No!" I was astonished at how the word burst out of me, my voice pleading in a way I'd never heard before. "Dammit, I'm not sending you away. You can stay here, of course you can." I reached down and grasped his shoulders.

Matteo gazed back at me. "I can't help it, I'm scared."

“Of what? Of going back to wherever you were? I don’t know what happened to you there...”

“Not that, not now,” he whispered, shaking his head. “Now I’m scared of leaving *you*.”

I stumbled to my feet, troubled and shaky. The chair lurched back, knocking one of my books off the table, and Matteo reached to pick it up. He paused with it in his hands. He’d always been confused by the books in the studio, at the lavish paper, the glossy photographs. For a while, I suspected he couldn’t read. Now I wondered if the confusion was because he’d never seen such things before.

“It’s him.” His head jerked up, his eyes seeking me, wide and shocked. “How can you do this?”

It was a book on Caravaggio. I got it out of storage after Matteo first mentioned him. At that time, I thought he was a mad kid or some kind of fraud, and I meant to prove how ridiculous his story was. Instead, I’d studied the book for several nights, increasingly disturbed. I reached down and tugged it away from him, but he grabbed at my shirt, scrambling to his feet and peering over my shoulder to see more of it. It fell open at a bookmarked page—one of the early works, *The Musicians*, a scene of young men in loose white togas and holding musical instruments. One of them faced directly forward, catching the viewer’s eye with a sensual confidence, a vivid red shawl draped over his shoulder. All the colors were bright, the subjects bold and natural, yet it was so much more than a fine painting. The men were alive to the viewer. Their flesh was luminous, their eyes haunting, a combination of young naivety and an older come-hither. It was thrillingly tactile, the young men ripe and luscious, just asking to be admired and adored.

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We both stared at the picture. My mouth dried. *It's him.* One of the four young men was the perfect image of Matteo. He was at the back of the tableau and only seen in profile, but it was him. *Of course.*

"He promised me that position," Matteo whispered in my ear, his finger pointing at the man in the foreground. "You see? But that was Mario, in the end. I wanted to be painted with the red shawl, Gavin. I would have pretended it was rich, soft cloth. I could have looked as beautiful as that."

I turned to face him. He didn't step back. We were touching from chest to hip and his breath brushed my mouth. There were unshed tears in his eyes and I kissed him. His lips were firm and young and tasted slightly salty, as if a lone tear had escaped his eye and slipped down to his mouth. I kept kissing him as his arms slid around me and held me tight. He was panting gently, his heart beating almost as fast as mine. His lips opened at the same time as my tongue pressed against them and I took the tasting forward into his mouth.

"Gavin." He whispered against my face, his lips framing the word around my tongue, his hands clutching at my shirt. "Touch me." His breath was hot, his response eager.

I touched his cheek, where his skin was as smooth as the pebble he'd been playing with, then ran my fingers over his throat, his jaw. His pulse flickered under a slight stubble, pricking at my fingertips. My heart hammered with relief. "Sometimes, I can't...but you feel good, Matteo. I can feel you." He'd think I was mad, of course I could feel him. I couldn't tell him how sometimes my fingers were numb, that the nerves mocked me, sleeping when I needed them to be most sensitive. It was getting worse as the days passed, too. *Don't go there, didn't I say?*

He was smiling, whispering. “Do you want me?” He tugged me back toward the couch, already loosening the waist of his pants. “I want *you*.”

I was so clumsy, my hands shook and my feet were unsteady. No more the seducer, no more the predator, just a man who desperately wanted another. “You would have looked beautiful, Matteo. In red—in rich, soft cloth. It’s what you deserve.”

He laughed. “I know it is only a painting.” His eyes shone at me. “But thank you for that kindness.” He peeled his shirt off over his head in a smooth, easy movement, then kicked off his pants at the ankles. He lay back on my couch, beckoning to me. Naked, welcoming.

“Can we do this?” I wasn’t sure what I was asking. We touched like men did in daily life, we were both alive, both normal in that way. But I didn’t know if there were other, more bizarre rules to this very abnormal relationship. *Like I accepted it all.*

I shrugged out of my shirt and he reached for my pants, slipping the belt, pushing them down my legs. My cock pushed greedily against the front of my briefs, dampening the cotton fabric. Matteo’s tongue was caught up between his teeth and his eyes were fevered. “Of course we can do it. We must. *You* must. Please, Gavin.” He spread his legs for me, unashamed of exposing himself. His cock jutted out from his groin, a raw, musky, muscular beauty, the sheath darker than blood red, the head purple at the tip.

I still hesitated, just for a moment. “You are beautiful,” I said, my voice hoarse. He didn’t need clothing, didn’t need a red fucking shawl. *Dammit.* “I do want you.”

He grinned, shaking his head at me. “Why are you nervous? Come here.”

I sank to my knees between his thighs, pushing them farther apart with my nervous hands. I'd been a virgin once, of course, but it was too long ago for me to remember the feelings. It must have been like this, but now I had the benefit of knowing what I wanted. So did Matteo. When I sucked him, he grasped my hair and thrust up into my mouth. He tasted of delicious, salty flesh and sweet, sweet desire. I slipped two fingers into my mouth beside his cock and wet them. Then I slid my hand under his straining ass and slipped a finger into him. He groaned, a happy, excited sound. I eased my fingers in and out, both stretching and stroking, feeling the shudder of pleasure as I touched him inside, teasing his climax nearer. He grunted happily with each thrust and when his voice caught in his throat I knew he was coming. His body arched on the couch and his cock pushed against the roof of my mouth. The come spilled out of it in hiccups, thick threads, treacle-rich trails, covering my tongue. I tightened my lips around him to keep it all in, to savor it.

In the end, he pushed me away, too sensitive to stay in my mouth, but he laughed as he did it. He smiled at me, eyes wild, dark pools twinkling with the excited turmoil below. "Gavin." He was panting. "Take me. Fuck me. Do you want...?"

Did I? I was speechless. He slid off the couch on to his knees in front of me, and turned around to lean forward on the cushion. I put my hands on his ass, the flesh warm and pressure-pink from his wriggling on the seat while I sucked him off. It was perfect. I traced the dimples of muscle as they clenched, brushed the short, dark whorls of hair where they tangled up between his buttocks. He lifted up, presenting to me, and I pushed down my briefs, dragging them under my knees and off at the ankles. My dick protruded heavily from my groin, hot with sexual hunger. It needed

him—I needed him. I kissed his ass, pressing hard, making carmine-red mouth shapes on the skin, watching it pale back each time to his natural color. When I bit a little harder and sucked a mark, he didn’t pull away. He hissed and his head dropped down farther.

I spread his legs and peeled his buttocks apart with my thumbs. The hole was smoky dark, deliciously inviting. He shifted, getting comfortable. I could see his balls hanging down heavily between his thighs, shifting inside the sac. The puckered flesh of his ass clenched and relaxed, just a small movement, but the promise was astonishingly great.

“There are condoms in a drawer in the cupboard,” I muttered. “Protection. Let me get—”

“No,” he interrupted. “We don’t need them.”

I would have protested more—that kind of sexual carelessness is the most treacherous of all—but I knew he didn’t mean it like other hasty young men might. I don’t know how I knew. A chill ran down my spine. It really *didn’t* matter, not to either of us.

“Please,” he whispered. He looked back at me, over his shoulder. “I am ready.” His hair fell over his forehead, sticky with sweat, his expression both bold and nervous. I smiled encouragingly at him and was relieved to see the worry fade from his eyes. I felt the frisson of pleasure as the tip of my cock nudged its way into his hole. It stretched well enough but remained snug around me, gripping me as I eased in. I wanted to tell him how fantastic it was, but my throat had closed tight with excitement. This wasn’t one of the times my sense of touch abandoned me—I could feel everything. I’d never been more grateful for anything in my life. The skin of Matteo’s back shivering against my stomach; the tight muscles of his ass beneath my hands; the way my toes

dug into the hard floor beneath me, anchoring me as I thrust. Everything was bright and sharp and fierce—I saw colors in my mind, shades of delight, tones of pleasure.

Matteo sighed beneath me and lifted himself, braced on his arms so that his upper body pressed back against my chest. I slid an arm around his torso and held him there, the two of us clinging together as I groaned and climaxed inside him. I could feel him shuddering with me, shaking as he pumped at his cock, newly aroused. He moaned aloud and I heard the soft splatter of seed on the bare floor as he came again. Things were so vivid, I imagined I smelled the sharp tang of his come. I knew that wasn't likely, but it pleased me, regardless.

We untangled and climbed onto the couch, still holding each other. We stayed there for some time. I had no idea of or cared for how long.

"Thanks," I said at last. I didn't feel foolish saying it, though it was one of the many words in my vocabulary that had always been seriously under-used.

Matteo smiled and shook his head, his loose hair caressing my neck. It seemed he was going to say something more in reply, but his breath hitched as if he decided against it. "Sleep for a while," he said, instead. "Let's both sleep, Gavin."

I'd never allowed anyone to talk to me in that protective way before, but it didn't seem to be an issue now. "What are you, Matteo?" I said, drowsily.

"Your muse, I think," he murmured, his laughter too soft to make it entirely a joke.

I nodded because, to me, it was true. I pressed up against him, our skin cooling, my heartbeat slowing to a regular, more soothing pace. "And my lover."

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His breath stilled for a second. “I hope so. I want to be. If I am allowed.”

I was too tired to argue further. Besides, as far as I was concerned, there was nothing to argue about.

* * *

Inside the house, I sat in my chair by the window. It had been bolted open so that I could look out over the garden and down to the studio. Beyond there were open fields, property of some filthy rich local landowner I’d never met nor was ever likely to. The sky was eggshell blue, the sun peeking like a coy virgin from behind a cloud, its light diffused into a pale, insipid color that was barely golden. We were too far away from the road to hear much traffic. Some insect buzzed past the window; a cricket chirped in the long grass with unbearable, unquenchable zeal. *Spring*. Yeah, right. A slight breeze lifted the edge of my blanket and I pushed it impatiently back over the arm of my chair.

Matteo was suddenly there beside me, though it wasn’t a shock. His hand rested on my shoulder.

“Who was it wrote about spring fever?” I sounded unattractively petulant. “Something about—you don’t know what the hell it is you want, but it makes your heart ache, you want it so bad.” I wrinkled my nose, knowing the gesture was pointless, I wouldn’t be able to smell the cut grass in the fields.

Matteo chuckled. The sound was like music. “Don’t you like the season? The colors are returning after winter. It’s warm. I like the sun. People wear less clothing, smile more. Plenty of inspiration for a painter, Gavin.”

“Christ, you’re a real glass half-full guy, aren’t you?” He

frowned at me, puzzled, and I sighed. “Matteo, shit. I’m sorry. I’m just teasing. I’m too fucking grouchy today.”

“Don’t be upset.” His voice was gentle, amused. “You’re not like that anymore, remember?”

Dear God, he was right, too. So much of my misery and anger had expired along with the winter—in all honesty, a pair of corpses we were all glad to see the back of. I snorted. “It’s disturbing, that’s all. Fresh and raw and...everything changing. Time passing. If I want to be fucking disturbed, I will.” *Pointless*. He was happy; I was pathetic. The ill-temper seeped out of me like air from a squashed balloon.

Matteo crouched down beside me. “What’s wrong? I’m here now. You know I come as often as I can.”

Not often enough, I realized quickly and with some alarm at my need. “I want to be in the studio. I can still paint.”

He smiled, though something flickered in his eyes that I’d learned to recognize as emotional pain. “You’ll be there soon. But you don’t need to sell more paintings, Gavin. The Red series has become famous. These last few months have been marvelous for you. You have more money than I can understand. Enough, surely...”

“What’s enough?” My voice was strident. “My agent reappears at royalty time like a resurrected mummy with outstretched, grasping hands. Ailsa’s attorney demands her financial share of a talent she used to call selfish, that she insisted was a sham, used only for seducing young men.”

“Hush.” Matteo’s breath was warm on my knee. “That’s all settled. There’s enough for *you*, Gavin. To keep you safe and comfortable here in your home.”

“Yours, too,” I said quickly. “Your home, too.”

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Matteo grinned, lighting up the room with something bright and vivacious that owed nothing to the blossoming season outdoors. “Yes, mine, too. I am here more often than I am away. That’s good, isn’t it?”

I gazed into his face. Not a jot older or younger than when he first arrived. The same dark, luscious eyes; the same vigorous body; the same heartbreaking smile. “You understand how it is for me, don’t you, Matteo? How frustrated I get, not being able to paint. You, of all people, understand me.” My muse, my support, my eager lover. My cock stirred between my legs, adding its hungry, happy endorsement.

“Of course I do. You’re a wonderful artist, Gavin. I want to be with you forever.”

The breeze brushed against me again, lifting the edge of my shirt. Nothing moved on Matteo, not his clothes, not his hair. Yet I could feel his hand on my leg—knew how his body would feel, arching underneath me, his cry of lustful delight ringing in my ears. His laughter in bed and the occasional tears after a fierce climax. His devoted love for me. *Love*. It wasn’t something I’d ever spent much energy or attention on. It was for weak, immature people, wasn’t it? It required more than I’d been prepared to give. Until now. Dammit, I’d ceased to question the bizarre anomaly of Matteo’s company, too grateful for what it had brought me. I smiled at him, speaking carefully around the lump in my throat. “That’s not going to happen though, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“The forever shit. I’m sick. You know that. I won’t last *forever*. Christ, I’ll be lucky if I make the fall.” My chest felt even tighter than usual. It was the emotion of course, not the fucking cancer. Matteo frowned and lifted a hand to my face, stroking along my

jaw. I wanted to push it away at the same time as I nuzzled up against his palm. “Do you feel it, Matteo? The sickness in me, the decay? Maybe you smell it, the taint of rot on my flesh. Or hear it, a rattle in my ruined lungs.”

He knelt up abruptly, swaying away from me. For a second I was scared, afraid he was going to leave. But then he leaned forward and his mouth pressed against mine, kissing me, his lips moving, his words whispering into me. “I love you, Gavin, whatever you are, whatever we have. I want you, I need you. I won’t leave you.”

“But will *I* leave *you*?” I sounded so plaintive I didn’t recognize myself. “Is that how it works? All the senses leaving me, one by one, leeching the pleasure out of life. Now the paintings are done, now I can’t hold a pen properly anymore, and I’m abandoned by every other bastard I ever knew...”

“Stop it.” Matteo sat back on his heels, his face flushed, his eyes angry. “You sent them all away, Gavin. You’ve never encouraged or welcomed friends. You despise pity. It’s all been your choice.”

I stared at him. The man had learned well, to answer me back. For a second, he looked worried, probably thinking he’d gone too far. But then I felt the loosening in my chest that always happened when he was there. I started to laugh. “Dammit, you’re right. When I was younger, it was arrogance made me like that. When I got older, it was the pain. Same effect, though, eh? Alone at the end.”

Matteo shrugged, not quite as willing to laugh along with my rather unpredictable wit. “You have a second chance, I think.”

“Huh?”

“People do care about you, Gavin. You have not been

abandoned by everyone. There are new students at your door. There are critics, you call them that, men who praise you and tell others about your work. I am here. And there's Macy."

I tensed up. "Macy..."

"I know. She is not your servant, or housekeeper as you call it. She is your nurse. I've always known that, despite your reluctance to admit it. It doesn't matter to me, Gavin. She cares for you."

"She's paid to—"

"No." He shook his head, his young face grave. "Please don't play a game with me. You know it's more than that, or she would have gone when your wife left you. Macy deals with all your business affairs for you, faces the people who pursue you, whether for good or ill. And she takes you to the studio every day."

I felt as embarrassed as a scolded school kid. "Where I stare at the easel and wish for the body I had as a teenager. A nose that can recognize paint by its smell; fingers that can stroke a pen down the page or smooth the edge of a canvas, finding nuances instead of numbness. Legs that can hold my weight instead of buckling like a weakling's after an hour at work."

Matteo didn't answer, but grasped the arms of my chair and turned it around, facing back into the room. I took a moment to focus again, but it wasn't as if I could have missed what was now in front of me. "The red canvas," I breathed out. It stood on the easel at the back of the room. Beside it was a low table, my paints piled up on the surface, my thick brushes on the side. "When did that get here? Who brought it in..." I bit the words off, suitably chastened even if I hadn't sensed Matteo was frowning at me. "Okay, I know. *Macy*. And yes, she's been far more to me than a nurse. I've provided for her, Matteo, when I go. And her hungry brood. Woman has about eight kids, I'm told."

Matteo laughed softly behind me. “Where does she find the time, in between looking after you and keeping clear of that selfish arrogance you are so proud of?”

I laughed aloud. It was, surprisingly, a very hearty sound. “And you’ll be equally pleased to hear the rest of my money is marked for gifts. My inheritance to others, all offered to worthy causes.”

He tutted. “I would not tell you what to do with your money, Gavin. That has all been your decision—your generosity.”

I blinked hard, my eyes stinging a little. “Yes, that’s true, isn’t it? How bizarre.” I cleared my throat, embarrassed again. But then, why the fuck should I be? Matteo had seen me at my worst, and maybe now my best. I trusted him above anyone else. Life—and death—had played stranger games with its victims. “After all, I’m not going to need it.”

Matteo leaned over, murmuring into my ear. “You don’t *need* this painting, Gavin. But you want it. This one is for *you*. You are so close to finishing. Take it wherever you want it to go. You have been obsessed with it in recent weeks.” We both stared at the canvas, knowing what he meant. I had indeed been working on it exclusively, whenever I had the chance. My hands were wasting and uncertain—I wasn’t able to cope with the detail needed on my other sketches, whereas painting the red canvas was much easier, everything more exaggerated on the larger field. But it seemed my deteriorating health had found reflection in the latest section. The red paint there was angry, thick and forceful—mottled and pitted with small stones and slivers of glass. It was startling but shocking.

The pattern of the work had moved along with my moods, with my relationship with Matteo, with the progress of my disease. It had developed from the buoyant naivety of the first section to the stunning maturity and vibrancy of the second. The third section

had been my most recent work and, although strong, was ugly in its resentment and—now I dared say it—fear. But I had been moving on again in the last week or so. As I blended the new paint into the old, the strokes became softer. The movement was a more gentle illustration, the flow through the canvas was restful rather than riotous, soothing rather than scathing. *The flow toward the end.*

“Your work has been calmer in recent months, more thoughtful.” Matteo’s voice was like balm.

“I’m not taking the treatment,” I said, apropos of nothing. My chest hurt again, tight with tension. “Macy wants me to but I won’t. Whatever comes, it comes. It’s what I deserve.”

“That’s not true,” he whispered. “Or fair to you.”

I ignored that. “I’m just scared,” I announced, determined to be loud and proud about it, because it wasn’t something I’d ever admitted to before. “Scared of what’ll happen to me. Scared I won’t finish the painting. Scared that I *will*! Because if I do, will I lose you as a trade-off?” I knew the fear had been brewing inside me, but I’d never intended to let it out.

“You won’t.” He sounded so very sure, but I didn’t think he was the one who made those kinds of decision.

“It’s only a damned painting, anyway. Will anyone ever see it?”

“Yes, I’m sure they will. They will adore it. It will be something startling and new and moving. And you’ll be here to see that.”

“How do you know, Matteo?” Of course, he didn’t. It was just comfort, just reassurance. But it worked, as it often did these days. For a long while I sat there, looking at the canvas but with my thoughts on Matteo. He stood behind the chair, breathing steadily,

his hands resting on the back, his arms on either side of my head. Just waiting for me.

I swallowed carefully, keeping my voice calm. “Matteo, you’re dead, aren’t you?”

He sucked in a breath. “Yes.”

I nodded. I wasn’t as shocked as I thought I would be. Neither of us were fools, just...centuries apart. Ghosts to each other. “The scar under your belly...?”

His voice was low. “The night I followed my previous master, he was in a fight.” He gave a short laugh. “He so often was. Owing money, arguing with other men. It was his way. He never saw me, and he escaped without injury. But one of the men chasing him caught me hiding behind the church wall. They thought I was a spy for him, one of them was a soldier...” His voice caught on the word. “There was a lot of blood.”

“Matteo.” I didn’t know what to say. *Blood...deep, scarlet pain.* For a few seconds, it was as if I could sense the threads of his agony, long-gone but vivid in both our minds.

“I am fine now, Gavin. Do you hear me?” When I didn’t answer, he came and crouched in front of me again. “Look at me! I look fine, I feel fine. The pain is only a memory. It’s from another time. Somehow I have also been given another chance, another master, another artist to love and to inspire. I have never been happier than here with you. You’ve given me a home. Company. A life of art. *Love.*”

I gazed down at him and his astonishing, beautifully earnest face. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d cried for genuine sorrow but my eyes seemed to be wet now. “I don’t care, do you know that?” My voice was hoarse. “I don’t care if you’re a ghost, or some kind of spirit, or even if you’re a fucking hallucination. It

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doesn't matter. I measure my life by *you* now, not the art."

"That's what matters?"

I nodded. "Yes."

Matteo laughed again. He stood up and straddled my legs, his hands on my shoulders. "Kiss me."

"Such a damned bully, even for a ghost," I murmured, wryly. By the time his mouth covered mine, we were both laughing.

We didn't speak again for a while. It was easier for me to conserve my breath, and I, for one, had little more to say. I heard the whisper of the breeze and the insects outside. Far in the distance was the sound of some farm machinery, maybe a few cars. The sun shifted lazily and bathed the edge of my chair in its brightness. Matteo sighed and wriggled out of his shirt and pants, sitting his warm, naked body gently down on my lap. I caressed his cock until he gasped with pleasure and his come spilled over my fisted hands. Then he slipped back off to kneel at my feet. He tugged my sweatpants down my legs, his eyes widening with pleasure at my brave but bold erection. I always wanted him. I always loved to hear his amusement, his mischievous whisper of seduction, his groans of need, and especially the soft gasp he made just before sliding his wet lips down over my cock.

I leaned my head against the back of the chair and moaned as he did just that, letting me fuck his mouth at my own pace, to my own satisfaction. It was warm and soft and slow, a fond fornication, something I'd never known in my life before. It was perfect.

* * *

The lights were very low or maybe that was the fault of my

sight. However, I had no trouble making out Matteo's figure at the foot of the bed. *Bed.* Fuck. I started to struggle to an upright position.

He moved swiftly to my side. "Be still, Gavin. Don't be upset. You are still at home."

I fell back on the pillow, exhausted by such a pathetically small effort. "Not hospital?" My voice was hoarse. "Fucking...hospital. Won't go."

Matteo shook his head vehemently. "Macy would not let it happen. It's what you wanted and everyone has abided by that."

Wonders would never cease. But the old cynicism lay too heavy on my tongue to be spoken aloud. There were better things to use up my energy. "Water. Please."

Matteo bent over me, holding a cup with a straw in it. Seemed I'd been sipping it for a long time and never felt soothed. But this time was a surprise—the water was cool and I could taste it as it slid down my throat. It was fresh. It made my eyes blink with pleasure, as if I'd never tasted anything quite so good. "Vodka?"

Matteo chuckled. "No, just water."

I smiled but I wasn't sure the muscles of my mouth were keeping up. It was very quiet here, apart from Matteo's voice and the faint hum of machinery in the background. *Fuck.* Thank God I could still swear mentally. "Ventilator?"

Matteo frowned. "I do not know the word, nor the object. But it helps you breathe."

Sure. "Painting done?" Why couldn't I remember anything clearly enough?

He nodded, a sudden sparkle in his eyes. Moonlight or the reflection from the neon screen of medical equipment? "It is magnificent. Macy cried. Your agent came with people who took

other pictures.”

Photographers? I fought back the cough that rose in my throat. “He didn’t take...”

“No.” Matteo knew instinctively what I meant. “It is very clear that the red canvas and its commission will all go to your wife. It is protected.”

“Needs...fucking name.”

He stared at me. “You have named it, Gavin. You called it ‘Muse.’ You have signed it so.”

Our eyes met. He looked very damned serious for such an attractive young man. Made me want to provoke that smile of his again—made me want to do things to him I was pretty sure wouldn’t be happening on this bed anytime soon. I wondered just how many drugs they’d pumped in to me to keep me going this far. I tried to get enough breath for some decent sentences. “It’s bad. Matteo...”

“Don’t. Don’t speak if it hurts.” His eyes looked suspiciously wet. “Gavin. I know how it is.”

And I believed him. “Is it now, you think?”

His face grimaced in distress. “I do not know. You have been...you are.” Words seemed to fail him. “I do not know, Gavin.”

“Kiss me.”

He looked startled and he blushed very sweetly. Ridiculous, ingenuous, incongruous considering the circumstances—but just perfect on him. He put the cup back on the side table and leaned over the bed. When he slipped his hand into mine I felt the slightest touch. It was enough. He kissed very gently and I could taste him as vividly as if it were the first time. I couldn’t remember finding a taste that good for a long time. As refreshing as the

water, as delicious as I knew Matteo would always be.

Some emotion twisted sharply in my chest. "Last taste," I croaked. He pulled back, his eyes widening. "Sweetest taste. Want you."

"You have me," he whispered.

"You look good..." I started to cough. "Fuck the painting. You're my best work. You're in me. Mine. Of me. All of me." I was rambling, embarrassingly so. *Damned drugs*. Matteo looked concerned and he glanced over toward the window. I moved my head very carefully and slowly until I could see what he was looking at. The curtains were drawn shut but I could still see a figure asleep in a chair. It was Macy. Such a plump woman couldn't possibly be comfortable at that angle, I thought. Damned stupid creature should have gone to her bed, to her brood, not sat there watching me as I...what?

"Only you," I whispered. "Matteo?" Where was he? "Don't go."

Macy stirred and snored, rather loudly for a man's sick room, I thought, indignantly. On the floor beside her chair were some magazines, a couple of her romance novels with the usual lurid covers and a pile of photos. It looked like they were of my Red series. Maybe she thought they would comfort me, reassure me. Under the chair I could see the edge of a larger book, fallen open at a full-page illustration. I recognized it immediately. The pages had been creased back, and the back cover had got caught up under the leg of the chair.

"Dammit." I was surprisingly angry. "She should be more careful of my things, even if I have left all the fucking books to her brood. God knows if they have an artistic bone in their unruly bodies, but if they do, I'm damned if I'll let it go to waste for want

of some decent inspiration.” I bent to pick up the book and smooth out the page. *The Musicians* stared back at me. “At least it’s not torn.”

“Gavin.”

I looked back over my shoulder at Matteo. “What?”

He didn’t speak. His eyes were large and his expression a strange mixture of confusion and delight.

I continued to stare at him. I looked down at the book in my hand. I looked at my hand, gripping the edge of it. Without needing to look any farther, I knew I was standing on the floor. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the foot of the bed, several feet away.

“Gavin,” he whispered. “You see?”

I turned slowly. There was a foul taste in my mouth but it started to ease as I swallowed. I swallowed a lot, and then some more. I hadn’t been able to do that comfortably for a long time. I could hear the hum of the ventilator very clearly now, vying with Macy’s snores for my attention. There was a disgusting smell of disinfectant in the room. But my legs felt perfectly steady and when I stretched, my muscles moved with ease. Matteo was watching me. The expression on his face was hope and it was the most marvelous thing I’d ever seen in my life.

“Matteo, is this true?”

He nodded, though he looked as astonished as I must have done. “Together, Gavin. I’ll never go. Nor will you. Not without each other.” I could see what he was wearing now, rather different from his usual clothing. He reached out his hand and I caught it. I could feel the pulse in his wrist, the texture of his palm, tight against mine. Life and vitality pulsed through me. Whether real or imagined, I didn’t care, did I? Either way, it was the only thing I’d

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ever wanted. I slipped my hand around Matteo's waist, pushing the cloak of rich fabric back over his shoulder. He blushed with pleasure and pressed up against me. A real man, a real body.

"You look damned good in red," I said softly, and drew him close.

CLARE LONDON

Clare took the pen name London from the city where she lives, loves, and writes. A lone, brave female in a frenetic, testosterone-fuelled family home, she juggles her writing with the weekly wash, waiting for the far distant day when she can afford to give up her day job as an accountant. She's written in many genres and across many settings, with novels and short stories published both online and in print. She says she likes variety in her writing while friends say she's just fickle, but as long as both theories spawn good fiction, she's happy. Most of her work features male/male romance and drama with a healthy serving of physical passion, as she enjoys both reading and writing about strong, sympathetic and sexy characters. Clare currently has several novels sulking at that tricky chapter 3 stage and plenty of other projects in mind...she just has to find out where she left them in that frenetic, testosterone-fuelled family home. All the details and free fiction are available at her website.

Visit her today at <http://www.clarelondon.co.uk> and say hello!

* * *

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