

CAMILLA  
ISLEY



MY



*billionaire*

GRUMP

*an enemies to lovers romantic comedy*



# My Billionaire Grump

(An enemies to lovers, grumpy sunshine rom-com)

By Camilla Isley

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FIRST EDITION

Digital Edition May 2023 ISBN: 9788887269833

Print ISBN: 9788887269840

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## About My Billionaire Grump

When Lucy planned a summer trip to Florence, she didn't expect to have to go single. Or for the hotel manager to cheat her out of her river-view room. And especially not for a broody, handsome stranger to offer to swap rooms with her.

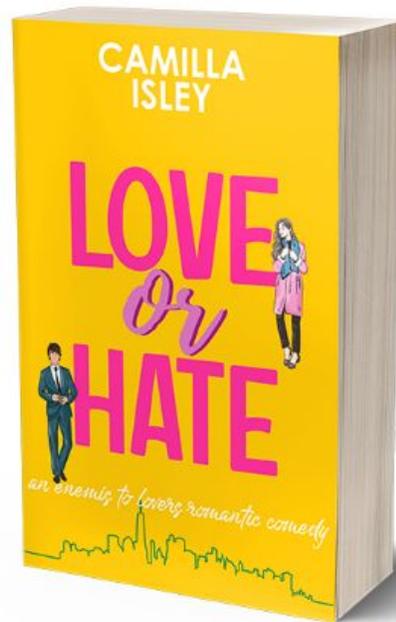
*Offer* is a euphemism. The mysterious George Emerson sort of brutalizes her into accepting the exchange. His gesture is as kind as the tone in which he poses it is barbaric, leaving Lucy rightfully confused.

What is it about this man that makes her heart race while simultaneously making her want to punch him in the face?

Only an unforgettable vacation under the Tuscan sun will unravel Lucy's true feelings.

An enemies to lovers, grumpy sunshine rom-com.

## Free Sequel



When Anita has the perfect, movie-worthy coffee shop meet cute, she doesn't expect for the same hot guy in a suit to evict her from her home an hour later.

As insta-attraction turns into insta-hate, these two will find themselves at odds with each other despite the fact that, no matter how hard they try, they don't seem able to stop kissing...

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## Dedication

To all lone vacationers, may you find love and adventure...

## PART ONE

## Chapter One

### The Bertolini

Lucy

There are three things that I really despise while on vacation: hotel bookings that don't correspond to what was promised, humid heat that makes my skin sticky again the second I step out of the shower, and arrogant, handsome strangers who make my heart race while simultaneously making me want to punch them in the face.

So far, on this trip to Florence, I've already been treated to the first two, and now I'm about to be hit with the third.

"This trip sucks so far," I groan in exasperation, my eyes glued to my best friend's face on my phone's display. "The heat is insufferable, and the Signora conned me."

I have the phone propped against the small trash bin on the breakfast table.

"The Signora?" Anita blinks, perplexed.

"The hotel manager."

"What did she lie to you about?"

"My room. My booking clearly states I should have a view of the river. Instead, I'm on the opposite wing of the palazzo, with my windows overlooking a courtyard."

"Lucy, you're on holiday in Italy. I'd switch places with you in a second—view or no view. And I can't believe Florence can be hotter than New York. We're melting."

"It is. They showed it on the news last night. Something about an African anticyclone that has turned this into the hottest month of June ever in Europe." I pause, taking a sip of iced coffee. "And the Signora is a total sham, even besides the room."

"How so?"

"She likes to be called 'Signora' when she has a Boston accent thicker than Beantown clam chowder. I swear everything is so Yankee here, I might still be in the US." I peek at the American tourists seated at the other tables scattered around the room, at the continental breakfast display, and at the drip coffee maker in the corner. What happened to a proper espresso

machine? “Not one person here speaks Italian. It’s hard to believe a whole foreign country awaits me out of these walls.”

“But it does,” Anita says.

“Still, I want to see the Arno when I wake up, and when I go to bed. I paid extra for a view. I should have a view!”

“What did the Signora say when you complained?”

“That she’ll move me to the first vacant room in the front, but who knows how long that will take? It could be days. I’m only here for a week and—”

“I have a view, damn it,” the man seated at the table next to mine spits, interrupting me. He lowers his newspaper to glare at me over the rim, and I’m momentarily transfixed by his stormy gray eyes.

I take in the rest of his person. Early thirties, dark, wavy hair, and a sharp jawline accentuated by a hint of stubble. Next, I assess his clothes. Pristine white shirt rolled up over his tanned forearms and unbuttoned at the collar. A pair of light-washed jeans. And a gold watch that glints on his wrist. He appears important and mildly irritated but undeniably attractive.

I remain slightly dazed for a second by his good looks *and* incredible rudeness. I might’ve grown animated in my complaints with Anita and, okay, a little peevish, too. But what business does this perfect stranger have butting into my conversation like that, spewing profanities at me?

“You have a view?” I ask, turning morose once the shock of the brisk interruption wears off. “Lucky you.”

“What I mean,” he continues, “is that you can have my room as long as you stop yapping and let me finish my breakfast in peace.”

My jaw drops at the protracted brutishness.

“Who is *that*?” Anita asks into my AirPods. “Sexy voice.”

I look back at the screen of my phone, where my friend is staring at me with an amused expression.

I’m not sure what she finds so funny about me being badgered by a barbaric stranger.

“I’m sorry, Ani, I’m gonna have to call you back.” I end the FaceTime call and return the stranger’s glare. “Thanks, but no, thanks.”

“Why?” he asks, neatly folding his newspaper on the table.

“I don’t have to give you a reason.”

“But why?” he persists. “Women like looking at a view; men don’t care. And anyway, I prefer to get out and about the city instead of staring at it through a window in a damn hotel. So?”

When I don't accept his contemptuous offer in two seconds flat, the strange man all but attacks me: Why should I not change? What objections do I have? He'd clear out in half an hour.

I'm usually an excellent conversationalist, but even I am powerless in the face of brutality. You don't negotiate with terrorists.

My cheeks flare with indignation. "I'd sooner rather change hotels," I mumble and toy with the eggs on my plate.

He opens his mouth to respond but then picks up his newspaper, unfurls it with an annoyed flick, and returns to hiding behind it.

The curtains at the end of the room part, revealing a colorfully dressed man, stout but attractive, who hurries forward to sit at the table on my other side.

I do a double take. "Jackson!"

He gives me a perplexed frown.

"Lucy," I say. "From Three-B in the Tunbridge Wells Tower. I moved out a year ago."

Recognition sparks in his brown eyes. "Lucy from Three-B, of course. What a coincidence running into you in Italy, of all places."

"What are you doing in Florence?" I ask, even if the Hawaiian shirt and bright-red Bermuda shorts he's wearing give him the unmistakable air of someone on vacation.

Jackson readjusts the sunglasses perched on top of his head. "It's my revenge holiday after a nasty breakup with my boyfriend. You?"

I try hard not to wince. "Non-refundable romantic trip to Italy that my ex thought I should have as a consolation prize after he dumped my ass."

"Ouch." Jackson winces sympathetically. "I feel your pain, sister. Were you still dating that blond hunk from way back?"

"Chase, yes," I confirm, not quite keeping my mouth from twisting into a bitter grimace at having to pronounce the weasel's name out loud.

Jackson tilts his head. "What possible reason could he have to break up with you, hon?"

Before I can answer, a mumbled comment comes from my right that suspiciously sounds like, "Yeah, I wonder what."

I ignore the ever-ruder stranger and continue my conversation with my old neighbor. "It doesn't matter. I'm already over it, I swear. I'm just sorry none of my girlfriends had the vacation days to come with me."

Jackson sighs. “Lucky you. I’m still working on my rage.” He pats his belly theatrically. “Italian food is helping, and this palazzo.” He sighs again. “Don’t you just love it? I have the best view of the Arno and Ponte Vecchio from my room, and I didn’t even pay for it. The Signora gave me a free upgrade when I arrived two days ago.”

Fighting my instinct to start another rant, I try to summon a smile. “How marvelous.”

A sardonic scoff from the stranger grates on my last nerve. I turn to glare at him, but the man is studiously hiding behind his newspaper. I’m pretty sure it’s just pretense, that he’s not really reading but listening to every word we say.

“Anyway,” Jackson continues. “I’m hoping to use this trip to clear my head and soak in the art. Florence is so inspiring, you know?”

“Haven’t had a chance to explore yet. I only arrived late last night.”

“Oh, you’ll get settled in no time.” Jackson winks at me conspiratorially. “And if you need a distraction, I’m sure we can find some Italian eye candy to ogle together.”

I roll my eyes playfully. “Thanks, but I’ll pass. Are there even any Italians here? I’ve only heard people speak English.”

“At the pension? No, I don’t believe so. Florence is full of Americans this time of the year. You’re not even the first person from back home I’ve run into.”

I take a bite of a delicious croissant. “Small world, uh?”

“Yep.”

“Do you still live in the Tunbridge Tower?”

“Yes, I’m a creature of habit. Moving is too much of a hassle. Where have you gone to?”

“Oh, just a few blocks uptown. I moved in with my best friend. She took over her grandma’s rent-stabilized apartment, and the deal was too good to pass.”

That’s when the stranger starts whistling under his breath. I don’t recognize the tune right away, but after a few notes, it becomes clear he’s whistling the Russian anthem. Is he implying that living in a rent-stabilized apartment makes me a communist?

He must be a banker or a lawyer who evicts families with small children for fun, drowns kittens in his free time, and burns down rainforests for sport.

“Uh-uh,” Jackson says. “Sounds like you got a sweet deal. But our neighborhood is too charming. I’d never move even if I weren’t a lazy ass.”

“I’m only a few blocks away, so it’s not too bad. But sorry, I’ve been making you talk nonstop. I should shut up and let you enjoy your breakfast.”

Cough. “Thought the day would never come.” Cough.

You can guess who grumbled that.

“Don’t worry,” Jackson reassures me. “I’m good at multi-tasking. These are delicious, I’m enjoying every bite while conversing.”

“Still, I should go.” Exasperated by the nasty commentary from the stranger, I throw my napkin on the table. “I’m done with my eggs.” I stand up and grab the rest of my croissant, wrapping it in a paper napkin. “Maybe we can hit a few landmarks together later?”

“Yeah, we should totally gallivant Tuscany like a pair of decadent rakes. Where are you headed today?”

“Santa Croce.”

“I went already, but I’m organizing a trip to the countryside. You can’t come to Tuscany without enjoying its magnificent hills. Do you want to tag along?”

“Yeah, sure. Let me know the details. I’m in room 242.”

“I was thinking of driving up to Fiesole, and ’round by Settignano, or something like that. Maybe make it a day trip and bring a picnic basket.”

“Sounds amazing. Just let me know when you have a fixed date.”

“Sure, will do. See you around, Lucy from Three-B.”

“It’s Lucy from 242 now.”

“All right, Lucy from 242.”

I cross the breakfast room, making a point not to spare the stranger even a side glance.

The *very* American food display catches my attention again on the way out, and I frown. The authentic Italian experience the booking website promised me seems more of a bogus claim the more I explore the palazzo. But as much as I was determined to check out of this sham hotel, now with a friend here with whom I’m already making plans, it’d no longer make sense. It looks like The Pension Bertolini has decided, almost enthusiastically, that we’re stuck with each other.

Just as I’m about to pull the curtains apart and exit the room, some inexplicable force compels me to turn around. The stranger is peeping at me

again from over his newspaper. He acknowledges the eye contact by raising his eyebrows and smirking, as if satisfied he caught me looking back.

## Chapter Two

### The Switch

Lucy

I avert my eyes and hurry through the curtains—curtains that smite me in the face with the dust of centuries. They're so heavy, I wonder if they've ever been washed in the past 500 years. Here's some authentic dirty fabric for you.

Beyond them is the unreliable Signora, bowing good morning to her guests. It makes a curious scene, this attempt of the lady-from-Boston to convey the hospitality, grace, and geniality of the Italians. I try to decide who I despise more, her or Mr. *I Have a View*.

I hop quickly upstairs into my court-view room and finish my croissant seated at the window, watching the kitchen staff throw out the garbage in the large bins that line the courtyard below. Instead of the beautiful domes and turrets of Florence, I have a view on a literal dumpster. Smells like it, too.

I gobble down the last bite of croissant and close the window.

Not wanting to let the Signora ruin my vacation, I brush my teeth, change into lighter clothes, and I'm ready to go exploring.

As I pass back through the lobby, Jackson is lounging in a tomato-red velvet armchair, his pose relaxed despite the tightly stuffed upholstery and stiff backrest of his seat. He's presumably waiting for the Signora, who's presently engaged in talking to another guest. But as soon as she spots me, her lips press in a tight line, and her eyes narrow.

"Ah, Miss Honey, if you could please wait for a second, I'll be right with you."

And so I find myself seated on an equally stiff-backed, tightly stuffed armchair as Jackson's but not quite pulling off his nonchalant pose.

"Have you been summoned here, too?"

"Nope, George Emerson sure didn't ask to swap rooms with me."

"Who?"

"George Emerson. Tall, dark-haired, with piercing gray eyes? I assumed you knew him since he marched in here ten minutes ago and informed the Signora you were to trade rooms effective immediately."

I close my eyes and take deep breaths, inhaling through my nostrils and exhaling through my mouth.

When I blink again, Jackson is studying me with a half-intrigued, half-amused expression. “I sense a story.”

I ignore his comment. “And you know this Emerson dude?”

“Why, you don’t?”

“No, I only had the displeasure of sharing with him a bad fifteen minutes over breakfast. How do you know him?”

Jackson scoffs. “How do you *not*? He’s been at the top of Manhattan’s most-wanted bachelors list for a while now.”

That guy? “Why?”

“Well, the mister is good looking, rich, successful, and single. What more could there possibly be to be desired?”

“He could also be civil and polite.”

“And why would an *uncivil* billionaire switch rooms with you?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s doing it more to spite me than anything else.”

Jackson tilts his head in a don’t-bullshit-me way. “And the real reason?”

“He has a view, and I don’t. I was complaining about it over the phone at breakfast, and he offered—more *ordered*—we trade places.”

“What a prick.” Jackson smirks.

“Trust me, you wouldn’t have appreciated the offer either if you’d been subjected to his savagery.”

“I personally would gladly subject myself to his *savagery*.” Jackson theatrically brings his palm to his chest. “And I say, don’t go looking a gift horse in the mouth.”

“How could I not? I’ve never seen this guy before, and now he wants to give me his room for no apparent reason.” I shift on my butt; gosh, this chair is really uncomfortable. “Except for his most-wanted bachelor status, is he a friend of yours?”

“We are friendly—as tourists get in pensions.”

“Why would someone so rich even stay in a pension? Shouldn’t he go to some swanky five-star hotel?”

Jackson grins mischievously. “What if he’s an eccentric besides being a billionaire and prefers to lodge in an antique Florentine palazzo, get the true Medici experience?”

“And he chose a pension run by Americans?”

My old neighbor shrugs. “Maybe he didn’t know. I had no clue.”

“Yeah, neither did I.”

“Honestly, though, even if his methods were a bit abrasive. I’m sure he has the best intentions. You should just go with the flow. Chances are nothing catastrophic will happen because of a room switch.”

“No *catastrophes*, of course. But I don’t want to owe that man a thing.”

“He’s a bit of a weirdo.” Jackson pauses for a second and then whispers, “But I don’t think he’d expect anything in return for giving up his room. George is a no-nonsense kind of man, always speaking his mind and meaning exactly what he says. He has a room he does not value, and he thinks you would value it. I bet he no more thought of you owing him one than he thought of being polite. We’re just not used to people being straightforward.”

“So he’s just a natural grump who means well?”

“I suppose; nice but grouchy. Whenever we talk, we disagree on almost anything. I’m sure you’ll feel the same way if you get to know him.” I scoff. Jackson continues. “You’re not the first guest he’s ruffled with his direct comments. George Emerson is a no-filters kind of guy. He’s blunt and a bit impolite at times—that is when he talks at all, but he means no harm.”

“So, in short, he’s an eccentric billionaire and must be taken at face value?”

Jackson’s lips twitch. “Oh Lucy, he speaks so little, I can hardly say I know him. But I think he’s fascinating, and I don’t mind how easy on the eyes our brooding, outspoken billionaire is.”

“What a relief.” I roll my eyes.

Jackson nudges my ankle with his foot. “Come on, don’t even pretend for a second you haven’t noticed how handsome he is.” My old friend sighs. “Irremediably straight, I’m afraid. But my loss is your gain.”

I scoff. “Yeah, right. Not in a million years.”

“Really?”

“No, I’ve had to deal with enough arrogant assholes in the past.” I study Jackson. “You always see the good in everyone, even when they don’t deserve it.”

“You’re probably right, and also why I’m in Italy alone on a revenge trip after one of those assholes broke my heart.”

I squeeze his arm. “Don’t worry, we’ll make this the best revenge holiday ever. I’m going to Instagram the heck out of you.”

“Music to my ears. We’re destined to become BFFs. Screw Freddy.”

“Freddy is your ex?”

“Yep.”

“Should we make that our vacation hashtag? #ScrewYouFreddy?”

“No, I want him to think I’m having the time of my life and not sparing him a second thought.”

“Then we’ll keep it a secret #SYF hashtag and have a laugh at his expense.”

“Ugh, what a bummer. I’m sorry for being such a downer right now.”

I squeeze him again and let go of his arm. “You aren’t. In fact, running into you here is the only good thing that’s happened to me on this trip so far.”

Before Jackson can reply, another hotel guest asks if she may sit in the only remaining armchair in the lobby. Given the go-ahead, she starts to chatter about Italy, the enormous risk she and her sister took to come to Europe at their age, but how much they’re enjoying the trip. Then she lectures us on how we must make sure to close the bedroom windows at night, for the street is very noisy, how we should always wear appropriate SPF lotion in the Italian sun, and on the importance of not leaving valuables out in the open.

She’s a cheery old lady, and her remarks are certainly more interesting than the raging debate about Guelfs and Ghibellines taking place at the other end of the room. At least until she tells us all about the dreadful experience she had at her previous stop in Barcelona, where she found a cockroach in the bathroom.

“But here you are as safe as in America. Unless you look into the court.” She sighs. “I’ve been told the rooms on that side are moldier.”

“Lucky for our Lucy, she’s about to get the upgrade,” Jackson chirps.

The tourist lady does a double take. “Oh? How so? I thought the pension was sold out?”

“George Emerson has offered to switch with her.”

“Really? What a gentleman!”

“I’m still not convinced of his gentlemanhood,” I clarify. “He was rather rude to me.”

“I bet he was,” the woman replies. “But that’s just how he comes across when you first meet him. I think he meant to be kind.”

“Jackson has just been scolding me for my suspicious nature.”

“Of course,” the little old lady says. “About Emerson—I really can’t say. No, he’s not the most diplomatic person; yet, have you ever noticed how the most indelicate things can still be beautiful at times?”

“The hidden beauty of discourtesy? Isn’t that a contradiction in itself?” I ask.

“Hidden beauty of discourtesy,” Jackson repeats. “Band name, I called it.”

I snort with laughter but stop short when the Signora sharply summons me to the check-in counter. Her attitude radiates a clear sense of disapproval.

“Miss Honey,” she cries once I reach her, “Mr. Emerson informed me about the agreement you reached regarding your rooms.”

Jackson, having jumped up from his armchair, knocks on the wood of the desk, casually leaning into it. “She accepts.”

“If you wish me to turn a gentleman out of his room,” the Signora mumbles, “I will do it.”

My jaw drops. “I don’t wish to turn anyone out of their rooms. None of this would’ve happened if you’d given me the room with a view that I booked and paid for.”

I raise my voice as I speak; my words boom through the lobby, silencing even the Guelfs and Ghibellines in the corner.

The Signora, while no doubt inwardly cursing me, bows her head, and, thin-lipped, continues. “Very well. You’ll now be in room 234. How soon can you vacate your room? I need to coordinate with the cleaning staff to prepare it for Mr. Emerson.”

Still annoyed at being treated with so much condescension, I choose to be the bigger person. “When is he leaving his?”

“He already vacated his room half an hour ago, and he’s waiting for you to do the same. His suite will be ready for you to take over in about twenty minutes. Will that be enough for you to pack? You only arrived last night. You can’t have taken too much stuff out of your suitcases.”

Not that it is any of her business. What if I’m someone who likes to unpack her entire suitcase on the first night? In fact, I am that person. I didn’t do it last night only because I was planning to move hotels.

Between gritted teeth, I say, “Twenty minutes is plenty.”

“Very well. Here are your new keys. Please drop the old ones on your way out.”

“Sure. I’ll go pack my things, then!”

“*Au revoir, mon cheri,*” Jackson greets me in French. “I’ll catch you later.”

Even if I'm done packing in ten minutes, I wait a bit longer before venturing back downstairs and dropping my keys to spite the Signora.

She begrudgingly thanks me and informs me my new room is ready. I refuse to wait for a bellhop and drag my suitcase up the stairs alone—the palazzo has no elevator.

When I finally haul my luggage into my new crib, I gasp in disbelief. She wasn't kidding when she said I've been upgraded to a *suite*.

This is not a room. It's an entire apartment with a separate living room, office area, and gigantic bathroom with both a clawfoot bathtub and shower. I open the window and breathe in the clean air, thinking of the strange man who has enabled me to see the sunlight dancing on the Arno and the cypresses of San Miniato, and the foothills of the Apennines, black against the early morning sun.

When I've had my fill of the view, I make another tour of the apartment. That's when I see a sheet of paper pinned up over the dresser mirror. On it is scrawled a single line.

**Her beauty surpassed the view outside my window.**

My heart skips a beat as I skim the words. I read the verse over and over again, tracing the ink with my fingertips.

*Did Emerson write this?*

*What does it mean?*

*Did he leave it on purpose for me to find?*

*Should I keep it? Give it back?*

The idea of having to return that man's lost poetry sounds even more menacing and obnoxious than having to thank him for gifting me all this. Because, intentional or not, now I clearly owe him big time.

I'm seized with an impulse to destroy the tiny piece of paper, but I have no right to do so. What if the man, besides having poor manners, also has a bad memory and this was a crucial verse in a masterpiece he will never be able to complete without this last line?

I unpin it carefully and slip it into a folded sheet of hotel paper stationery. Then I finish my inspection of the room, make sure there's no more hidden poetry lying around, sigh heavily, and go out to enjoy my first day in Florence.

## Chapter Three

### In Santa Croce with Giorgio

Lucy

The special map app I downloaded to experience the city like a true Florentine guides me through narrow cobblestone streets, giving me a sense of navigating the authentic Florence—the one to be discovered in back alleys and less beaten routes.

Italy is coming at last. The Signora and her inhospitality have vanished like a bad dream.

I follow the directions, turning right until I reach the sunny Lungarno. As I walk along the river, the special map app points out various landmarks to me. Il Ponte alle Grazie—mentioned by Dante. San Miniato—the beautiful small town with an impressive tower I can now see also from my window. More churches and ancient buildings and their places in history.

The next indication prompts me to dart under an archway of white stone into yet another alley.

I take a deep inhale, wanting to become familiar with Florence’s unique smell. Every city has its own.

Florence smells of life. Of red wine. Of buon giorno!

I proceed through its quaint cobblestone streets, calling, “*Buon giorno!*” to everyone I pass.

I get lost in the city’s bustle, admiring the handcrafted leather bags dangling outside so many shop windows, the more mainstream clothes shops that still, in Italy, appear more stylish than back home, and the picturesque bottegas where artisans display their goods.

In fact, I get so lost in my surroundings that I forget to check the map app and actually lose the way.

I’ve been walking a long time, and Santa Croce, whose tower I can see from the window of my new room, ought to have been closer to the hotel. I should’ve already gotten there. Looking at the map app, I try to orient myself and determine where I’ve taken a wrong turn. That’s when my phone dies.

I shake it, as if rattling the battery could revive it. It doesn’t. I distinctly remember putting it in charge last night. Something must’ve gone awry with

the power adapter I brought from home, or maybe the plug at the palazzo is faulty. I wouldn't put it past the Signora not to maintain electrical fixtures.

*Or maybe, a voice resounds in my head, one that sounds like a deep scowl and stormy gray eyes, if you hadn't spent half your breakfast yapping on a video call, you'd still have battery.*

Regardless of how it happened, being abroad in a foreign city without the safety blanket of a world of information just a screen tap away is almost refreshing, liberating. Part of the adventure.

Should I ask the way to Santa Croce? Or just follow the roads and see where they lead me?

I shrug and decide to walk on. And if I end up getting irremediably lost, I can always grab a taxi back to the Bertolini.

I partly regret my decision as I drift through a series of gray-brown streets, dark and narrow and not particularly picturesque. But then Italy reappears as I emerge into the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata, as the marble plaque mounted on a corner wall informs me. I stare in awe at a nine-bay loggia. Another sign discloses that this used to be an orphanage—as the lifelike terra-cotta babies above each bay hint at. The building was designed by Brunelleschi, the inscription also states.

See? I might've missed this if I hadn't gotten lost. And I've never seen such stunning architecture.

A cart serving food in the square makes my belly rumble. It's almost lunchtime. I buy some hot chestnut paste out of the cart because it looks so typical. It tastes partly of the paper in which it's wrapped, partly of hair oil, and partly of the great unknown. But it gives me enough strength to drift into another piazza, large and dusty, on the far side of which soars a majestic black-and-white façade of awe-inspiring beauty. Santa Croce. The adventure is over.

Excited, I reach the steps of the cathedral but pause before going in. I pull on the straps of my backpack, craning my neck to take in the building in its entirety.

Splendid as the outside of the church may be, I don't linger long. The glare of the sun on the white stone is almost unbearable, even with my shades on, and the dust manages to blow in my eyes under the lenses. Also, the day is growing hotter by the minute.

I enter the church, relishing the dingy lighting and cool air of the inside. My original intention had been to listen to the guided audio tour I had

downloaded on my phone. But that plan died alongside my phone's battery. That's the problem with modern technology. A good, old-fashioned guidebook of the city wouldn't have forsaken me. There are supposed to be frescoes by Giotto here, but how will I recognize them on my own? I need a guide.

I shiver and pull on a light cardigan. The inside of the church is almost too cold after the initial reprieve from the warmth outside. Now slightly less cold, I search the interior for a tourist box to ask where I can join a tour.

I puzzle out the signs in Italian—the ones that forbid people to introduce dogs into the church—the ones that ask, out of respect for the religious surroundings, to talk in hushed tones. The ones that prohibit the use of camera flashes. And finally, the right one that guides me to the tourist office.

The man behind the glass explains to me in stilted English that all group tours are sold out for today and I could, for an extravagant fee, book a private one in two hours. He also tells me, not sure why, how unlucky I am that the last available private tour starting immediately has been sold only five minutes ago.

Either way, I don't want to wait two hours or spend a gazillion dollars on a private tour. My first morning is ruined, and I might never be in Florence again. Half an hour ago, I was in a great mood, talking as a woman of the world who got lost in adventures in foreign countries. Now I'm freezing my ass off in a church whose beauty I've no way to appreciate fully on my own with no phone, no guide, and no tours available.

"Miss, Miss," the clerk behind the glass calls. "The gentleman who booked the tour before you is meeting with his guide now. Perhaps you could ask to join him and split the fee?" Without waiting for a reply, the man shouts, "Gianfranco, Gianfranco."

The guide, presumably—given the official-looking badge dangling from his neck—comes our way, and the two confabulate in thick Italian.

That's when I look at the abandoned tourist who, from the stiff set of his shoulders, is not happy about the delay. He turns, and a dark gray storm crashes into me. Then his lips curl into a smirk and he walks toward me.

"We meet again," he says, voice low, unbearably sexy.

Now that I see him standing, he's so tall, I have to crane my neck up to look him in the eyes. Same as I had to do with the church's façade.

"I haven't had the opportunity to thank you," I say, because no matter the weird, rude behavior, this man has given me his hotel suite for no apparent

reason. “You really didn’t have to give me your room.”

He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Was the view everything you expected?”

“Yes,” I say in a whisper, feeling out of breath and for no reason at all. “Everything and more.”

He gives me an almost imperceptible nod and tilts his head. “And what’s the problem now?”

“Oh, nothing, really, you should get on with your private tour.”

George Emerson, who still hasn’t properly introduced himself to me, turns to his guide and, after listening in to the ongoing discussion, asks in impeccable Italian, “*Gianfranco, puoi fare il tour anche in Inglese?*”

“*Certamente, signor Emerson.*”

“*La signorina si unisce a noi allora.*”

“*D’accordo.* The more the merrier,” he adds in English, making me catch on to the gist of the exchange.

“You really don’t have to,” I try to protest. “I’ve already imposed enough.”

Emerson shrugs. “Please, Lucy from 242—”

“Well, now it’s Lucy from 234. You’re George from 242.”

His eyes flash at my use of his first name; after all, we never introduced ourselves. “I can’t keep up with the numbers,” he says. “I’ll just call you Lucia.” The name rolls out of his mouth in a seductive whisper.

My lips part as I try to form a reply, find I have none, and let him continue.

“So, *Lucia*, at least this time accept the gesture without fighting me. Will you join my tour?”

He is being genuinely kind. Not even a profanity or veiled insult. Maybe earlier I’d just caught him on a bad morning. I could give him the benefit of the doubt. Plus, I really want to take a guided tour of the church.

As if reading the answer on my face, he adds, “Glad to see you’re not going to be difficult this time.”

And just like that he has me blushing with anger.

“Maybe it’d be easier to accept your kind gestures if you didn’t segue them with grating comments, *Giorgio.*”

The man has the nerve to chuckle at that. He motions to the central nave of the church, gallantly saying, “After you.”

A pair of unruly toddlers pull free of their mother's grasp and come thundering down the nave toward us, yelling and laughing at their brilliant escape.

George Emerson gives them such a frightening scowl, they stop short, their lips turning down from their smile into a wobble.

*See? Makes children cry for fun. I knew it!*

One boy, in his terrified status, falls, scraping his knees, and starts screaming frantically. I try to pick him up, but the child's legs have become melting wax. Each time I set him erect, he collapses. Fortunately, the mother catches up with her kids.

By some mysterious virtue, which only moms possess, she stiffens the little boy's backbone and imparts strength to his knees. He stands and, still gibbering with agitation, asks to be picked up.

The woman opens her arms, throwing Emerson a dirty, you-children-hater look. She picks up the toddler, dusts him off, rubs the boy's bruises, and tells both kids not to be silly, that there's nothing to be afraid of.

"Not even the tall man with the mean scowl?" the walking child asks as they go.

The mother's answer is lost in the crowd.

"Is terrorizing little kids a favorite hobby of yours?" I ask.

"Yeah, alongside kicking puppies for exercise, plucking flowers from old ladies' gardens, and pulling the wings off butterflies," George replies, with a smirk.

*Pulling the wings off butterflies.* I couldn't have come up with such creative evilness if I tried.

"I suspected as much," I say.

He peers at me. "While you, Lucia? I bet you have an inclination to rescue strays off the street, to cry at orphan commercials, and can't resist buying Girl Scout cookies."

I roll my eyes.

I've adopted a stray cat or two over the years, and I definitely cry at orphan commercials, but... "I don't know," I say. "I'm not the one giving away hotel suites to strangers or inviting them to piggyback on my private tours."

He gives me a look but doesn't elaborate further. Adding to the enigma of his personality.

The guide clears his throat at this point. "Are we ready to start?"

*“Si, Gianfranco, perdona la signorina, è un po’ logorroica non può farci niente.”*

I got signorina, meaning he’s talking about me, and logorroica sounds enough like logorrhea for me to get the gist of the speech.

I glare. “Don’t think you’re so clever. I understood perfectly what you just said.”

He smirks. “Stop being so tiresome and tell me instead what part of the church you want to visit first.”

He’s being so abominably impertinent again. I ought to be furious. But at this point, I’m finding his grumpy attitude almost comical.

“I’d love to see the Giotto,” I tell Gianfranco, avoiding answering Emerson directly to prevent further conflict.

“Very well,” the guide starts, leading the way to a chapel he names Peruzzi. He has a teacher-like air about him, and I feel like a student who just aced a test.

The chapel is already filled with a group tour led by a priest who, if I had to define in one word, I’d call sanctimonious.

“Remember,” he’s saying, “that the church of Santa Croce was built by faith in the full fervor of medievalism before any taint of the Renaissance had appeared. Observe how Giotto, in these frescoes—now, unhappily, ruined by restoration—is untroubled by the snares of anatomy and perspective. Could anything be more majestic, beautiful, true?”

“Ah!” Emerson exclaims in a tone of voice much too loud. “Built by faith indeed! What he means to say is that the workers weren’t paid properly. And as for the frescoes, I don’t see any truth in them. Look at that fat man in blue! He must weigh more than the two of us combined, and yet he’s shooting into the sky like an air balloon.”

“That’d be the Ascension of St. John,” our guide explains, throwing the prelate a worried look, as if the priest was someone important we ought not to irk with our unholy remarks.

The lecturer’s voice falters at George’s commentary of his explanations. The group of tourists he’s leading also shifts uneasily, and so do I. I hope that the sanctimonious priest isn’t a bishop or someone important and we’re not about to be thrown out.

George seems to have a gift for getting on a person’s last nerve. And I shouldn’t follow this man around and get tangled in his quarrels with everyone, but he has cast a spell over me. I can’t abandon the tour, no matter

how embarrassing it might turn out, just as much as I couldn't say no to his room.

"Also, I'd rather go up to heaven by myself than be pushed by cherubs," Emerson continues, unperturbed. "That is, if heaven even exists and all of our destiny isn't simply to rot into the ground until we become dirt ourselves."

"Cheerful much?"

He stares at the frescoes, reflective, looking lost in contemplation. "We know we come from the winds, and that we shall return to them," he says, not necessarily to me, but more to himself. "Life is just a knot, a tangle, a blemish in the eternal smoothness. But why should this upset us?"

In his words, I recognize the shadow of the poet who wrote the note abandoned in my room.

"You're quite the ray of sunshine, George Emerson."

That cryptic look again. "You know my full name, you've dug into me."

"Hard not to when I've been equally assisted and brutalized by you."

The storm fires up in his irises, a warning that if I really had been brutalized by him, I would've joined the choir of angels, singing praises to his prowess in bed.

No. I'm projecting. I'm sure he's not thinking anything sexual. Or is he?

His eyes never leave mine. "What's your full name, then? I feel at a disadvantage here."

"Honey," I say. "Lucy Honey."

He throws his head back, and a throaty laugh barrels out of him, wheezy and raspy, as if he was laughing so hard, he had trouble breathing.

"Oh my gosh, even your surname is cheesy."

Before I can destroy him with a vitriolic reply, the sanctimonious priest brushes past us.

"Pardon me," he says in a frigid voice. "The chapel is too small for two groups. We won't bother you any further."

The lecturer is clearly an important ecclesiastic, and his audience must be also his flock, at least judging from the prayer books they hold in their hands alongside the tourist guides. They file out of the chapel in silence.

"Stop!" our poor guide cries. "There's plenty of room for us all. You don't have to go."

But the procession disappears without a word.

Soon, the lecturer can be heard in the next chapel, describing the life of St. Francis.

“...full of innate sympathy...quickness to perceive good in others...vision of the brotherhood of man...” Scraps of the lecture on St. Francis come floating past the partition wall.

Gianfranco takes the slight in his stride and stoically delivers all the information we need to appreciate the frescoes.

“I’ll leave you a minute to explore by yourselves,” he concludes.

Seconds later, I can hear the lecture next door being interrupted again by Gianfranco’s apology, the anxious voice of our guide, and the curt, injured replies of his opponent.

I’m absorbed contemplating a lunette, when Emerson steps next to me.

“Poor Gianfranco, I fear I might’ve ruined his reputation with the clergy.”

I shake my head at him. “I swear I still haven’t figured out if you’re extremely rude or extremely nice.”

“Most individuals are polite because they believe it reflects positively on their persona. When I’m kind to someone, I have no ulterior motive. Sometimes people can’t comprehend that and get offended, or frightened.”

I say nothing, but in my heart I sympathize with the offended, frightened folks. “Maybe a kind action also done tactfully—”

“Tact!”

He throws up his arms in disdain. Apparently, suggesting tactfulness is a capital offense in his book. I watch him stalk around the chapel and stop before a different fresco with a scowl.

His rugged features are contracted in a deep frown but somehow also softer in the chiaroscuro lighting of the chapel. And that softness seems to carry an overwhelming sadness. That of someone who’s been through a major tragedy.

The weird impression passes when Gianfranco returns, and Emerson asks calmly, “Were you snubbed?”

“No. But we ruined the visit for I don’t know how many people. They won’t come back,” Gianfranco frets. “Should we move on?”

We explore Santa Croce’s interior, overflowing with the history and beauty of the ages. Gianfranco reveals the church’s many treasures, allowing us to take in the architecture’s splendor, the artifacts, and the works of art inside its walls. We bump into a few more serious groups we manage not to

scare away. And also more runaway children to dodge, who Emerson miraculously doesn't reduce to tears.

He's too busy staring at one of the Giottos.

*Why that fresco in particular?*

It seems much like the others. But Emerson has the look of someone who, despite being in a church, lives in hell.

*He's unhappy, I can't help thinking.*

How can he be unhappy when confronted with so much beauty? He's also rich, handsome, and successful, if Jackson is to be believed. What more could he want?

Not to mention he's on holiday in Italy. Maybe he realized he cared about his view after all and is regretting giving me his superior accommodations. Or maybe it has to do with how much time he's spent on that most-wanted bachelors list. Could he be *lonely*?

"If you have no more questions...?" Gianfranco takes his leave.

I tip him generously. Emerson refused to let me contribute to the tour, but at least he won't have to tip our guide.

George doesn't stop me. He waits until Gianfranco is gone to approach me, his face in the shadow. "I'll stick around a bit longer."

"Sure." I, on the contrary, am tired of the coldness, and I'm also ready for a yummy Italian pizza. "Thanks again for the tour, and the room. I hope my company hasn't been too much of a pain in the neck!"

Again, he just stares at me cryptically. "Goodbye, Lucia." He turns on his heel and goes back to stare at his frescoes.

Oh, hell, I shrug and exit the church, tilting my head up to the warm Tuscan sun. "George Emerson, you are a mystery," I mutter to myself and go search for that pizza.

## Chapter Four

### Für Lucia in A minor

George

A dreadfully rainy afternoon has all the guests of the Bertolini confined indoors, myself included. After a couple of days of mercifully avoiding Lucy Honey and her big Bambi eyes, full lips, and rosy, freckled cheeks, there she is opening the little draped piano in the common room and sitting at the keyboard.

As her fingers fly over the keys, she becomes a different person. Free from labels and constraints, a creature of pure sound.

She's a dazzling performer; a natural talent. Her playing is punctuated with dramatic gestures, even when she does it in black slacks and a hipster T-shirt bearing a cartoon cat.

Lucia is entralling. I'm ensnared.

A few people linger around and praise her playing, but finding her too engrossed in her music to reply, they disperse to their rooms to update their socials or take a nap.

She doesn't notice. Like every true performer, she's intoxicated by the notes.

I sit unnoticed by the window and watch her with fascination and resentment, wondering why I can't tear my eyes away from her, pondering this illogical pull that I feel toward Lucy Honey.

She ends a sonata, and I wonder if she'll keep going with Beethoven or switch to Mozart or Chopin, or perhaps Vivaldi, since we're in Italy. My composure is further disturbed by the opening bars of Moonlight Sonata, my favorite classical piece. I'm in suspense throughout the introduction until her soft hands start to caress the keys with deft competence, carrying the full weight of the melody.

I lose myself in the music.

At least until Jackson, the man who has become the Head Gamemaker of our little pension, sits next to her, stroking a few keys at random, disrupting her momentum.

The spell is broken. Lucy becomes once again only a young woman with a quantity of dark hair and pretty face who loves iced coffee, croissants, and

her rooms with a view.

But if she makes love as she plays... I shouldn't wonder about that. It'd be a very dangerous discovery for both of us. I'm in no state to date anyone. Haven't been since I came back from Afghanistan. I function better alone.

Still, my mind can't seem to let go of the image of Lucia at the piano. What if she's the same in bed? Inhibited and timid until the music takes over, turning her into a passionate and wild creature? The thought pops into my head unbidden and sends a jolt of electricity through my body.

I avert my eyes and absently stare out the window overlooking Italy in the wet. The most graceful nation in Europe has turned into a formless lump of dirt.

The street and river are a dirty yellow, the bridge a dirty gray, and the hills in the distance a dirty purple.

The Arno is swelling with the heavy rains, washing away the debris on the shoreline. A thick, yellowish fog is creeping in from the southwest, bringing the promise of better times, or hinting at the possibility of an impending storm.

I open the window to inspect, and an icy blast infiltrates the room, drawing a plaintive cry from an old lady, who's coming into the common room.

"Close that." She scowls. "We will catch a chill! Who would suppose this is Italy?"

The woman prowls toward Lucy and Jackson and sits on the armchair closer to the piano.

"I could hear your beautiful playing even if I was in my room with the door closed. Doors shut; indeed, most necessary. No one seems to have an ounce of respect for privacy in this country. Everyone is in each other's business, and gossip spreads so quickly."

Lucy blushes in response, probably not sure if she's really being praised for her prowess at the piano or being reprimanded for making so much noise with her music that it could breach through closed doors.

Similarly, I can't tell if the old lady is being genuine or passive-aggressive.

Jackson chuckles. "Privacy in Italy doesn't exist. In Modena, a cleaning maid burst in on me taking a hot bath and still proceeded to change all my towels before leaving, exclaiming cheerfully, '*Fa niente, sono vecchia.*'"

Jackson slams his hands on his thighs. "I'm old, she told me as justification."

"How dreadful," the lady says.

"Ah, what can I say?" Jackson continues. "The Italians are a most unpleasant people. They pry everywhere, they see everything, and they know what we want before we know it ourselves. We are at their mercy. They read our thoughts, and they foretell our desires. From the cab driver down to—to Giotto, they turn us inside out, and I resent it."

The lady doesn't seem to follow Jackson's philosophizing, but perhaps she gathers she's being friendly mocked.

I, on the other hand, am pleasantly surprised by this side of him. I wouldn't have expected a man who pairs mustard-colored pants with a russet shirt to have such a *subtle* sense of humor.

And now I'm blathering with myself worse than that old lady. I scoff at the parlor and its guests and leave. I've had enough of daunting tunes, useless chatter, and spellbinding women.

I crave the privacy of my small, *stale, view-less* room.

Sometimes I wonder why I do the things I do.

## Chapter Five

### Looking for Adventure

Lucy

George Emerson leaves the room, and I can finally let out a breath of relief. The moment I noticed him in my audience, I wanted to stop playing, but I didn't know how to without giving away *he* was the reason. Thankfully, Jackson sat next to me shortly afterward, fumbling with the keys and providing the perfect excuse.

But how long had the tall, mysterious man been listening to me before I noticed him? Not that it matters. According to Miss Alan, my music was clearly audible through the palazzo, so he would've heard it even if he weren't standing right there. But maybe he wouldn't have known it was me playing. Or looked at me while I did.

I turn to my friend. "Jackson—George Emerson, is he nice or nasty? I so want to know."

Jackson laughs and suggests that I should settle the question for myself.

"No; but it is so difficult. Sometimes he acts like a gentleman, and at others he turns into a complete caveman. Miss Alan, what do you think? Is he nice?"

The little old lady shakes her head and sighs disapprovingly.

Jackson, whom the conversation is clearly amusing, stirs her up by saying, "But you must classify him as kind, Miss Alan, after he rescued you from that awful beast of a taxi driver the other day."

Miss Alan nods reluctantly. "Yes, he saved me from an obvious attempt at extortion, but that doesn't mean I have to approve of his behavior in general. No, I do *not* like that young man. He is *not* nice."

Jackson smiles nonchalantly. "I swear I've done all I can to introduce him into Bertolini society. But he just doesn't seem to click with anyone."

"What about you, Lucy?" Miss Alan asks. "What do you make of him?"

With one eye upon the dreadful weather, I say, "He's like a summer storm, beautiful and dangerous." Then, at the curious blinks I receive in response, I add, "And so annoying when it keeps you shut inside for an entire afternoon."

“He looks dark and stormy for sure.” Jackson nudges me with his shoulder. “Doesn’t talk much either.”

The sun starts to set as we chat, turning the air brighter as the rain finally stops. The trees and hills drop the fog and return in crystal color. And a few streaks of bluish-green sky become visible among the clouds. While the Arno loses its muddy solidity and begins to twinkle.

“Too late to head out,” Miss Alan says, sounding almost relieved. “All the galleries are shut.”

“I’ll go anyway,” I say. “I’ve wasted half a day indoors, and I want to take a stroll around the wet city.”

The old lady looks grave.

“Should you venture outside at night alone, my dear? Couldn’t you accompany her, Jackson?”

“I wish I could. Unfortunately, I have a date with a hot Italian designer. He works for Ferragamo, I cannot skip.”

“And you shouldn’t,” I say.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay alone?” Jackson asks.

“Italians, dear, you know,” Miss Alan says.

I brush her unfounded comment off. “Worst that can happen is, someone will convince me to go into their restaurant and stuff me full of delicious food.”

Jackson laughs it off. “You’ve always been a free spirit. I put it down to too much Beethoven.”

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Jackson is right. I’m never more in touch with my inner self than after I play, which I’m not sure is necessarily a good thing.

Don’t we all need to lie to ourselves from time to time?

Anyway, I couldn’t stand listening to Miss Alan bad-mouthing this beautiful country and all its inhabitants for a second longer. I needed an escape, and Florence is here to provide me one.

The idea of just going back to my room is too depressing. This trip is my adventure. I’m tired of my square life, with a stable job that I chose because my parents told me to go for stability over passion, and with the same old routine that never really sparks any joy.

I want something big, and I believe it will come to me on the rain-swept streets of this beautiful city. It’s a free country, and I’m a free woman. I’m

not some medieval lady prisoner in a tower. The dragons have gone, and so have the knights in shining armor. I don't need an escort to take a walk at night.

I step out of the hotel and begin my late stroll around Florence, feeling rebellious. I'd love to do something that the proper Miss Alan would disapprove of. Like finding my own Italian designer to date for a week.

Unfortunately, contrary to what I've seen in movies, it seems wandering the streets of an Italian city at night is not enough to be swept off my feet by a modern-day Casanova.

On a whim, I walk into a shop and buy a postcard of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." I also buy Giorgione's "Tempesta." The storm. It reminds me of a certain brooding, not-so-much-of-a-stranger-anymore billionaire, who apparently keeps invading my thoughts at every turn.

Looking at the painting of the storm, ironically, makes me calmer, more grounded, less restless.

I buy more postcards. But no matter how many euros I blow on artistic reproductions, or how many turns I take, I still feel sort of trapped. I'm hyper-aware of this sense of dissatisfaction, which probably runs deeper than a wasted afternoon during my holiday. My stay in Italy is making me question my entire life, and I'm not sure why.

*The world is full of beautiful things... if only I could come across them.*

It's not surprising that my mom was never fond of me playing the piano. She's been declaring for years how playing always leaves me peevish, unpractical, and touchy.

"Nothing ever happens to me," I reflect as I enter the Piazza Signoria and look nonchalantly at its marvels, now familiar to me.

The great square is blanketed in shadow; the sunshine has come too late to hit it with its light. Neptune is already unsubstantial in the twilight, half-god, half-ghost, and his fountain splashes dreamily on the men and satyrs at his feet.

On the other side of the piazza, the Loggia looks like the triple entrance of a cave, where many deities, shadowy but immortal, seem to watch over humanity, noticing the comings and goings of humankind. In the dim light of dusk, it appears magical, giving me the impression that anything could happen.

But what? What do I want to happen?

Isn't being abroad in a beautiful city at sunset enough? Why do I only feel more and more frustrated instead? There's something I long for and can't seem to uncover.

I want more. More life. More joy. More love.

But apparently, I won't find them here. I shoot one last wistful glance at the palace's tower, still golden in the dying day, and start toward home.

Then something does happen.

Two English tourists by the Loggia begin a drunken argument about a woman.

The arguing quickly escalates becoming physical, and I find myself right in the middle of the melee. The men crash into me, and an elbow hits me in the temple.

"Ow," I cry out.

The man who hit me turns and frowns at me. He bends his head with a look of stupefied interest, as if he had an important message for me. He opens his lips to deliver it, but is silenced by his opponent's right hook smashing his jaw.

I hug my bag close to my chest and do my best to get out of the line of fire.

That's when I see him, George Emerson, standing just a few steps away, looking at me from across the square. How weird! Is he real, or am I hallucinating him?

He must be a mirage, because as soon as I spot him, he's already fading. He grows dim, sways above me, falls onto me softly, slowly, noiselessly, and the sky falls with him.

## Chapter Six

### A Heart-To-Heart with the Storm

Lucy

“Oh, what happened?” I murmur and open my eyes.

George Emerson still looks at me, but not from across the piazza. His face is just a few inches apart from mine.

I’m in his arms, and he’s carrying me away from the brawl. He’s holding me tightly to his chest, somehow managing to be strong and gentle at the same time. Like he was afraid to hurt or break me. The combination makes me feel safe in his embrace.

With my face so close to his neck, his scent is in my nose. And gosh, if it’s not the most divine smell on Earth. He smells of cedarwoods, cypresses, and hot sex in front of the fireplace on a winter night.

Oh my gosh. I’m *not* attracted to the pension’s grump. I can’t be.

*Lucy, I repeat, you don’t find George Emerson hot, sexy, or attractive in any capacity. No matter how firm his biceps feel around your waist, or how hard his chest is against your side, or how his stubble scrapes your forehead, making your skin burn.*

Nope!

After carrying me for what simultaneously seems like forever, and not nearly enough time, George drops me on the steps of the Uffizi Arcade.

My ass hits the hard stone, and I repeat, “What happened?”

When I speak, he checks that I can keep upright on my own and stands up, dusting his pants.

“You fainted.”

“I—I’m sorry.”

“How are you now?”

“I’m fine. Super-duper.” I nod and smile.

“It seems it’ll take more to crack that strong head of yours than two drunk Brits.” He looks relieved. “Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

I suppose. I tell him so.

But George Emerson is not satisfied. He makes me perform a few tests to confirm my soundness of mind.

First, he flashes his phone torch in my face.

“What are you doing?” I protest.

“Checking that your pupils are shrinking properly.”

“What are you, a doctor?”

“Ex-military. This is standard procedure in case of a blow to the head.”

Ah. Having gone to war could explain the haunted look he has, at least partially.

When I pass the pupils test, George still isn't satisfied. He makes me state the date, month, year, day of the week, and current time. Then I have to memorize a list of words and repeat them to him. Count to thirty backward. And say the months in reverse order.

I ace every answer, and only then he convinces himself that I don't have a concussion.

“You seem fine, let's go home.”

He holds out his hand to pull me up, but I pretend not to see it. Instead, I stay put and start to blabber, “Wow, thank you so much for...” Saving my life? Seems a bit dramatic. For being concerned? I doubt he really is. He's just being polite for a change. In the end, I opt for a non-committal, “Thanks for helping me back on my feet. But now I am good to go,” I add. “No need to worry. I'm grateful for the rescue, but I can manage on my own.”

His hand is still extended.

“Oh, my postcards!” I exclaim suddenly.

“What postcards?”

“I bought some postcards at a shop. I must have dropped them out there in the square.” I eye him warily. “Could you be even kinder and grab them for me?”

He could. George starts toward the piazza. And like the coward I am, as soon as he turns his back, I leap up and wobble down the arcade, heading for the Arno, trying to make my escape.

“Lucia!”

I stop with my hand on my heart.

Emerson appears at my side faster than a cheetah hunting for prey and scowls. “You sit still; you might not be concussed, but you aren't fit to go home alone.”

“Yes, I am, thank you very much.”

“No, you are not. You wouldn't have tried to make a run for it if you were.”

“But I'd rather—”

“I can’t save your postcards if I have to police you.”

“I’d rather be alone.”

He barks out an order, “Sit down until you’re rested.” I’m bewildered by his authoritarianism and obey him. “And stay put until I come back.”

In the distance, the palace tower has lost the gold hue of the declining sun. I stare at the now-dark spire, wondering how I will talk to George Emerson when he returns from the shadowy square. He’s impossible to deal with when I have my wits about me, but now that I’m dizzy and disoriented, I don’t stand a chance. I feel like a deer caught in the headlights.

But when he returns, I’m the opposite of speechless. Words just explode out of me. I talk about the fight and how annoying drunken tourists are. Oddly enough, it’s an easy topic. George tells me they’ve been arrested, and I become so talkative over the incident, I confirm all the logorrhea accusations he made about me to the Italian guide in Santa Croce the other day.

Surprisingly, George listens to me patiently. Not even scowling too much. In fact, he finally manages to silence me with a grin. “Well, that poor tourist’s elbow didn’t know who he was fighting against.”

Words lodge in my throat. His face like this, in the semi-darkness, smiling, is enough to make my insides tremble. Reassuring yet dangerous. Approachable yet forbidden. The same as always, and yet different.

“Can you stand?” he asks in a raspy whisper.

I nod, and to prove it, I lift up without his help. Despite the wings fluttering in my belly, I manage to walk firmly enough toward the Arno.

Emerson follows me. A cab driver signals to us; but George turns him down, opting to lean against the low stone wall flanking the river instead.

“How come a billionaire is ex-military?” I ask, leaning against the low wall next to him.

“I see you’ve done some more digging.”

“Hard not to, you’re one of the most gossiped-about guests of the Bertolini. I bet that when you booked a quaint palazzo in the heart of Florence, you didn’t expect it to be filled to the brim with American tourists, and most of them New Yorkers, no less.”

“I sure didn’t.”

We stay quiet for a while, staring at the water rushing below us. So long, in fact, I think he’s not going to answer me, when he finally says, “I run a private security firm.”

I wince.

He raises an eyebrow. “Quick again to judge me?”

“I—I wasn’t judging...”

He turns around, sitting on the low wall, facing me. “So you didn’t just imagine I head some kind of mercenary operation running black ops for shady oil corporations in even shadier countries driving locals out of their homes while also helping to kill the planet a bit?” His lips curl at the corners.

He’s teasing me.

“Well, I hadn’t gone that far, but... what is it you do instead?”

“All the clubs and bars in New York that need private security? They come to me.”

“Oh, by private security you meant *bouncers*?”

“Yes, I hire vets. When the soldiers come home burned out after another bad tour, I ensure they have a long enough, post-war-zone adjustment period while they train for the new role and then send them back out into the world. My guys are the best. I make money, they earn a good living and stay out of trouble. It’s a win-win.”

“Trouble?”

“Depression, PTSD... having a stable gig helps them recover, function like normal persons.”

“Does running a billion-dollar company help with those things as well?”

His eyes flash, and I know I’ve gone too far.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to—what was that?”

He has thrown something into the stream.

“What did you throw in?”

“Things I didn’t want,” he says crossly.

“George Emerson!”

“Yes?”

“Where are my postcards?”

He keeps silent.

“You threw my postcards into the river!”

“They were covered with blood.” He exhales. “I don’t suppose your dear ones would’ve wanted to receive them with that little addition. Unless you have many vampire friends, in which case I sincerely apologize.”

This man! I throw my head back and laugh. “It is decided, Giorgio,” I say between chuckles. “You are nice.”

He smirks. “Heaven spare me.”

“Still, you could’ve thrown them in a proper bin instead of littering.”

“It’s only paper, they’ll be melted by tomorrow. And at least this way, the fish can enjoy some art.” He points downstream, where the river swirls under the bridge. “They’re gone. I like the idea of them going out to the sea—I don’t know, maybe they just scared me.”

“A few postcards?”

The carefree young man verges into an old, troubled soul. “Art is for me like music is for you, I suppose...”

A simple comment, but one that lets me know this man somehow understands me on a deeper level than people I’ve known for much longer. Of my ex who I’ve been with for three years, for example. Chase never got my link to music, what playing did to my soul.

I don’t know how to answer that, so we walk toward our pension in silence.

“Art sets me free in a way,” George continues.

A premonition warns me I should stop him. That we’re treading on dangerous ground. That having a heart-to-heart with George Emerson is a mistake I’m going to sorely regret. But I don’t. I let him talk.

“I’m headed to Rome in two days,” he says. “I want to see a few more Caravaggios. *Davide con la testa di Golia*.”

“Why Caravaggio?”

“He was called *il pittore inquieto, innamorato del vero e della luce...*”

Hearing him speak Italian sends a shiver down my spine in a way it didn’t at the church during our tour.

“Which translates to?”

That lopsided grin again. “I thought your Italian was excellent. You understood me so well the other day in Santa Croce.”

I silently scold him.

“It means the restless painter, in love with truth and light.”

The words leave an inexplicable lump in my throat, and I keep quiet. But George seems incredibly chatty tonight.

“I want to ask you something before we go in,” he says.

We’re close to our pension. I stop and lean my elbows against the parapet of the embankment, facing the river. He does the same.

“Ask away.”

“Are you a musician? Please tell me you are.”

I wince. “I wish I could.” I stare at the gushing waters of the Arno. “Becoming a professional pianist was my dream. I’d gotten into Juilliard and all. But my parents talked me out of it.”

“Why?”

“They said spending upward of 300 k to study an instrument I already knew how to play was silly.”

“So what did you end up doing?”

“The most boring thing in the world. I’m an accountant.”

“Ouch, Lucia.”

I swat him playfully. “Are you mocking me?”

“How could I not? You’re making my mercenary operation sound like a dreamland.”

I shrug. “Numbers aren’t so bad. They’re reliable and uncomplicated. All I have to do at the end of the day is sort them into their neat rows and draw a sum. It can even be de-stressing. And I still give piano lessons in my spare time.”

“It still doesn’t sound any fun, but thank you for answering me.”

I mock-curtsey. “You’re very welcome, sir.” And move ahead.

The river is rushing below us, almost black in the advancing night as we return to the front steps of the Bertolini.

“Well, thank you so much,” I say, stopping. “You’ve now also possibly saved my life, on top of everything else. How will I ever repay you?”

His eyes darken. The change is perceptible even in the dim light.

Hands in his pockets, he tilts his head. “By forgiving the untimely demise of your postcards?”

I smile. “Consider it forgiven. Forgotten.”

We move inside and walk together up the stairs to the second floor. My room comes first.

We stop outside it, and George Emerson gives me a simple, “Goodnight, Lucia,” before moving along the corridor to his door.

In my room, leaning my elbows on the windowsill, I contemplate the River Arno, whose roar is suggesting to my ears some unexpected melody.

*Ah, George Emerson, the more I get to know you, the more you turn into a puzzle I can’t solve. And I’m afraid I won’t be able to forget so easily that I’ve been in your arms.*

## Chapter Seven

### Hills and Kisses

Lucy

I'm not sure why, but I don't tell Jackson or any of the other pension guests about my night adventure and of the role of knight in shining armor George Emerson played in it. I might be a modern, independent woman, but it turns out I'm far from immune to the lure of fairy tales.

True, Emerson slew no dragon. But the way I felt in his arms as he carried me away from the square... I shiver just thinking about it. I should steer clear of him, and yet at breakfast the next morning, when I have to decide how to spend my day, I jump willingly into more trouble. Jackson has put together a group to drive up the hills to the countryside. Emerson is part of the gang, and now so am I.

George Emerson and a picnic in the Tuscan hills; the ingredients for a disaster are all there.

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Our driver to Fiesole irresponsibly fires the engine of his rusty, battered minivan, recklessly urging it up the stony hill.

I suppress a smirk as I watch George, the most taciturn man on Earth being engaged in relentless conversation by the old ladies in the front.

How weird it is to imagine him as a billionaire living in a swanky penthouse somewhere in New York while watching him share a ride in a van with run-of-the-mill tourists like ourselves. He could've probably taken a helicopter up to Fiesole. But here he is instead, sharing the bumpy road with us.

I'm in the back of the van between Jackson and a young Irish man, one of the few non-Americans guests of the Bertolini. While Emerson is in the front with all the ladies.

Oddly enough, there are no couples at the pension. That makes me wonder if I involuntarily brought some kind of relationship doom on myself months ago, when I booked this stay for my vacation with Chase.

My stomach does a little flip when I realize I haven't thought about my ex once in the past few days.

George Emerson turns, flashing me a "help me" stare, and the flipping in my belly worsens.

I hunch forward. "Enjoying the road?"

"When we return, I'm going to sit in the back," he whispers so only I can hear. He has to lean close to my ear not to be heard by the others, and his warm breath tickles the skin on my neck.

"Hearts will be broken," I whisper back.

He gives me one of his unreadable stares, one that suggests he has figured out what happened between us last night when I still haven't, and turns to face the road.

I sag back in my seat, staring out the window at the hills rollicking past. I shouldn't read too much into the exchange and assume he wants to replicate the closeness we experienced last night. He's leaving Florence tomorrow to go to Rome. Nothing good can come out of fraternizing.

The van sweeps with agonizing jolts up through the Piazza of Fiesole and onto the road to Settignano.

"*Piano! Piano!*" Jackson pleads with the driver.

"*Va bene, signore, va bene, va bene,*" the driver croons, not easing off the accelerator one bit.

The car seems to gain speed instead of losing it, so much so that I'm thrown against my seat-mates with the regularity of a motor boat bobbing in a roiling sea.

"*Più piano, per favore!*" Jackson repeats, with a martyred look at me.

An extra lurch makes him turn ashen.

"Are you getting car sick?" I ask.

"Quite possibly."

"Give me your hands."

He obliges me, and I put pressure on the inside of his wrists. "Better?"

"A little."

"Don't worry, we're almost there."

I point to the Val d'Arno, which is visible in the distance through the blossoming trees. We're nearly at the top of the hill; our destination can't be far.

The car stops a few minutes later in the spot where we're supposed to go for a short walk, soak in the views, and have a *pranzo al sacco*—lunch in a

bag, literally translated.

A hollow like a great amphitheater, full of terraced steps and misty olives, stretches between us and the high town of Fiesole. The windy road continues its lazy meanderings before leading up to a high promontory jutting out over the flat terrain below. The scene reminds me of a few paintings I saw at the Uffizi and Accademia Gallery portraying uncultivated hills, covered with bushes and trees, overlooking the city below.

In fact, I find Jackson, phone in hand, trying to match a painting to the landscape. But the haze in the valley makes it difficult to pinpoint an exact location.

Once everyone is out of the van, we spontaneously split into groups. I stick with Jackson, the old ladies keep together, and Emerson—*surprise surprise*—wanders off alone.

We spread a couple of blankets on the grass. I sit on one and Jackson and the Irish guy on the other while we eat our paninis. After a while, they begin to talk almost exclusively to each other, so much so that I wonder if Jackson has already forgotten about the Italian designer he went on a date with last night and I'm intruding on a second vacation tryst.

I finish my lunch, and with an excuse, I wander off, strolling down the hill, with no particular destination in mind. As I trudge through the ever-thicker undergrowth, I stop now and then to pick up a few of the blue violets that grow everywhere.

I walk aimlessly until I get close to the edge of the promontory. Here, the view stretches out before me. But the crisscrossed pattern of the shrubbery breaks it up into a million fragments. I continue forward. With each step, twigs snap under my feet. I wouldn't make for a great hunter, I'm afraid.

I finally push past the bushes to an unobstructed view of the river, the golden plain, and other hills.

At the same moment I shove a low branch aside, the ground gives way, and with a cry, I fall out of the wood. Light and beauty envelop me. I've fallen onto a little open terrace, covered with violets from end to end, and of course, George Emerson is standing in its center.

He turns at the sound of my tumbling arrival. For a moment he studies me, cryptic as ever, an amused grin dancing on his lips. "Way to make an entrance, Lucia."

Then without another word, he quickly steps forward, offers me his hand to pull me up, and once our bodies are flush with each other, he kisses me.

## Chapter Eight

### Let's Just Enjoy Today

Lucy

I'm taken aback at first, my mind racing with questions: What's happening? Did I hit my head and I'm dreaming this? Why is George Emerson kissing me like his life depends on it?

But as his lips press against mine and his hands snake around my waist, pulling me closer to him, the rational part of my brain is lost, and instinct takes over. My body responds intuitively to his touch, my hands moving to clutch at his shirt.

The way he kisses is deep and passionate, urgent, desperate almost, as if he has been waiting for this moment forever. It's the kind of kiss that steals my breath away, while my heart is pounding so loud, I can't hear my own thoughts. All I can feel is him, his warmth, his scent, his taste. He tastes of the sweetness of a summer morning, of a dream finally coming true, and of the passion of a dark secret. An intoxicating combination that makes me dizzy with desire.

His lips are liquid fire on mine, igniting a flame deep inside me I didn't know could burn so high. It's like nothing I've ever experienced before. We're the only two people in the world. Italy, the beautiful view, the sea of blue violets, everything else fades away into insignificance. All I can focus on is the feel of his body pressed against mine, the way his hands roam over my curves, flaring up sparks of desire wherever they touch.

In response, I tangle my hands in his hair, pulling him even closer until there's no space left between us.

The kiss seems to go on forever, and I don't want it to end. But eventually, we have to come up for air. He pulls back slightly, his forehead resting against mine as we both pant for breath.

He looks at me with those unreadable eyes. "I'm leaving for Rome tomorrow," he whispers, his thumbs tracing circles on my hips. "But I had to do that before I went."

I smile, feeling both exhilarated and uncertain about what just happened. "Why?" I ask him breathlessly.

"I don't know," he replies honestly. "But I can't stop thinking about you."

My heart skips a beat at his words. Maybe this vacation wasn't doomed after all.

Emerson takes my hand and leads me to a spot where we can sit on the grass and enjoy the panorama.

We settle on the blanket of violets, our bodies still close together, our gazes lost on the horizon. The view from here is stunning—the river sparkling in the sunlight, the lush green hills stretching off into the distance. But my attention is focused solely on George.

He takes my hand in his and runs his fingers over my knuckles, sending shivers down my spine. It feels like fate brought us here together, in this beautiful place. But at the same time, questions swirl in my mind about what our future holds.

George seems to sense my hesitation and leans in to kiss me again. This time the kiss is gentler, more intimate. Slow and tender, his lips moving softly, as if he's savoring the taste of me.

The doubts in my head blur. At this moment, none of them matter. All that exists is the softness of George's mouth and warmth of his chest pressed against mine.

As our kiss deepens, his hand slides down my back and rests on my hip until, without warning, he rolls me over and gets on top of me, trapping me between his hard body and the grass below. If this is a prison, please sign me up for a life sentence.

I break our kiss for a moment, panting for breath. "What are we doing?" I whisper, gazing up at him with wide eyes.

He smiles down at me, his fingers tracing a path along my cheekbone. "Isn't it obvious? We're enjoying each other's company."

I'm about to protest when he leans down and kisses me again, his hand sliding under my shirt to caress the small of my back.

All my objections vanish as pleasure spreads through me like wildfire. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down to me. He deepens the kiss even further before his wicked mouth moves on to my jaw, my neck, my earlobe.

The connection is more than just physical attraction or the heat of the moment. It's a deep and abiding clash of souls that makes me feel like I've finally found my missing piece.

As he nibbles on my earlobe, I can't help letting out a soft moan. George's lips travel down my neck, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

He breaks away from my neck and looks into my eyes, his own filled with a hunger and longing that matches my own.

We stare into each other's eyes for the longest time. A million unspoken words pass between us until George voices what we're both thinking, "I don't want to think about tomorrow," he whispers. "Let's just enjoy today."

I should say no. I should get up and rejoin the others. I'm driving at full speed toward a wall. If I don't pull the brakes now, I'm going to crash and burn. But at this moment, I can't bring myself to care. I don't want to stop. I don't want to think. All I want is to feel. I want George. I want him in every way possible.

"Okay," I whisper, my voice barely audible.

With no further hesitation, he leans back down and captures my lips in a fiery kiss, and everything else is forgotten.

## Chapter Nine

### He Returns and He Leaves

Lucy

I can't say how long we stay on the grass, rolling on a bed of violets and kissing with a passion greater than that of the damned souls in Dante's *Inferno*.

We only pull apart when my phone rings.

Jackson.

George rolls off me, and I immediately feel cold. And not just from the lack of his body heat. The weather has changed. Gone is the blazing Tuscan sun, replaced by heavy, dark clouds.

The storm raging in George's eyes has moved to the skies.

"Yes?" I pick up.

"Where are you? We have to leave before the storm breaks."

"We'll be right there."

"We?"

I throw George a side glance. "I meant, *I*'ll be right there."

I hang up and turn to George, unable to suppress a furious blush now that the passion-induced temporary insanity is receding. "The others want to go, we should head back."

George stares up at the lead gray sky. "I'll walk."

"All the way back to Florence?" I ask, astonished. "It'll take you hours." Doubt twinges in my stomach. I don't know if he wants to walk back to avoid me, to avoid being trapped between the old ladies again, or something else entirely. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." He cups the back of my head and stamps a kiss on my forehead. "But you should go, Lucia."

Not sure how I feel, I stand up and dust my jeans off.

I don't look back as I head to the car. My self-control is waning by the minute. Another look at his handsome, tormented face, and I might offer to walk home in the rain with him.

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As I climb into the van, Jackson gives me a dubious stare.

He pulls a blade of grass out of my hair and asks, “Have you seen Emerson? He’s not picking up his phone.”

I hope that, in the van’s semi-darkness, my cheeks don’t look as hot as they feel. “I passed him on my way here, he says he wants to walk back.”

“To Florence?”

I shrug. “Apparently,” I confirm. “I told him it was madness.”

As he climbs into the van shivering, with his collar up, Jackson mutters, “Weirdest billionaire ever. It’s everyone,” he yells to our driver. “Let’s go.”

Rain and darkness come together halfway through our journey. A lightning flash strikes across the sky, making one of the old ladies in the front scream. At the next flash, I almost scream as well.

“Nervous?” Jackson asks. “You disappeared half the afternoon, were you with Emerson?”

I lean in to whisper. “I won’t ask how your Italian designer and Irish beau fit together if you don’t ask about Emerson.”

With a wicked grin, Jackson zippers his mouth shut and lets the topic drop, turning his gaze out the car window.

The storm rages on, and I can’t help wondering how Emerson is doing. Did he even have an umbrella? I don’t think so.

I have to put in a conscious effort to stay still in the car and not make it obvious how worried I am. I’m angry at him for being so reckless. I keep imagining him stuck in the pouring rain, his clothes soaked through, his hair plastered to his forehead. Yet, a part of me is drawn to his wild and indecipherable spirit.

Still, what kind of person willingly walks into a storm? Aha, and what did I just do? Maybe I didn’t walk into a literal storm, but kissing George Emerson sure wasn’t a safe choice.

What possessed me to kiss him like that? Yeah, we shared a moment last night, but I don’t really know him.

I know what happened. *Italy* happened. *Tuscany* happened.

The sky was gold, and the ground blue, and for an instant he looked like the lost brooding, romantic hero of a novel. So, when he kissed me, I kissed him back. It was a moment of reckless abandon, and despite knowing that it was wrong, I couldn’t resist the pull of his magnetic eyes.

But now, sitting in the van, I’m filled with a sense of unease. I re-enter the city with my hands clasped, struggling not to fidget. The storm has lost

intensity, and my anxiety for George's safety eases a little.

Without the raging winds, the temperature rises almost at once, transforming the fallen rain coating the city into a warm, misty vapor that hangs heavily in the air.

As we pull up to the hotel, I don't feel like going out again in the drizzle. I don't care if I'm wasting a night of my vacation. I order food off an app—the pension doesn't provide room service—and eat alone in my room.

With all the lights turned off except for the bedside table lamp, I think in a loop about what happened. How I can't describe it. I try to dissect my emotions, the mysterious discontent Italy has brought to the surface, the recklessness of my actions, and the irrational bliss kissing George Emerson has unleashed within me.

I can't shake off the feeling that I have made a mistake by kissing George, but at the same time, it excites me to think of what could happen next.

*Nothing, he's leaving tomorrow.*

As I lay on my bed, trying to come up with more reasons to justify my behavior, the light rain patters against my windows, casting weird shadows over the glass. A tram roars by in the dark, and I feel inexplicably sad, even if my eyes stay dry. I lift my gaze to the ceiling, where the fading frescoes are colorless and vague, the very ghosts of joy.

*It has been raining for nearly four hours.*

I pace up and down the room.

What would have happened with George if Jackson hadn't called?

Nothing. We certainly wouldn't have done anything beyond kissing in a field on the side of a hill where everyone could've spotted us.

We wouldn't. Right? No. The rain would've caught us aware, and we would've rushed back to the van.

That's it.

Is it?

I can't think.

I go up to the dripping window and strain my eyes into the darkness.

The pension doorbell rings. I grab the window handle, but before I turn it, I hesitate. I go back to the bed and switch the lampshade off before opening the window. In the street below, someone is standing dripping on the landing. A man. George looks up but doesn't see me.

To reach his room, he has to pass by mine. I'm still dressed. I could slip into the hall and... and what?

Thank him for the kissing?

So I wait like a coward behind my door, listening for the sound of his footsteps out in the aisle. They come, muffled over the carpet, and move inexorably closer.

I hold my breath and wait with a sick feeling in my stomach for him to reach my door and edge past as if nothing has happened. As if this afternoon didn't matter. As if *I* didn't matter.

But the footsteps halt suddenly, and I can almost hear his heavy, tired breathing outside my door.

Am I imagining things? I convince myself I am when the softest knock makes my heart do a somersault in my chest.

I wait for a few heartbeats to steady my breath and fling the door open.

There he is, darker than any storm, wilder than any wind, an electrifying presence in the dim light of the hallway.

His clothes, hair, and lashes are soaked, dripping on the carpet.

"What—?" I begin.

"It is my last night in Florence," he says. "I want to spend it with you."

I should say no, I should close the door in his face. Instead, I take a step back and open the door wider.

"You're drenched, and you're shivering." I help him unbutton his wet shirt. "What possessed you to walk all the way home?"

He kisses me before shoving the wet fabric of the shirt off his shoulders. "I was trying to clear my head."

"And did you succeed?"

"No." He kisses me again. "My thoughts are still raging in a storm, I can't control them any longer."

I pull back. "Am I the storm?"

He comes forward and cups my cheeks. "You are the storm, and you are the quiet after it. You are everything, Lucia."

His words send a shiver running down my spine, I step back and pull my top over my head. I want him as I've never wanted anyone before.

We only have a night, I won't waste another minute second-guessing myself. I prefer to live with remorse than regret.

George seems to share the same hurry. He makes a quick job of removing the rest of his wet clothes and comes to me, our bodies crashing.

I dissolve under his caresses, the last of my resolve crumbling like a sandcastle under the force of a wave. His words, his touch, his kisses,

everything about him has me under a spell. I can't resist him any longer. I kiss him back with a fierce passion, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him closer to me.

We stumble toward the bed, falling into it together, our wet clothes forgotten. He explores my body with his hands and lips, rekindling that fire within me I never knew existed. I moan into his mouth, surrendering myself to the moment, to him.

He breaks the kiss and stares at me, his eyes dark with desire. The sound of rain pounding against the window pane mixes with that of our heavy, ragged breaths.

"I want you, Lucia. I need you."

No more convincing is necessary. I want him, too, more than anything at this moment. I nod my head and doom myself to an eternity in an inferno worse than any hell Dante could ever have envisioned.

My soul is damned, and I'm a willing captive in the devil's grasp. But right now, I'd sacrifice anything for the taste of his lips and feel of his skin against mine. And so I give in. I give myself to him completely, our bodies moving in perfect sync, the storm outside echoing the one raging within.

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The next morning, I wake up alone, with only a note left on his pillow to confirm last night hasn't been a dream.

I pick up the small sheet of paper and read.

**My dearest Lucia,**

**I'm sorry to have left without saying goodbye, but I had to leave early, and you were sleeping so peacefully, I couldn't bring myself to wake you.**

**Or perhaps I was afraid I wouldn't go if I stared into your beautiful eyes.**

**We both knew time was our enemy. And we didn't make any promises. But last night with you, I felt alive in a way I never thought possible again.**

**I see now I have been held captive by my own fears, fears I thought I'd learned how to live with, but realize now I still have to overcome. I**

**don't know what the future holds, and I still can't make any promises. What I can say is that I hope this goodbye is not forever.**

**As you once said, it's a small world. We'll find each other again, Lucia, once I'm ready, once my demons are conquered.**

**Yours,  
George**

I clutch the note in my hand as I try to sort through my tumultuous emotions. I wanted adventure, and I got it. What I didn't bargain for was getting my heart broken in the process. That's why you should read the fine print before signing your soul away to the devil.

## PART TWO

## Chapter Ten

### Summer in New York

Lucy

Early on a Friday afternoon in mid-July, I'm keeping the blinders lowered in my office. Despite the air conditioning, the glare of the sun bouncing off the nearby skyscrapers is merciless. I've been back from Italy for a month now, with no word from Mr. Tall, Dark, and Stormy.

But at least this weekend will be the first I won't spend stuck melting in the city. Jackson has convinced me, Anita, and my brother to join him and a couple of friends in sharing the rent of a cottage in the Hamptons, from mid-July through Labor Day. We leave this afternoon for our first mini-break.

I'm literally counting the minutes until I can get away from my desk, race home to grab my suitcase, and for me and Anita to hitch a ride with my brother, Larry, to the beach house.

But when the moment comes and my best friend and I push past the glass doors of our building, sunhats on our heads, flip-flops on our feet, and shades over our eyes, I find more than I'd bargained for awaiting me on the curb.

Larry's car is parked out front with the trunk open, while my brother is engaged in a shouting match with my ex, Chase.

They look like the violent version of a J-Crew catalog. Both men wear simple, well-cut slacks and crisp polo shirts, looking very prim and proper—except for their raised voices. Both tall and refined, with square, broad shoulders, and pearly white teeth that are now bared at each other in twin snarls.

My brother's dirty blond mop is recently trimmed but still looks like he just came from the beach. While my ex's hair is longer and more unruly than I remembered, with dashes of gray at the temples that weren't there a few months ago when we broke up.

I approach them warily. "What's going on?"

Larry turns to me, the anger on his face relaxing a notch. "I found this loser lurking around your building and told him to get lost."

I turn to stare at Chase. Our eyes lock and... nothing. Their piercing blue wrings exactly zero reactions out of me. No speeding heartbeat, no sweaty

palms, flushing cheeks, or weird flutterings in my belly.

Chase seems self-conscious as he approaches me. “Luce.”

“Chase,” I say. “What are you—?”

Before I can finish the phrase, he drops to one knee and attempts to blind me with a rock the size of a softball.

“Lucy, honey, I’ve been an unforgivable idiot. I made a terrible mistake and am lost without you. Will you marry me?”

My jaw drops. “Is this a joke?”

“No joke, the past months without you have been hell.”

Chase takes my hand in his, his touch still eliciting no reaction except for a mild disgust at finding his palms clammy. In this awkward position, my ex declares I am the love of his life and the only woman for him. Next, he proceeds to list all the reasons I should take him back.

I stand with my feet glued to the curb, frozen. Chase must mistake my stunned silence for encouragement, because he stands up, cups my cheeks, and kisses me.

At first, I’m too stunned to react. I’m vaguely aware of people clapping around us—passersby must’ve assumed I said yes, and of my brother cursing under his breath. I try to concentrate on the kiss, deciding to give it a shot. Not because I want to kiss Chase particularly, but because I haven’t kissed anyone since George Emerson. I might as well jump back on the horse, since I’ve no intention to wait around for Stormy McDisappearing while he sorts his demons—if that’s even a thing, and not just a blatant excuse he gave me to make me feel slightly less lousy about him sneaking out on me in the middle of the night.

I tentatively open my mouth and try to force some enthusiasm into the kiss, dropping my hands on Chase’s shoulders. The sounds of catcalls and applause grow louder while I feel as enthusiastic about this kiss as being on hold with the cable company.

Chase’s lips move against mine, and I feel nothing. He’s not a bad kisser per se, but everything feels wrong. My blood doesn’t sizzle, no sparks zing across my nerves, no trembling, no nothing. And especially no fire.

The kiss is awkward and stilted. Chase’s hands are on my hips, mine are around his neck, but I’m not twisting my fingers into his hair or pulling him closer lost in passion, feeling as if I might die if I can’t press harder into him.

Damn it.

I pull away and put some distance between us. My plan backfired on me big time. Kissing Chase after having kissed George Emerson is like eating cold ravioli out of a can after having tried the real thing cooked from scratch by an Italian chef.

My ex blinks at me, bewildered and hopeful.

“Sorry, Chase,” I manage. “I don’t think this is going to work out.”

No matter how many times I’ve imagined this turned-tables scenario in my head. How much I’ve wanted for my ex to come back to me groveling. And how frequently I’ve pictured myself turning him down with scorn. Rejecting him brings me no pleasure.

His face falls. “Luce, I know I—”

I raise a hand to stop him. “It’s not something you can talk your way through, Chase. I don’t feel that way about you anymore.”

His expression flickers with hurt, then anger. “Is there someone else?”

I shake my head.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“There’s no problem. I just... don’t love you anymore.”

The muscles in his jaw twitch. “That’s it? You’re over me?” he asks, as if the concept were inconceivable.

He’s looking more angry than sorrowful by the second. When he takes a menacing step toward me, Larry steps in-between us. “She said no, pal. Get a hint.”

Chase glares at my brother, then at me. With a mean sneer on his face, he spits, “Your loss.” Then he turns on his heel and goes.

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

Anita drops a hand on my bare shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Just... what was that?”

My best friend smiles at me. “An idiot who realized too late he let the best thing that ever happened to him go.”

“Aww.” I crush her in a hug.

Meanwhile, the surrounding crowd disperses now that the show’s officially over.

My brother grabs our bags and stuffs them in the trunk, muttering to himself. “What a loser, and he made us waste so much time, we’ll end up stuck in rush hour traffic out of the city. It’s going to take us forever to get to the Hamptons now.”

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Three hours later—one hour too many—we finally reach our beach cottage. Larry parks out front, and we each pull our luggage inside, where Jackson welcomes us with chilled cocktail glasses, complaining, “You’re horrendously late.”

I prop my suitcase against the wall and gladly accept the drink from him. I take a sip of the pinky liquid. Cosmopolitan, easy on the juice, heavy on the vodka.

“Sorry, my fault.” We kiss on the cheeks.

“How very Italian of you,” Anita jokes while pulling Jackson in for a more customary side hug.

“What happened?” Jackson asks.

“We’re late because my ex thought to stop by my place and ask me to marry him.”

Larry stands stiff in the middle of the room, looking very cross and handsome. “What a jerk, I never liked him.”

Jackson pulls my hand up. “I see no ring.”

“I wouldn’t be standing here if I’d said yes.”

“All the better for us,” Jackson cheers. “But I want deets, was the ring big? How did he ask? Did he just come out and say ‘marry me’ after months of radio silence?”

“Basically. But how about you show us the house before I go into the gory details?”

“Patrick!” Larry exclaims.

Two guys I don’t know walk into the cottage, carrying store bags that clinch loudly.

Larry grabs one from the guy closer to him and drops it onto the kitchen counter. “Did you get any food, or just alcohol?”

“Darren has the food.”

The other man, either Jackson’s new boyfriend or summer fling, sets the rest of the bags on the island and waves at me shyly. “Darren, nice to meet you.”

“Lucy.”

The other guy introduces himself as Patrick, straight, I’d say, from the subtle once-overs he gives me and Anita.

“Guess this makes all of us,” Jackson says. “Should we get this party started?”

He pours more Cosmo mix into our glasses and gives us a tour of the house. The bedrooms are all upstairs. I'm sharing with Anita. Patrick and Larry are bunking together. And Darren and Jackson are in the master. The decor is very beach stylish, whitewashed wood everywhere, with pale blue accents. The ground floor is one big open space, and outside there's a terrace, with gnarled tree trunk decorations, rustic-chic outdoor furniture, two flower beds, and a white wooden gate that grants us direct access to the beach. The beautiful patio gets overshadowed by the view beyond, sandy-white dunes that chase one another into the Atlantic Ocean.

We all get lost in our thoughts for a second, staring at the waves until Jackson breaks the spell. "I already met our neighbors on the left." He points to a cottage practically identical to ours. "All young people, no children. Just the right crowd."

By reflex, I turn to the other side of the cottage and take in the other property adjoining ours. It looks like an abandoned mansion. The tortured garden is bright with wildflowers and tall grass. The villa's paths are already weedy; the lawn yellow with dandelions.

"And what of the neighbors on the other side?"

"Non-existent at the moment." Jackson points to a white-picked real estate sign. "The property is up for sale."

"A toast," Larry proposes.

"What should we toast to?" Anita asks.

Jackson raises his glass. "To exes getting what's coming to them..." Larry genially accompanies the toast, whistling the wedding march. "And to a beautiful summer full of memorable moments, unforgettable parties, and hot encounters."

We all clink our glasses and take a sip of our drinks.

The first night at the cottage goes by in a blur of laughter, alcohol, and music. I'd say we're a well-assorted group. Jackson is the life of the party. Larry is at his wittiest. Anita is just the best, as always. Darren is quiet and reserved but still makes everyone smile with his dry sense of humor on the rare occasions he speaks. While Patrick... dare I say is a little flirty? He keeps flashing me teasing smirks that could make any woman weak in the knees, except, perhaps, he's not broody enough. Too much of a good boy.

*Are we into bad boys now?* a voice asks in my head.

Apparently.

I try to stay focused on the present, but as my gaze wanders out to the darkening ocean, I can't help reflecting on that kiss with Chase.

Before Italy, I had enjoyed his kisses all right, never thinking of them as lacking or not passionate. But if today's kiss is any indication of how all my kisses are going to go after George Emerson...

I catch Patrick eyeing me over his wineglass again. Maybe I should kiss *him* and drive away the ghost of George Emerson for good. The problem with Chase was that he basically was warmed-up old soup. I need something new, something exciting.

Patrick catches me staring and winks. I glance away, feeling heat rush to my cheeks.

See? That's a normal reaction. Not all men are dead to me after George Emerson; just my ex. I take a sip of my drink and look back at Patrick.

He's still looking at me, smiling.

I return the smile.

## Chapter Eleven

### The Queen of Bad Decisions

Lucy

The next day, Jackson organizes a beach party, inviting all the neighbors.

Patrick comes down to the beach, looking a tad too prim in his pale-blue swim trunks and white linen button-down. Definitely not a stormy, broody stranger. Still, he's handsome, with an athletic figure and sun-kissed hair.

I watch him as he sets up his beach chair, his muscles flexing under his shirt as he maneuvers the chair closer to the water line. I'm suddenly very aware of the oversized, baggy T-shirt that I've flung over my bathing suit. I should've planned my seductress attire better.

He takes the shirt off and starts applying sunscreen to his flat-muscle chest. Then, in the oldest move in the book, he asks me if I can please get his back.

I don't mind. I grab the bottle of sunblock and stand behind him, enjoying the feel of a man's strong back under my palms. As I rub the lotion onto his body, my fingers trace the lines of his muscles, and I appreciate the geometry of his back and shoulders.

Still, I don't feel like I'm going to die if he doesn't flip me over and drop me on the hot sand.

But I sure didn't feel that way about George Emerson the first time I met him. I was closer to homicidal instincts than amorous feelings. So maybe this quiet attraction I seem to share with Patrick could lead to the same passion that made my blood sizzle with George. Surpass it even, since the premise is so much more promising.

Lotion applied, I lie back down in my chair. Some time passes, during which neither of us speaks. Until Patrick sits upright, huffing out air.

"It's too hot sitting here, would you like to take a walk?"

I eye him from under my shades. Is *take a walk* code for *let's go make out where the others can't see us*?

I shrug, and what if it is? "Sure," I say.

We amble along the shore, our feet sinking into the warm sand. Patrick leads the way, steering us away from the cottage. As we stroll further down

the beach, the noises of the party fade into the distance, while the sun beats down on our skin.

The waves lap against our feet, delivering a small reprieve from the heat, while the smell of salt water fills the air. Seagulls caw overhead, searching for prey to snatch up from the ocean. The beach is busy on a Saturday, so we keep walking, mostly in silence.

The more we go, the more I question my decision to come. Should I really go around kissing any willing hot guy, just to prove George Emerson doesn't own a piece of me?

Probably not. But oh, hell, I've been the queen of bad decisions lately, what difference is another one going to make?

We walk on until the sand dunes open to leave space for a sloping triangular meadow. Pretty houses line it on two sides in plain view, as opposed to some splendid mansions hidden in the trees.

We're now well out of sight of the cottage.

"Should we go back?" I ask.

"Maybe keep going a little further," Patrick says. "We can't get lost, all we have to do to get back is follow the ocean."

"Sure," I say, feeling as if I'm edging toward the inevitable.

We continue along the shore until a water enclosure among the shrubs—a shallow pool, blocks our way.

"A pond!" I dip a toe in the water. "Definitely warmer than the ocean."

"Is the water clean?"

The question is so beyond the point. I shrug. "Looks clean."

"I'm still not sure I'd go in there. Stagnant water is the worst for bacteria."

My shoulders sag. "I suppose there should be a sign if it weren't safe."

"Sign or no sign, I wouldn't risk it."

"No, I guess I wouldn't go in either." *I totally would.*

I throw a rock into the pond and turn back, finding Patrick standing right behind me. So close, in fact, that I almost crash into him and lose my balance, stumbling back.

"Sorry." He steadies me, gently grabbing me by the shoulders. "I've scared you."

"Nah, don't worry."

"May I kiss you?"

My cheeks flame scarlet, apparently he thinks discussing water bacteria is a good preamble to a kiss.

If I was half into the idea of kissing him before, now I'm ninety-nine percent out. Still. In for a penny...

Words escape me, I'm never good at debating the act of kissing beforehand. Like, what should I say? Yeah, get on with it? Go, Cowboy? Or answer by saying, "I'm the queen of bad decisions, do your worst?!"

It's much simpler when men just grab me up from a sea of violets and kiss me senseless, without asking for permission.

Patrick is still staring at me expectantly, waiting for an answer, so I just nod.

He closes his eyes, and I brace myself for the kiss more than anticipate it.

Our teeth clash, we tilt our heads the wrong way. Trying again, Patrick angles his head and presses his lips against mine, but it's only a slight improvement. I try to adjust my mouth, to match the pressure of his, but it feels like I'm kissing a wet fish.

It's not Patrick's fault, he doesn't have bad breath or anything. I'm just not feeling it. I force myself to ignore the sensation, to focus on the feel of his lips pressing against mine, on his strong back, sun-kissed hair, and sky blue eyes. But it's no use. My mind is wandering, and my body is numb.

Another failure.

All I managed to prove so far is that George Emerson *did*, in fact, ruin all men for me.

I break the kiss and step back. "Sorry, I—"

Patrick looks at me, confused, scratching the back of his head. "Guess that didn't work."

We leave the pond in silence. I'm not sure if he's waiting for me to say something. Or if he, like me, just wishes we can put this kiss in the past and never speak of it again.

"I'm sorry," I repeat when I can no longer take the silence.

He shrugs. "Nah, it's not you, babe, or me. Sometimes the attraction is there but the chemistry just doesn't work."

Oh, well, at least he's being laid back about the whole affair.

"So, friends?" I ask tentatively.

"Sure."

I let out a relieved sigh inside my head. Imagine if he'd been a sour puss about it. I'd be stuck sharing a house all summer with a man I'd scorned.

No more bad decisions from now on.

## Chapter Twelve

### A New Neighbor

Lucy

“The villa next door has sold,” Anita announces the following weekend. She’s coming from the house, carrying two cold Diet Cokes to the beach.

I shade my eyes against the sunlight. “Really?”

“Yep,” Larry confirms, trailing Anita out of the house with what I suspect is concealed beer for him and the boys. “They just put up a fat red *sold* sign over the listing notice.”

“Do we know who bought it?” Jackson asks.

“Last I’d heard, someone by the name of Bartlett had put an offer in,” Larry says.

“Who’s Bartlett?” Patrick asks, coming up panting from behind a dune after having chased a green frisbee down it. He looks very attractive with his face bright in the sunlight, no wonder I thought kissing him was a good idea. It’s been a week since our fiasco of a kiss, and after the initial inevitable embarrassment, I’m glad we’ve landed on a solid friendship.

“They’ve bought the villa next door,” Jackson says, taking the frisbee from him.

“That wasn’t the name—”

Jackson throws the frisbee, and Patrick leaps to catch it, forgetting to finish what he was saying. His foot slips, and he rolls backward down the dune.

“Wasn’t what name?” I ask Patrick after he’s made it back safely into a deck chair and has joined in perusing the contraband beer.

“Bartlett isn’t the name of the people who bought the house. At least from what I heard.”

“Who was it, then?” Anita asks.

“Something like Anderson.” A pause. “No, wait, I’ve got it. Emerson.”

“What name?” I ask as a shiver runs down my spine.

“Emerson. I’ll bet you anything you like.”

I lie on my beach towel and gaze at the cloudless sky, afraid to dig deeper. But the name of the new neighbor hasn’t escaped Jackson’s notice.

“Emerson, did you say, Patrick? Do you know who they are?”

“I don’t know whether they’re any Emersons,” Patrick retorts. “I won’t pretend to know all the people in the country who go by that surname.”

“Emerson’s a common enough name,” I remark, pulling up on my elbows. I don’t stare at anyone in particular as I talk, instead gazing at the sand dunes descending one beyond the other into the ocean.

“What I meant to say,” Jackson continues talking to Patrick, “is if you’ve seen the buyers besides hearing their names. A friend from Florence was searching for a house in the Hamptons, and I passed him the listing.”

“*From Florence?*” I exclaim.

“Ah, yes, Lucy has met him, too.” Jackson regards me with a not-so-innocent smirk. “George Emerson, remember him?”

I jump up from the sand.

“But the buyer Emerson—he can’t possibly be the same—”

“Emerson who was at Florence? Why not? We liked him, didn’t we?” Jackson gives me that Cheshire cat grin again.

“If Jackson and Lucy approve of the fella, I do, too,” Larry says, probably not noticing how very red my face has turned.

“He’s a billionaire who shared car rides and gave up hotel suites,” Jackson offers.

*And who kissed like a god and made love like a devil,* I add in my head.

Anita, who’s the only one to have the full story of what happened in Florence, sips on her straw with a mischievous air. “If it’s indeed George Emerson from Florence, it should be interesting to have him as our new neighbor for the entire summer.”

“Sure he won’t move in right away, the house needs too much renovation,” I say hopefully. “The season will be over before that house is fit to live in.”

“Summer is still long,” Jackson replies.

“I need to cool off,” I say. “It’s too hot out here.”

“Oh, don’t go!” Larry cries and tries to catch me by the ankles.

“I must go,” I said gravely. “Or I’ll get a heat stroke.”

I glare at the rundown neighboring house as I go. Not even a billionaire can fix all that before the summer is over.

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To my dismay, when we arrive at the cottage the following Friday, the villa next door has had a full makeover.

The garden has been cleaned, the grass mowed, and the entire outdoor space re-landscaped. Likewise, the exterior of the house has been painted a fresh white and all the window frames, doors, and shutters replaced with elegant new ones that complete the classic look. Even the seaweed-choked pool has been turned into a perfect architectural digest oasis.

Jackson mockingly pushes my dangling jaw shut. “That’s money for you, dear. You pay high enough, and miracles are suddenly possible.”

I drop my overnight bag on the couch inside, not sure what to do with myself.

“I’ve organized a welcome committee for our new neighbor,” Jackson says. “Larry is coming, too, you gals want to join us?”

“Anita and I will stay behind,” I say, without hesitation.

My best friend pouts as if to protest. After Jackson confirmed it’s the same George Emerson we met in Florence who bought the house, my best friend has been frothing at the mouth to meet the billionaire next door we’ve spent so many hours discussing. But at my pleading look, she relents.

“Yeah, I’m tired from the drive over.”

Jackson shrugs and leaves.

I watch him and my brother cross into the neighboring property from the kitchen window. They unlatch the side gate and saunter over the garden to the villa. After a quick knock on the door, they move inside and disappear from view.

What wouldn’t I give to be a fly on those freshly painted walls right now.

## Chapter Thirteen

### A Night Bath

George

“Hullo!” a man shouts in at the open door.

“Hullo!” I reply.

“It’s Jackson from Florence, and next door now, I guess. I’ve brought someone to see you.”

*Lucia*, is my first thought.

I check my reflection in the mirror, raking my fingers through my hair, it looks worse than before. “I’ll be down in a minute,” I say, flattening my hair again.

The downstairs passage is blocked by a wardrobe that the movers still have to carry up the stairs. But it’s Friday night, so I sent all my people home to enjoy their weekend. They’ll be back to fix everything on Monday. And I can handle a few boxes on my own until then.

I lean over the baluster as Jackson edges past the wardrobe, only to find the access to the next room also blocked, only by books this time.

He stops and turns back, clearly undecided on what to do with himself. His eyes widen when he reads the inscription on the wardrobe.

“Mistrust all enterprises that require new clothes.” That’s what made me buy it at an antiques auction.

There’s another man with him I don’t know. “Giotto,” he says, pointing at one of the framed posters on the floor. “It’s the same painting reproduction Lucy got in Florence.”

*He knows Lucy. How? Are they dating?*

“You know she’s insisting she must learn Italian?” he continues.

“Why?” Jackson asks.

“The heck I know, my sister is weird like that. One day is the piano, the next is Italian...”

*Sister.*

If she learns to speak Italian as she plays the piano... I’ll be in even more trouble.

I run downstairs and greet Jackson with a brotherly handshake. “Nice to see you, man.” Then I offer the other man a more formal extended arm.

“George Emerson, nice to meet you.”

“Larry Honey, another one of your neighbors.”

Lucy’s brother has barely shaken my hand when he says, “Come have a swim. The water is amazing at sunset.”

“Oh, all right,” I say, taken aback.

Jackson seems highly entertained.

“Yeah, let’s go for a swim.” He chuckles. “That’s the best conversational opening I’ve ever heard.”

“So, let’s go?” Larry murmurs, now looking unsure of his proposal.

“Yes,” I say. “I’ve been hauling furniture all day, I could use a cooldown.”

I bow my head, dusty from all the furniture handling.

“Gosh,” Jackson brushes off the dust. “You really do need a bath.”

“You’ll feel much better afterward, I promise,” Larry adds.

“Let me just go get my swimming trunks.”

The other two look at each other.

“We’re not in swimwear either.”

I pause on the first step of the stairs. “Should we all go change and meet again at the beach?”

“Nah,” Jackson says. “We’ll swim in our underwear and change later, we’ll lose momentum if we go change, come back, blah, blah, blah...”

I shrug. “Good for me. But let me at least grab some towels.”

I get them from one of the half-open boxes still littering the ground floor, and we head out.

The day has been hot, but a cool wind has risen, blowing the rushes and sedges along the beach as we trudge toward the water quietly. Jackson, who if I remember correctly from Florence has never been one to cope well with silence, is compelled to chatter. As we walk, he speaks of Florence, New York, the Hamptons, and any other place on Earth we might have in common.

“What a coincidence that three guests of the Bertolini who had not booked their trip as a group should vacation together again so soon.”

I wouldn’t view it as a coincidence. I’d call it me blowing multiple seven figures on a house because I can’t get a certain Bambi-eyed woman out of my head.

Unperturbed by the fact that no one is answering him, Jackson continues. “But it’s not a mere stroke of luck that you’re here now.”

“I’d call it fate.”

“Here we are!” Larry calls.

“Oh, good!” Jackson exclaims, mopping his brow. He’s sweaty no matter the short walk and cool breeze.

The beach is deserted in the early dusk; still, we climb down a slippery dune to undress with more privacy.

This is where I get my first close-up of the ocean and its churning waters. Because of the rising wind, the seawater crashes against the shore in tall waves.

I sit down and unlace my shoes.

“Jackson, aren’t you coming?” Larry calls as he strips himself.

“I don’t know, this wind has turned out chilly.”

“Water’s wonderful!” Larry cries, prancing in.

“Water’s water,” I murmur.

Wetting my hair first, I follow Larry into the waves. I have to muscle my way in against the tide.

“Apooshoo, apooshoo, apooshoo,” goes Larry, splashing water around himself.

“Is it worth it?” Jackson asks.

I plunge into the cold vastness, immediately feeling regenerated.

“Ocean’s great,” I say, reappearing from my dive and sputtering at the moon.

Finally, Jackson’s clothes join ours in a third pile on the sand, and he, too, jumps in.

We waddle to where the water is breast-high and the waves not as intrusive. For some reason, the moment we’re all three in the ocean, something changes. We begin to play. Jackson and Larry splash each other. A little deferentially, they splash me. I keep quiet to add to the suspense. Then I smile, fling myself at them, splash them, duck them, and drive them out of the water.

“Race you,” Larry cries, rushing back into the water.

I give chase, and we race in the moonlight. Somewhere between the fourth or fifth dash in and out of the ocean, the waves strip me of my boxer briefs.

I make a run for my clothes, but Larry is quicker in snatching them up.

I scatter Larry’s bundle with a kick in retaliation.

“Be careful with my watch!” Jackson yells from the water.

Clothes fly in all directions.

“No, that’s enough, Larry, stop,” Jackson protests.

But we have turned wild and won't take no for an answer. Until Jackson shouts, "I see people coming!"

I turn as I'm running and almost smack privates-first into Lucy.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Naked Ghosts

Lucy

“What do you think is taking so long?” I ask Anita as we spy on the house next door.

The lights are on, but there’s no sign of Jackson, my brother, or the new owner.

We’ve opened a bottle of wine to calm my nerves, and we’re drinking it perched at the kitchen island, staring at the villa like two creeps.

“Perhaps they’re male bonding, are you jealous?”

“Shhh,” I hush her. “The others could hear you.”

Patrick and Darren are resting upstairs, and there’s no way of knowing when they might wake up and come downstairs.

Anita rolls her eyes at my seriousness and takes another sip of wine. “Relax, they’re probably just catching up. You know Jackson, he’s a chatterbox. He’s most likely telling George everything he did since he left Florence.”

I nod, realizing she’s right. I’m pretty sure they won’t discuss me. Except for maybe a vague, brief conversation.

*This is Larry, Lucy’s brother.*

*Oh, really, nice to meet you. How’s your sister?*

*Great, she’s great, especially after you gave her the night of her life and then left her with a soul-crushing note, to then disappear for a solid month, only to casually move in next door now.*

Yep, they’re definitely not saying anything of the sort.

But as the minutes turn into an hour and the bottle of wine empties, I start to feel restless.

“Why don’t we take a walk?” I propose. “It always relaxes me.”

“Sure, Nervous Nelly.”

Anita grabs her sweatshirt, I pull on a cardigan, and we hedge down the shore, choosing a direction at random. A strong breeze has picked up, making it almost chilly down here.

I wrap my light cardigan against my chest and ask, “Do you think it’s a coincidence George bought the house next to ours?”

“You don’t suppose he did it for you? We’re only renting our cottage for a season.”

Of course, I’ve thought about it. But bitterly, I admit Anita’s right. “So just a coincidence?”

“I don’t know, we’ll see what he does the first time you bump into him.”

I bite nervously on a fingernail. “Not knowing when it’ll be is unnerving. I should’ve gone with Larry and Jackson. That’s what I’ll do tomorrow, I’ll just go knock on his door and get it over with.”

“Lucia the brave.”

“Don’t mock me, I’d like to see you in my place.”

“Sometimes I wish I were in your place.”

The sand is cool under my toes, and a little wet. “Really, why?”

Anita stares up at the moonlight. “Meeting a handsome stranger abroad who sweeps me off my feet... it’s the stuff that doesn’t happen in real life.”

“You’re forgetting the part where he never called me afterward.”

“Well, maybe you’re right and he bought the villa next door as an extravagant grand gesture for not calling sooner. He’s a billionaire after all; he can throw money into a house he doesn’t need if he wants to.”

“I don’t know whether to hope you’re right or dread that you are—”

Shouts down the shore interrupt me.

Anita grips my arm. “Is someone being attacked?”

“Should we call the police?”

Anita squints. “Isn’t that your brother?”

I screw up my eyes in the semi-darkness and indeed recognize Larry.

What’s he doing?

We advance further until another man appears running buck naked out from behind a dune. Someone shouts from the water, the man turns, and I find myself staring at George Emerson in the nude.

He straightens up in all his naked glory. Barefoot, bare-chested, bare-*everything*. Radiant and dazzling against the shadowy night clouds. “Hullo, Lucia! Hullo!”

Then he whoops in our faces, turns, and scuttles away into the water. Larry drops the clothes he’s holding ransom and dashes in after him.

“Oh my gosh!” Anita yelps, laughing her head off.

I’m too shocked to talk and allow my friend to lead me away, back toward the house. “We’ll leave you boys to your fun,” Anita calls behind us.

Once we're safely out of earshot, she leans in conspiratorially to say, "Naughty you, you've been holding back on me."

I frown. "Holding back, how? I've told you everything!"

"Well, you sure didn't tell me about *Mr. Big* back there."

I gasp. "You didn't look!"

"It would've been impossible not to, I mean, it was just there"—she brings her palm toward her face—"in my face."

She teases me the entire way back to the cottage, and as we get closer to home, my mind races. George Emerson, the grump, was just naked and running into the ocean like a madman. I can't reconcile that carefree image with the brooding stranger I met in Florence. It's like something out of a dream or wild fantasy.

Anita nudges me with her elbow, bringing me out of my thoughts. "Are you sure he's the same stormy stranger you described from Florence?"

"No." I shake my head. "The man I met would never run naked in the moonlight."

"Is that a good or a bad thing?"

We reach the porch of the beach house, and I peer up at the sky. "I honestly don't know."

I don't sleep well that night, trying to come up with an answer to Anita's question. The ghosts gather in the darkness. There are too many of them. The original ghost—that kiss in the field, has gained a spectral family: our night together, the lack of a goodbye the morning after, memories of violets... they all haunt me. But it's mostly images of George naked—both running in the sand and on the only other occasion when I saw him naked—along with the phantom of his lips on my body that torture me until sunrise.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Beach Volleyball

Lucy

The next morning, I'm not doing much better. There's still only one thought taking over my brain: why is George here? What are his intentions?

Not that I can find any answers.

Every time I see the man, he becomes more of an unsolvable mystery. And trying to guess what's going through his mind is useless.

Take all the hours I spent obsessing over when George and I would meet again for the first time. I've always imagined us indoors, and with clothes on. Who could've guessed that our paths would cross during an impromptu skinny dip session, with him stark naked, his clothes and underwear strewn across the sandy beach in a battlefield of stolen garments?

Also, in my mind, I'd pictured a version of George Emerson similar to the one I'd gotten to know in Italy. In my reunion fantasies, he might've been standoffish or rude or indifferent or furtively impudent. But I wasn't prepared for happy, howling-to-the-moon George.

Anyway, predictions are of no use. The recent months should've taught me it's impossible to crystal ball the future, and equally impossible to rehearse life.

No sooner than I've reached this conclusion, I begin obsessing over when, what, and how our next meeting will happen.

I hide away in my room for most of the morning, sipping coffee and staring disconsolately at the view of the beach and ocean. My windows are on the wrong—or, I suppose, the *right*—side of the house with no view of the villa next door.

I wallow in peace until Larry comes bouncing upstairs and barges into my room without knocking. "Why are you hiding up here all alone?"

"I'm not hiding, I'm just having a quiet moment to myself."

"I've invited Emerson for a beach volleyball game this afternoon."

"Oh, Larry, why?"

"Why not? I like the guy. We had a blast last night."

"I bet you did."

And I didn't sleep all night because of a five-second glimpse at his body in the dark. Now, I'll have to watch him play sweaty and bare-chested, skin glistening in the sun. What will that do to me? How many nights of sleep am I going to lose over it? I can already see the scene getting permanently imprinted in my retinas, and I'm only imagining it.

Larry seizes me by the elbows and humorously waltzes me in circles around the room. I pretend not to mind, but I could scream with frustration. Until my brother finally lets me go and, after a final invitation to join him and the others at the beach, runs away again, unaware of the despair he's left behind.

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"He seems more upbeat than in Italy," Jackson observes as we watch the game lounging on deck chairs under the shade of a giant beach umbrella. "He laughs more."

"Yes, he does."

They're playing two against two. Larry and George against Patrick and Darren.

"Have you talked to him yet?"

"No."

Jackson turns in his deck chair to face me fully, raising his shades on his forehead. "Have you two swapped bodies? Has he become a jolly good fella and you a grump who will only give yes or no answers?"

"No," I say morosely. Then I can't help bursting out laughing.

George looks my way, becomes distracted, and promptly gets hit in the face by the volleyball.

"Oi," Larry reprimands him. "Eyes on the game."

Still, George's eyes linger on me for a millisecond, then he flashes me a grin and concentrates back on the match. But it's enough for my heart to race, for my belly to flutter with anticipation, and for my mouth to go dry. I want him to look at me like that again, to make that connection.

As the game progresses, the players' skin begins to glisten. Under my shades, I can ogle undisturbed George's sweaty chest and muscular arms as he jumps to spike the ball. I'm hyper-aware of his every move, of how his muscles flex at every blow to the ball, or how his hair is deliciously disheveled by the wind, sand, and sea salt.

Anita sighs. “Gosh, they’re hot. If we filmed the game and posted it on TikTok, I bet we’d go viral.”

Jackson chuckles. “How’d you hashtag it?”

“#sweatyhunksplayvolleyball?”

I shake my head, trying to focus on anything but George’s bare chest, or his sexy calves, or that hair I’m dying to sink my fingers into. And... it isn’t working. I pick up a book from my beach bag and try to concentrate on that, but I have to read every sentence a million times before I take in the meaning, and I keep getting distracted by the manly grunts coming from the volleyball court.

The game ends too soon, and my anxiety spikes as the players approach us.

“We won,” Larry hoots.

“Easy with the sun safely behind you and not glaring in your face,” Patrick protests.

George has gone to retrieve the ball down the beach where it landed after the last point, but now he’s coming our way.

I jump up ready to make a run for it, but Anita stands up next to me and grabs my hand to keep me rooted. “Introduce me,” she says. “Unless he feels he knows me already after last night. I mean, I saw everything there was to see.”

I ignore the reference to skinny dipping and the rising acid in my throat, and after a quick, anticlimactic “Hi, Giorgio,” “Hi, Lucia,” I introduce them formally.

“Do you like your new house?” Anita asks.

“Very much,” George says, watching the sunlight flash on the panels of the roof. “Great neighbors.” His eyes bore into mine.

A shiver runs down my spine as his gaze locks onto mine. George’s irises are a piercing gray, and I can feel them staring deep into my soul. I try to compose myself and act casual, but my heart is racing so fast, it might burst out of my chest.

“Yeah, it’s a great neighborhood,” I squeak. Definitely not acting cool.

“Surely, you didn’t buy a house like that just because of the awesome neighbors,” Anita prods him.

His eyes stay on me, and I’m glad I’m wearing sunglasses and my cheeks are already justifiably red from the heat. “I liked how much light poured into it.”

“I thought you were a fan of the shadows just as much,” I say.

“Light gives us shadows. Like the Monnalisa, whom we love so much for her beauty, but especially for the things she won’t tell us.”

*Love? Did he say, love?*

I’m stunned speechless. Anita, luckily, is quicker to recover from the inevitable swoon.

“Oh, George, you’re a poet!”

He finally removes his eyes from me to stare at my friend. He flashes her a knees-weakening, self-deprecating grin. “Erm—?”

“You’re the first naked poet I saw.”

George’s eyes laugh, and I suspect that he and Anita will get along all too well. A conspiracy against me.

With the sun lowering in the late afternoon, Patrick shouts, “Barbecue!” Everyone agrees, and I notice George look my way.

“Do you want to join us?” Anita asks, earning an elbow in the ribs from me.

“Sure,” George accepts. “I’ll just go home to shower real quick.”

“Oh, there’s no need,” Anita chirps. “We have an outdoor shower right there.” She points to our patio.

George seems undecided but relents in the end.

Anita and I watch as he crosses the patio and gets under the cool jets. I don’t know about my friend, but my mouth waters watching George shower.

He closes his eyes and tilts his head back. I’m jealous of the water slithering down his toned body, coming in contact with every inch of his skin. He runs his hands over his face, causing his biceps to flex in the most delicious way.

“You can thank me later,” Anita whispers to me, not tearing her eyes away from the view.

“I don’t know if I should thank you or hate you,” I mutter back, equally unable to take my eyes off George. “I’m not sure I can handle being around him all evening.”

Anita chuckles. “I know, he’s a bit distracting. But we’ll just have to try our best to behave like normal human beings.”

“As opposed to?”

“Horny degenerates?”

George finishes his shower and shakes his head dog-style to get rid of the excess water.

“Yeah, that’s going to be difficult,” Anita continues. “I’m recording this scene in my head to replay later in slow motion.”

I playfully shove her aside. “You’re going to crush hard on someone one day, and then it’ll be my turn to laugh!”

While I bicker with Anita, George grabs a towel, his wet hair curling around his forehead, and catches me staring. My heart pounds in my chest as he walks up to us, water still glistening on his skin. My knees weaken, and I lean on Anita for support.

“Is everything okay?” he asks, his voice low and intimate.

I nod, unable to form any coherent words. Anita comes to my rescue.

“If you’ll excuse us, we need to check if the others need help with the food.”

As we walk toward the barbecue, I can feel George’s eyes on me, making the short hair at my nape crackle with electricity.

We all gather around the grill: George, Anita, Patrick, Darren, Jackson, and I, as well as our neighbors on the other side who Jackson, in typical Jackson fashion, has befriended the moment we moved in. We grill up burgers, chicken breasts, and sausages while telling jokes and stories until our bellies are full. We move away from the patio to sit on the sand and enjoy the beautiful evening sky while sipping on beers. The guys lit a bonfire, adding to the atmosphere. As everybody else gets caught up in conversation, I’m drawn toward George. I don’t listen to what anybody else is saying. I only have eyes for him, and he for me, it seems. We exchange many furtive glances over the flames. When I feel like I could catch fire myself if we keep going, I stand up and walk alone toward the ocean.

Muffled footsteps follow me over the sand, and I don’t need to turn to know who it is. Without saying anything, we wander down the shoreline, watching as the waves lap gently against our feet with each step we take. The stars are twinkling above us like tiny fireflies in the night sky, and my entire body feels like it’s been wired with high-voltage current.

“Is good lighting really the only reason you bought that house?” I ask eventually.

“Of course not.” He peers at me sideways and smirks. “I also loved the view.”

“You? I thought you didn’t care about views?”

He stops walking and turns to face me. “Not when it’s over *things*.”

My heart positively stops. Yet, my voice for once remains steady as I ask, “What are you doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” He gives me a soft smile. “I came here for you.”

My heart leaps in my chest at his words. I look into his eyes, trying to find proof he is serious and not just teasing me. I can’t believe what he’s saying, I can’t trust it. It’d be like having a recurring dream finally come true. Could this really be happening? Do I want it to happen?

Part of me wants to run away, but another, bigger, more stupid part wants to hear what else he has to say.

“For me? What do you mean?” I ask, finding it harder to keep my voice from shaking.

The sound of the waves crashing against the shore is the only thing keeping me grounded as George takes a step closer to me. The heat emanating from his body engulfs me, even if we aren’t touching. His eyes are now fixated on my lips, forcing a shiver down my spine as I anticipate what’s coming. My heart is racing, and I can hardly breathe.

“I mean that I’ve been thinking about you ever since we parted ways in Florence,” he says, his voice low and husky.

He reaches up and tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear, sending more shivers down my entire body.

My cheeks flush harder as he leans in closer. His breath is hot against my skin as he whispers, “You’re beautiful, smart, witty, and have stolen my soul.”

He cups my face, and my lips part before he’s even leaned in to kiss me. But I don’t have to wait for long.

His lips descend on mine, soft, yet urgent. I lace my fingers behind his neck, deepening the kiss as our bodies become intertwined. The beach, the waves, the sand, everything around us fades away as we become lost in each other.

I sink my fingers into his soft hair and pull him closer to me, wanting more of him. His hand slides down to my waist, pulling me flush against him. His hard body pressed against mine ignites the now familiar inferno of emotions, passion, and desire that burns me alive from the inside out.

*This is the only way to be kissed.*

I panic. No, I can’t fall for it again.

I break the kiss and stumble a step back. “I can’t.”

“What—”

“No discussion.”

“But I came—”

I shake my head. “Go, please. Wait until next summer to enjoy your new house when I’ll be gone.”

“You don’t mean it,” he says. “Why didn’t you agree to marry your ex?”

The question is unexpected. How does he know? Jackson or Larry must’ve run their mouth as usual.

I shrug. “None of your business,” I say quietly.

His voice becomes raspier. “Because he wasn’t the man for you. Not anymore. Not after Italy.”

“Exactly what part of our trip to Italy are you referring to? Because all I can think about is how you didn’t even have the guts to say goodbye.”

“And I was wrong.” A storm darker than ever rages beyond his eyes.

He takes a step forward, but I raise my arms as a shield. “Stand back.”

He stops. “We should’ve talked before I kissed you. I wish to goodness I had more self-control. But I’m not ashamed. I don’t apologize. Yes, I’m the same brute who scared you off at breakfast that first morning. Then I frightened you again when I ran away in the night, and even more now that I’ve come back. And between all the fear you may not have noticed... but I love you, Lucia.”

“But—but... you can’t possibly...” I can’t speak.

“Yes, I do.”

My eyes narrow. “You want me, that’s different from loving me. How long before you decide you have other demons to fight and I no longer fit in the picture?”

“Never. I want you, yes.” He reaches for me, his eyes filled with a mixture of desperation and hope. His hands tremble, but he holds them steady as he gently runs the pad of his thumb over my knuckles, whispering, “And I need you, Lucia, just like I need air to breathe. And I love you. I don’t want to own you or control you. I simply want to be with you, always. I can’t live without you any longer—I’ve been searching for my chance at joy ever since that night in Italy when you saved me. Please, let me in now so I can explain everything gently. Let me have my one chance at happiness with you.”

“I—I need to think...” I take another step back, dropping his hands.

“I have been into the dark, and I am going back into it unless you try to understand.”

“That’s too much to put on me.”

“Believe me, I know.”

“Please go.”

The beach falls silent as I look helplessly into George’s eyes. A mixture of love and despair fills me, and my heart aches with regret that I’m not able to confess the truth—the one that I suspected since that night in the piazza, that I, too, love him. He seems to sense the conflict in my mind, yet he says nothing, turning away from me and marching off into the dark night. As he disappears from view, a tear rolls down my cheek, and I feel like a lost soul, adrift in an ocean of loneliness.

## Chapter Sixteen

### The Same Old Picture

Lucy

“Did I ruin everything?” I ask Anita. We’re holed up in our bedroom for a council of war—or should I say, for a council of love.

“I don’t know, the man told you he loved you, that he couldn’t live without you, and you... what?”

“I blabbered nonsense and asked him to leave. But he ambushed me with his hot kisses and grand words.”

“Come on, you can’t blame a man for trying. What’s really holding you back? I thought you wanted him?”

“I’m scared by *how much* I want him. And I’m terrified this is just another decision taken on a whim for him, like buying the house next door just to be close to me.” I hug a pillow to my chest. “Who does that? He’s too impulsive. He doesn’t think. How can I trust he won’t change his mind again?”

“But he’s not being impulsive.”

“What do you mean?”

“That he hasn’t made this decision on a whim. He’s taken a full month to consider everything and concluded that he wants to be with you. Now the question is, what do you want?”

*Him.* “I don’t know. To be happy? Not to get my heart broken?”

“Ah.” Anita looks out the window dreamily. “Then you’re in trouble.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t have one without risking the other. You love George!”

I shake my head. “It makes little sense, I’ve known him less than a week. We had a one-night stand. I can’t love him.”

“But you do,” she goes on.

I do. I love him, the three words burst against me like waves from the open sea.

“You’re shocked, but a little shock might be good. Then you can admit you’re in love, quit your job, and open that school of music you’ve dreamt about your entire life.”

My eyes widen. “What does my job have to do with any of this?”

Anita grabs my hands. “It’s all part of the same picture. You keep a job you hate because it’s safe. And you refuse a man you love *also* because it’s safe.”

“What’s wrong with safe?”

“It’s so boring, it’ll kill you.”

I think back to my lone walks in Italy. To the discontent and dissatisfaction I felt, the very feelings George has cured. I haven’t felt that despondent once since coming back. Miserable? Yes, at times. But alive. Connected to the world around me. That’s what George has brought out in me, and I know I can’t let that go.

“You’re right,” I say, squeezing Anita’s hands. “I can’t keep living this way. I have to take a risk, even if it means getting my heart broken.”

## Chapter Seventeen

### Moonlight Sonata

George

I'm lying in the dark in my room on a mattress on the floor because the bed still hasn't been delivered. I came anyway because I was too impatient to see her again. And now I've ruined everything. That same unwillingness to wait has made me blab out every last one of my feelings on the poor woman, while the plan was to ease her gradually into knowing and liking me again, possibly loving me.

I knew there'd be dues to pay after my disappearance in the night, and a month of silence, but I didn't expect her to be so hesitant, so unsure. Lucia didn't say what she feels for me, and instead of the love I'd hoped to find in her eyes, I only saw fear. Fear that I might change my mind again. Fear that she might get hurt. I get it. Believe me, I know. But I won't give up on her. I can't.

I stand up from the mattress and walk to the window. The moonlight casts shadows on the street below. I take a deep breath and close my eyes, trying to calm my racing heart. I need to think. And I need a plan.

A knock on the door makes my heart jump in my throat. Could it be her? I shake my head, wanting to be realistic.

It's probably Larry, asking me to go for another night's swim. Or Jackson inviting me to a party. But when I open the door, I'm surprised to find Lucia standing there, looking up at me with those big, beautiful eyes.

"Hey," she breathes.

"Hey," I reply, unable to hide my surprise. "What are you doing here?"

She pushes past me and paces in a circle in the limited space of the entrance that's not occupied by strewn boxes or furniture.

"I kissed exactly two men since coming back from Italy."

*Not the opening I was expecting.*

"The first kiss felt like I was eating cold ravioli out of a can, and the second like I was making out with a wet fish."

*Okay, better.*

I close the front door and lean against it. "And you're telling me this because..."

“I only want to eat pasta made by an Italian chef and feel a fire burning in me when I kiss someone. The way you make me feel when you kiss me. I want to take a risk and be with you, George,” she says, her voice steady but her eyes uncertain. “But please tell me you’re serious about what you said earlier. That this isn’t just a whim for you, like giving up your room, or walking the way back from Fiesole under the rain, or sleeping with me and then disappearing in the middle of the night.”

I cross the distance to her and drop to my knees, hugging her waist and pressing the side of my face to her belly. “Lucia. It’s not a whim, and I’m sorry I didn’t reach out sooner.” I look up at her. “I don’t know why it took me so damn long to make up my mind. You’re the light in the shadows, the fire in my soul, my anchor in a storm. You’re everything, Lucia. I want to be with you. I want to be the one to make you feel alive the same as you do for me.”

She runs her fingers through my hair, tugging at the roots as she does so, forcing me to look up at her. “Promise?”

“I swear.”

She smiles down at me, and I stand up. I cup her face in my hands, gazing into her eyes. She looks back at me, her lips slightly parted and breaths coming in short gasps. Slowly, I lean in and press my lips against hers, savoring the softness and warmth of her mouth. Her arms slip around my neck, and she pulls me closer, deepening the kiss and sparking the inferno we both crave.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Epilog

Lucy

A few months later, as summer ends and fall takes over New York City, George and I have become one of those annoying, can't-take-their-hands-off-each-other-even-in-public couples.

Hand in hand, we're taking a stroll around Central Park, enjoying the early fall color changes. Walks are our thing. Like that very first one that brought us together in Florence, each one brings us closer, deepening our connection and adding more memories to our already overflowing love bank.

Today seems like one of our typical aimless wanderings around the city, at least until George guides me out of the park toward a recently renovated limestone building, its white façade beautiful and with a retro feeling despite the renovations.

"What is this place?" I ask.

George smirks. "My most recent purchase. Want to see inside?"

"Sure."

I step in wondering if my boyfriend has suddenly decided to leave the private security sector to move into real estate.

But the interior of the building doesn't look like it'd be suitable to be turned into luxury apartments.

I stare in awe at the large foyer, listening to the way the echo of our footsteps bounces on the wall. This would be the perfect space for an auditorium. The acoustics are amazing, and the room is so vast, it could easily host a large audience. I can almost see it. Rows upon rows of chairs lined up beside each other in neat fashion in large semicircles and facing a dais at the back where the performers would play. And on this side, practice rooms could be easily partitioned off from one another by walls full of soundproofing material. Offices would go at the other end and... I turn into another room and find it empty except for an immaculate black grand piano sitting by the window.

I bring my hands to my mouth. "What did you do?"

"You like the space?"

“George?” I ask, an edge to my voice.

“Okay, hear me out. You hate your job, and I hate that you hate it. This is your dream.” He swipes his arm at the room. “Let me give it to you.”

I swirl on the marble floors, almost able to touch the dream. My school of music. But I land from the spin with a hard reality check.

“I can’t.”

George frowns. “Why not?”

“Because if it’s something you’re just going to give to me, then it’ll never be truly mine.”

My boyfriend stares at the ceiling, adorably annoyed. “I knew you were going to be difficult.” He sighs. “I can rent the place to you, help you come up with a business plan, set things in motion. It’ll be your project, I’d just be helping out.”

I go to him and wrap my arms around his waist. “And how much do you plan to lowball the lease?”

He smirks, gray eyes stormier than ever. “You’re getting the friends and family discount, and that’s non-negotiable.”

I drop a kiss on his neck. “Oh, so we’re friends now?”

The look I get back smolders me with its intensity. “Actually, Lucia, I was hoping for the other thing.”

I pull back abruptly and crane my neck up to see his handsome face. “What are you saying?”

Wordlessly, he takes my hand and guides me to the grand piano. “Open it.” He points at the fall board.

I do and find a small emerald-green velvet box sitting in the middle of the keyboard.

My hands fly to cover my mouth. George grabs the box and sits on the piano bench, pulling me closer, so his leg is between mine.

“Lucia.” He opens the velvet box to reveal a diamond ring in the shape of the Giglio of Florence. A stylized iris with one straight petal in the center and two curved ones at the sides. “From the very first day you ruined the peace of my breakfast, you have made my heart ache most wonderfully. You’ve made me laugh, taught me to live again, and to come out of the darkness to return into the light. You make my world brighter, and I love you. Will you marry me?”

The world stops for a second as the full meaning of George’s words sinks into me. Tears blur my vision, and my throat is so tight, I can hardly breathe,

let alone talk.

He smiles. “Come on, Lucia, if ever there was a moment to run your mouth, this is it.”

“Yes.” I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him fully on the mouth.

He kisses me back before sliding the gorgeous ring on my finger. We break apart for air, and George pulls me onto his lap, pressing his lips to my ear. “I can’t wait to spend forever with you.”

I snuggle into his embrace, feeling the warmth and love that radiates from him. “I can’t wait either.”

As we sit there on the piano bench, with the ring sparkling on my finger, I know that this is just the beginning of our journey together. We have so much to look forward to, so much to experience, and I’m excited to take on whatever comes our way—as long as we’re together.

###

Dear reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading Giorgio and Lucia’s story. If you’d like to read a bonus epilog, [you can join my Readers’ Group and download it for free.](#) **You’ll also receive a FREE SEQUEL, *Love or Hate*.** This is the story of Lucy’s best friend, Anita, and the hot guy in a suit who’s going to evict her from her rent-stabilized home.

The sequel, like the bonus epilog, is exclusive to members of my Readers’ Group and not available for sale anywhere else.

Read the blurb for *Love or Hate*:

When Anita has the perfect, movie-worthy coffee shop meet cute, she doesn’t expect for the same hot guy in a suit to evict her from her home an hour later.

As insta-attraction turns into insta-hate, these two will find themselves at odds with each other, despite the fact that, no matter how hard they try, they don’t seem able to stop kissing...



If you're not convinced, keep reading for an excerpt from Anita's story...

## Sneak Peek – Love or Hate

### Meet Cute

Anita

In my rush to get into the coffee shop and out of the rain, I almost collide with the door. Only my chest doesn't smash against glass and metal. No, it crashes against a muscular arm clad in a business suit.

The arm in question is attached to the solid frame of a tall man holding a briefcase over his head as a makeshift umbrella against the downpour.

The shoulders of his light gray suit are dusted by droplets of water, and his face is shadowed by the briefcase, making his chiseled jawline even more pronounced.

Something moves underneath my palm, prompting me to notice how I've trapped the stranger's hand under mine as we both reached for the door handle at the same time.

He lowers the briefcase, and my gaze travels up to his face, where I find piercing blue eyes staring back at me. I can't tell if it's annoyance or amusement written in those sky blue irises.

I let go of his hand so fast, I almost fall flat on my bum. But the stranger's sharp blue eyes sweep over me as he steadies me with his freed hand, preventing me from going down.

"Careful there," he says in a deep voice that sends shivers down my spine.

I blush and mumble an apology as I catch a whiff of his cologne, a mix of sandalwood and musk that is so purely masculine, my toes curl in my sneakers. He gives me a subtle once over, his blue eyes traveling down my body and then back up until they lock onto mine. The eye contact sends a jolt of electricity shooting through my nerve endings.

"Are you okay?" he asks in that deep voice that is pure sin.

I nod, trying to regain my composure. "Mm-mh," I manage to mumble, struck dumb by his rogue charm. "Thank you for the save."

He rakes a hand through the wet, dark hair plastered against his forehead, slicking it back.

Then he smiles, and twin dimples mark his cheeks. His face is so perfect, I might pass out from the sheer beauty of it.

“Anytime,” he says, his voice a low rumble in his chest. He grabs the door again and keeps it open for me, gesturing for me to go ahead. “Ladies first.”

My cheeks flush. Not from embarrassment, but from the way his eyes are studying me like he wants to unravel every inch of my being.

After a steadying breath, I step inside, sensing his presence behind me as he follows me in and we join the line to the cashier.

The coffee shop is busy, and more customers pour in from the street. Either because they really need a caffeine fix or to get shelter from the downpour.

Unfortunately, the constant influx of new patrons forces the people already in line to close ranks, meaning my backside is getting ever closer to Hot Suit Guy’s front side.

I try to focus on the menu above the cashier, but every time I inhale, I catch his scent—the earthy musk mixed with the rain outside that is still clearly distinguishable even over the scents of coffee and freshly baked pastries of the shop. It’s intoxicating, and my body responds to it in ways it shouldn’t.

Cocooned in the heat emanating from his body as he stands behind me in line, I have to make a conscious effort just to keep still and upright. The sensation is similar to standing too close to a bonfire, but instead of feeling the urge to back away, I’m entranced by the warmth enveloping me. And who cares if I get burned?

When he leans forward to check out the pastries on display, I try to ignore the growing heat that spreads through my body as his chest presses lightly against my back. I adjust my stance slightly, hoping to create some room between us, but the move only makes things worse. His breath fans across my neck, making me hop like a scared bunny. In my hurry to shift positions, I stumble on his foot, apologize, and finally settle in the confined space I have in the queue so I’m not being whipped in the face by the ponytail of the lady in front of me or pressing against the hunk behind me.

When my turn to order finally arrives, I’m so flustered that I can barely remember what I came in for.

“Uh, can I have a vanilla latte, please?” I stammer out, struggling to recollect what Lucy wanted. “And a cappuccino with a vanilla shot.”

“Anything to eat?”

“Oh, yes. We’re having...” I look at the menu board again.

The cashier next to mine frees up, and Hot Suit Guy steps forward, distracting me with his sexy, rough voice. “An Americano, please.”

Even his coffee order is manly.

His barista asks, “What name should I put on the cup?”

“Humphrey—”

And of course he has a hot name. He couldn’t be called “Melchior” or some other ridiculous name like “Cletus.”

“Miss?” my barista calls out to get my attention. “Have you decided on the food?”

I’ve been so distracted eavesdropping to learn Hot Suit Guy’s name that breakfast has become the least of my worries. “Two croissants, please, plain.”

“Sure thing,” the cashier replies, with a smile. “Anything else for you?”

I shake my head, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the simple task of ordering breakfast. “What name should I put on the cups?”

“Anita.”

I pay and go wait at the other end of the counter for my order. Of course, Humphrey the Hottie is right there, waiting for his Americano.

I covertly admire how his dark hair curls around his ears as it dries up, and the way Mr. Hot casually passes a hand over his stubbled jaw.

I wonder how that stubble would feel on my inner thigh as he—

“Ghawk.” I let out a strangled noise, choke on a bit of saliva, and get seized into a coughing fit.

Mr. Hottie signals to a barista, and once he has the attention of someone behind the counter, he asks, “May I have a glass of water, please?”

He takes the plastic cup and offers it to me.

I positively die of embarrassment as I take a very much-needed sip of fresh water. “Thank you,” I say once I’ve got the rasp in my throat under control. “I swear I won’t let my roommate convince me to brave the rain again to get breakfast.” Then I frown. “Well, guess she won’t, since she’s moving out today.”

I look at Humphrey. He’s studying me with a curious glint in his eyes.

My cheeks flush, and I add, “And you probably don’t care to hear my life story to go with your Americano.”

Oh no, now he knows I was eavesdropping on his coffee order. Could you do me a favor, floor, and swallow me whole?

“No, please,” he says, with that teasing glint in his eyes. “I always take my coffee with a side of intriguing life stories.” He leans in a little closer. “Especially if the storyteller is as captivating as you are.”

My heart goes into overdrive. Did he just call me captivating? What does that mean? Is he being serious, or is he mocking me?

Before I can reply, a barista shouts, “Americano for Humphrey.”

He smiles. “That’s me, I’m afraid.” He retrieves his paper cup and pauses before exiting the shop. “I’m Humphrey, but I didn’t catch your name.”

I would offer him my hand to shake, but he’s holding his cup with one hand and the briefcase with the other.

“Anita,” I say.

“Nice to meet you, Anita.” Humphrey takes a sip of his coffee and flashes me a charming smile—cute dimples and all. “Enjoy your last breakfast with your roommate.”

And then—as quickly as he arrived into my life—he’s gone. I stand there in shock, realizing my heartbeat has not returned to normal yet when another barista calls out, “Vanilla latte for Anita!”

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## About the Author

Camilla is an engineer who left science behind to enter the whimsical realm of romantic fiction.

She writes contemporary rom-coms. Her characters have big hearts, might be a little stubborn at times, and love to banter with each other. Every story she pens has a guaranteed HEA that will make your heart beat faster. Unless you're a vampire, of course.

She's a cat lover, coffee addict, and shoe hoarder. Besides writing, she loves reading—duh!—cooking, watching bad TV, and going to the movies—popcorn, please! She's a bit of a foodie, nothing too serious. A keen traveler, Camilla knows mosquitoes play a role in the ecosystem, and she doesn't want to starve all those frog princes out there, but she could really live without them.

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# Table of Contents

[About My Billionaire Grump](#)

[Free Sequel](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Sneak Peek – Love or Hate](#)

[Also by Camilla Isley](#)

[About the Author](#)