

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

There Are No Ossuaries on Staten Island . . . That I Know Of

January 6, 1997

Taran leaned forward as if sharing a secret with the handful of study abroad students gathered in the sitting room on the third floor of the Locanda Garibaldi. “If any of you ever get lost in Siena, there are three words I want you to use.” He paused just long enough to make sure we were listening and perfectly enunciated the Italian phrase: “Dov’è il Campo?” At a gesture from Taran, the undergraduates half-heartedly repeated the phrase, preferring to botch the pronunciation completely rather than to get it partly wrong. Taran winced. “You’re all just messing with me, right? How about actually trying to pronounce it now?” He made us repeat the phrase eight more times, until he heard everyone say it clearly and correctly.

“Very good,” Taran nodded. “That means, ‘Where is the Campo?’ The Campo, in case you don’t know, is the town square right up the street from this hotel. Once you find the square, finding the Locanda Garibaldi is easy. Right, Damien?”

I blushed. “Right.” The sitting room had a lot of overstuffed couches and chairs with grandma-style floral patterns and tiny table lamps that barely illuminated the table when turned on at night. Taran explained that the Italians don’t like bright illumination in the evenings because they got used to keeping things dark during World War II. Sounded plausible, anyway. One winding stairwell led upstairs, to the rooms where most of us were staying. A pine-green spiral staircase led down to the restaurant that doubled as the hotel lobby. The proprietors were named Sophia and Marcello, but were not, in fact, Sophia Loren or Marcello Mastroianni.

“Now, the only one of you who has ever been to Italy is Evelyn here. She went on this same trip with Valancourt and me two years ago.” — Evelyn smiled and waved to the group. — “Evelyn is happy to help people who can’t find their way around Siena. Like Damien.”

I forced a “yes-I-know-getting-lost-is-funny-so-feel-free-to-laugh-at-me” smile.

Taran returned his attention to the others. “How many people here speak some Italian?”

I was one of the few to raise my hand. Despite my lack of any real mastery of the language, I wound up being the most proficient Italian speaker on the trip. I was worried people would look to me for leadership. I preferred solitude and had never been in a leadership role.

“I’m sure Damien wouldn’t mind helping any of you with some difficult conversations, just as long as you don’t use him as a dictionary,” said Taran. “Or compass. He’s a good man, but his moral compass is better than his physical one.”

“That’s right,” I said.

“You’re never gonna live this one down,” Taran joked.

“I was just taking a butcher’s hook ‘round Siena.” My first stab Cockney rhyming slang.

Purple Sarah smiled slyly, “But, Taran, if I follow Damien around, asking him for help speaking Italian, I might get mistaken for one of his stone-cold fox groupies.”

I held my head in my hands as the entire room burst into laughter. When the laughter subsided, I said, “Thanks for this, Bobby. I really appreciate it.”

Bobby spread his hands. “Hey! That’s what I’m here for, Egon.”

“Now everyone thinks I’m Bill Clinton,” I grumbled.

Byron poked me in the shoulder. “You *are* both Leos. There’s some similarities there.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

Purple Sarah’s smile couldn’t get bigger. “You really don’t have a sense of humor about yourself, do you?”

“Listen, y’all. I’m just here to see Italy. Stop busting my chops.”

Byron smiled at Sarah. “He takes needling so well, doesn’t he?”

Sarah nodded. “Exceptionally!”

“Come on, with that crap!” I shot back.

Bongo Guy spoke for the first time. I forgot he was even with us. “How long do we have to wait for the horse race? I wanna see the horse race.”

Taran looked quizzical. “The Palio? Six or seven months.” We were only going to be there four weeks, so seeing a Palio would present a

unique challenge.

“Bummer.” Bongo Guy resumed not speaking.

“At least we didn’t miss it by a nose,” I said. “I went to New Orleans with Mom on Ash Wednesday. We were walking around Bourbon Street at eight a.m. and there was beads and empty alcohol bottles and food wrappers and people asleep in the gutter. We’d missed the world’s biggest party by twelve hours, and it looked like it.” Mom and I had gone to Louisiana to meet our newfound cousin, Retha-Louise from Namibia, for the first time in person. Retha-Louise was in New Orleans with the Namibian Youth Choir for an international music festival. Within fifteen minutes of our first conversation, Mom and I could tell that she was every bit as wonderful as we expected her to be. Still, we had missed Mardi Gras.

Byron slapped his knee and laughed. “You went to New Orleans the day after Mardi Gras? That’s so typical of you!”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

While I had been hopelessly lost in the city-state the night before, Byron picked out a room for us to share on the fourth floor, next door to Bobby and Tuesday’s love nest. Sparsely furnished, with one floral design overstuffed chair, one small oak wardrobe, a tiny corner table and chair set, a mounted coat rack, and two army-cot-like beds with floral print bedsheets, the room was functional but not beautiful. Our quarters’ biggest perk was it came with its own bathroom, unlike the third-floor room Evelyn and Purple Sarah opted to share, which had no amenities within, compelling them to use a hallway shower and bath. Outside our room was a modest sitting room with a sofa and coffee table, across from which was a third bedroom claimed by Bongo Guy. That accounted for all the students and their lodgings in the hotel. Valancourt was staying in the apartment he owned across town, which he lived in all summer and rented out during the school year. Meanwhile, Taran was rooming with local friends he had made during his years living in Siena, running its international study program.

“Evelyn and Purple Sarah are sharing a queen-sized bed downstairs?” Byron asked.

“That is correct.”

“I bet you wish you could jump in between them and sleep

there, too?”

“That is correct.”

“You’re goddam right, you do,” Byron grinned. “Me, too.”

“Of course.”

“I’m really hoping to have sex in Italy.”

“Sex? Is that when people press their orifices and/or genitals together in a surprising variety of combinations, producing a pleasurable effect? Word on the street is that this contact is designed to stave off awareness of the inevitability of death and/or generate offspring.”

“Very funny.”

“I’ve heard much talk of this ‘sex’ business. It sounds excessively diverting.”

Speak of the devil and he doth appear. At just that moment, Bobby Mammolito’s screaming orgasm shook the foundations of the hotel. It was so deafening it was as if he were getting blown right here in the room with us. *Of course*. The wall that separated our room from theirs did not rise all the way up to the ceiling, and the half-moon window cut into the dividing wall eleven feet off the ground didn’t help, either. If a pin dropped in one room, the noise would startle the duo in the adjoining room. The extended roar that Bobby made when he came was just a taste of the moaning that awaited us each night, as Tuesday and Bobby took turns going down on one another. Byron gave me a deer-in-the-headlights look. I shrugged. “Whatever.”

Face flushed red and hands clasped tight over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud, Sarah appeared at our doorway. Her eyes danced, telling that she and Evelyn could hear Bobby’s bellowing flood tide through their ceiling. I guess she couldn’t wait to race upstairs and catch the end of it. That the loud orgasm was still going on from the time she heard it downstairs to her arrival in our room was a testament to just how unnaturally long and loud Bobby’s climax was. Sarah risked removing her hands and mouthed the words, “Holy shit.”

Me and Byron mouthed back. “I know.”

We huddled together. Sarah whispered, “Tuesday must be queen of the hummers.”

“Wanna switch rooms?” Byron asked Sarah. “I can’t listen to this shit every night.”

"Love is in the air," I said. "I'm glad *somebody* is getting laid. Sure as shit ain't me."

Sarah said, "Evelyn has a whole bag of earplugs. I think I can talk her into sharing them."

Bobby howled again like a wolf baying at the moon.

"The Second Cumming!" Sarah whispered. "What's Tuesday's secret?"

"I think I may actually be in hell," Byron said. "I'm so jealous right now."

"So," I whispered, "who do you folks think Jack the Ripper was? Virginia Woolf's grandfather seems to be the in-vogue choice. Personally, I favor Montague Druitt."

"Walter Sickert," Sarah whispered. "One hundred percent. You seen his paintings?"

A deafening silence rose to fill the room.

"Is it over?" Sarah mouthed.

Byron nodded miserably.

"Are you two gonna spend the month chasing Italian ass, or what?" Sarah asked.

"Damn right," Byron confirmed.

"Nah," I said. "Fuck that. I'm just here to enjoy Italy."

"What's with you?" Sarah asked. "Have you asked out even one person the entire time you've been in college?"

"He hasn't!" Byron hissed. "Because he wore braces and thought the juniors he was attracted to found him too young for them! He's driving me nuts! He won't even try."

"I *did* make that one pass at a lady who worked in a rare bookstore," I offered feebly.

"When was that?" retorted Byron. "Thanksgiving, 1995?"

"I haven't heard this story," said Sarah.

I wasn't sure if I should smirk or frown. "I said to the rare books lady, 'Would you happen to have a *Ben Hur* (1860), 3rd edition, with a duplicated line on page one-sixteen?'"

Sarah laughed. "*The Big Sleep*! Fantastic! Did she get the reference?"

"She looked daggers at me and said the next line in the movie: 'Nobody would. There isn't one.'" I had a bad feeling I wasn't as clever

as I thought I was. Then, she added, ‘Men who want to flirt with me try that line from the *Big Sleep* on me ten times a week. I’m going to strangle the next person who quotes it to me!’ I apologized, asked her out anyway, and she nearly tossed a book at my head. That’s the extent of my college fornicating and debauchery.”

“That’s too bad,” Sarah said. “That movie reference is fundamentally funny.”

“It is a great joke with no audience,” I said. “In the right place and at the right time, that joke should kill, but it’s never the right place or time. In a rare bookstore, everyone has already heard it a dozen times. Outside a rare bookstore, nobody’d get it. I feel a great deal of empathy for that joke. I *am* that joke made flesh: cool dude never in the right place at the right time.”

Sarah smiled sympathetically at me. “James Sheridan says you are exactly as funny as the person listening to you is culturally literate.”

“Which is why I had six friends in Staten Island and sixty in Geneseo,” I murmured.

“Why do you make so many cultural allusions in casual conversation, anyway?” asked Sarah. “You giving everyone you meet an I.Q. test to see who’s worth hanging out with?”

“If you wanna be negative about it,” I grumbled. “I’m just sending out signal flares to find bosom friends. It worked with you two, didn’t it?”

“Just don’t try it with any girls younger than us,” Byron warned. “We’re the last generation that has heard of *The Little Rascals*, Bobby Darin, and Mothra. You name-drop those things with someone born after *Star Wars*, they won’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“I *have* tried it. They *don’t*. And girls old enough to get my jokes are all married. Ergo, I have decided to retire from dating, because I am never with the right women at the right time.”

Byron poked me in the shoulder. “So, fuck a married woman! Be Sir Lancelot!”

“I never liked him. He shoulda quit his job and fled the second he fell for the queen.”

“And got another job where? Working for Meleagant? I hope to God one day you wind up in Lancelot’s shoes. We’ll see how you do

in his place. Be a humbling experience for you. Maybe teach you some empathy and get that enormous stick out of your ass!”

I drew back as if stung. “Did you just place the Curse of the Cat People on me? You take that back this instant! I mean, that’s just mean! Don’t you know how Catholic I am?”

“Hold up!” Sarah exclaimed. “Damien, is that seriously the extent of your efforts to land a girlfriend? You meet a freshman, sing her the Mothra song, she doesn’t recognize it, you bolt?”

“Um . . . ,” I stared at my shoes. “If you put it that way, you make it sound pretty stupid. I admit it. I haven’t really asked anyone out since I failed to land a prom date back in 1994.”

“Was trying to get a prom date so traumatic for you that you’ve given up flirting?”

“I flirt with you two times a year,” I said.

“Yeah, but we’re just kidding around. I mean have you ever *really* tried to get even one person into bed while you’ve been at college? Even *one*?”

I shrugged. “Nah, but who cares? I always planned on having more of an *Educating Rita* college experience than an *Animal House* one.”

Sarah looked melancholy. “What happened to you, to make you like this? I don’t want to pry, but I worry something *awful* happened to you, and you need to talk to someone about it. Like, I worry you need serious psychological counseling.”

“Speaking of awful,” I said, “remember what a piece of shit Alcibiades was in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*? Thucydides blames him for the Sicilian Expedition.”

“Don’t change the subject on me,” Sarah said. “It’s me, your STD coven compadre!”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin. As much as I love and trust you, I dunno if I wanna subject you to eight hours’ worth of my bad memories. You got better things to do with your time than listen to me bust out the violin. Let’s just say I was humiliated trying to find a prom date. Keep it simple. But that’s misleading cuz the prom is the tip of the iceberg.”

Sarah grew pale. “Eight hours is a lot of bad memories.” She noticed I was looking at my shoes again. “But if I’m your friend, you

can trust me, and I'm willing to listen."

"Thank you." I paused. "No, its too humiliating. I don't want to open Pandora's Box."

Byron jerked a finger in my direction. "When he talks about failing to land a prom date, he gets that exact same haunted expression my dad's friend Clive gets talking about Vietnam."

I laughed loudly. "Okay, now that's funny. You can keep teasing me if you're always that funny about it."

Byron said, "Your braces are off. Arwen is married. Quit making excuses and get back on the horse. You can't waste your sexual prime reading all the Jeeves and Wooster books."

"Hey! I like the *Jeeves and Wooster* books. A lot."

"Don't read about Bertie Wooster's sex life. Explore your own!"

"I'm not sure he ever has sex. Over how many books with how many women?"

Sarah cut in. "If you're worried you're not attractive, don't be. I know of at least seven English majors currently in happy relationships who have confided in me that, if they ever break up with their boyfriend, you're their second-runner-up replacement option."

I felt flattered and insulted all at once. "I'm *everyone's third choice* for a boyfriend?"

"Yep! These seven girls love you to pieces. The second choice is usually the guy on campus who is the most cut and looks the best in jeans. Your David Hasselhoff types."

"*Knight Rider!*" Byron laughed. "Taran says that show is called *Supercar* here."

"David Hasselhoff is hot," I admitted. "He's as handsome as Franco Nero."

"Yes," Sarah purred. "Yes, he is. Anyway, after the hottest guy on campus at position two, you get the third position, which is guy with best personality. Bronze medal. So, if you're patient, at least *one* of the seven will call you up *sometime*...in the future . . . I think...maybe."

"After dating her current boyfriend for three more years, and Hasselhoff for seven, then I can go out dancing with her sometime around January of 2007? Sign me up!"

"I'm just trying to cheer you up."

“Are these seven English majors even cool?”

“I’m pretty sure you’re aware that four are attractive, even if you try not to be.”

“Yeah, I do try not to be aware. Just like I try not to know where Yale is located, since I’m never going there.”

Sarah smirked. “Yale is in New—”

“Bah! I say, ‘Bah!’ I just burned ten years of my life waiting for Arwen. As Chief Brody said in *Jaws 2*, ‘I’m not going through that hell again!’ If you don’t mind, I’ll spend that time more productively, reading all the Jeeves and Wooster stories.”

Sarah’s face grew more resolved. “Now, you listen to me, Damien. You’ve got to do some serious flirting on this vacation, or you’re gonna have to answer to me. I can’t chase any ass this month. I’m in the middle of trying to convince my boyfriend of five years to ask me to marry him. So, I want to get you laid so I can get off on you getting off with someone else. It’s called living vicariously. Capisce?”

I chuckled. “Living vicariously through me? You’re going to be very bored and very disappointed. I wouldn’t wish my sex life on Pol Pot.”

That night, I made love to First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton in the White House bedroom for the first time. I hadn’t intended to do it, but she had been so inconsolable over her husband’s philandering. I listened as she talked for hours about Gennifer Flowers and her husband’s other sexual conquests. Hillary exhausted herself and clutched me to her, sobbing into my shoulder. After her crying died down, we sat on the edge of the bed, holding each other in silence. Before I understood what was happening, Hillary surprised me with a kiss. I found myself too drawn to her to resist. I fumbled with the buttons on her pale blue blouse. She tore at my belt. In moments, our clothes covered the floor. We were locked together, naked in each other’s arms, on top of the covers.

The doors to the bedroom flew open, banging against the walls. Al Gore burst in on us, yelling, “Hillary! The Republicans are coming!”

“Shit!” Hillary scrambled to tuck herself under the covers, snatching up a paperback copy of *The Celestine Prophecy* from her nightstand. She

pretended to read casually as she fought to gain control of her breathing. Hearing the sounds of two men racing towards the bedroom, I grabbed my clothes and hers, and dragged them with me under the bed, hoping no one would look there. Seconds after my head disappeared from view, Alan Keyes and Rush Limbaugh pushed past Al Gore and raced up to the foot of the bed. Red-faced and wheezing from running his enormous girth through the White House, Limbaugh puffed, "Where is she, FLOTUS? Where's the dyke strumpet you're sleeping with?"

Alan Keyes stomped his foot petulantly. "I tell you it's Damien Cavalieri! A young Republican. She's seducing one of our own to the other side. She's luring him to the dark side with her magically delicious pussy!"

Hillary smiled evilly behind her copy of *The Celestine Prophecy*. "It is, indeed, magically delicious."

My eyes snapped open in the middle of the night.

What the holy hell was that?

Someone stirred in the dark, in another bed across the room.

"Is that you, Hillary?" I whispered. "Or is it Alan Keyes?"

Byron Baldwin's voice came back. "It's me, Byron. What's going on?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God. I was afraid you were Alan Keyes."

"What?" Byron reached over and turned on the small lamp that stood on a nightstand between us. "Okay, now I'm awake, and I need to hear about this dream."

I was embarrassed and excited to relate it to him, leaving no gory detail out.

"I should have gone right back to bed after you woke me," Byron declared. "If I had any idea . . . any at all . . . that you were going to tell me about a Hillary Clinton sex fantasy . . ."

"Pretty funny, huh?"

"Nobody likes Hillary Clinton! *Nobody*."

"The number of people worldwide who like Hillary Clinton is an empty set. That's why I like her. Somebody has to. All she said was she wasn't that into baking cookies and it was all over for her. But she's way cooler than her idiot husband, that's for damn sure."

"I'd heard Italian guys have terribly bad cases of the Oedipus Complex, but I had no idea just how true that was until you just told me this story."

"I wonder if I go right back to sleep now, will I be reunited with Hillary? Could we pick up where we left off?"

"Oh, my God," moaned Byron.

I dropped my head back down on the pillow, closed my eyes, and made a wish.

I'm coming, Hillary. I'm coming.

January 8, 1997

I lingered in the Locanda Garibaldi's empty ground floor restaurant, looking out through the windowed cherry-wood doors onto the wet street, wondering what Siena looked like when it wasn't storming or nighttime. Two days sprinting through heavy rains gave me the vague impression that the stone-walled medieval city-state was gorgeous but made me fear returning to America with twelve unused rolls of film. Since it was 9 a.m. and the restaurant opened at lunchtime, I took a seat at one of the empty tables. The table was set with a white table-runner over a red, floral tablecloth, an unlit candle, and a ceramic boat of spices and grated cheeses as garnishes and condiments. I glanced at the stack of assigned books I had brought down with me to read in the lobby, since I could never get comfortable reading in bed: *The Italian City Republics*, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi by Saint Bonaventure*, *The Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris*, and *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death*. Valancourt had some nerve assigning so much reading for a four-week Italy trip. Sure, the class would provide the final three credits of my Medieval Studies minor, and I was fascinated by Italian history, but come on!

I did not notice Evelyn until she dropped into the seat across from me. I tried not to notice that I liked how she looked in her jeans and brown sweater. I was really in no mood to find anyone attractive any more ever again. I promised myself I would not make a pass at her.

Evelyn lightly tapped the cover. “Believe it or not, the best book is the one on the Black Death. It got me interested in art. I immediately added a second major to Psychology that spring. Of course, everyone else in the class last time hated it. They all found it more boring than watching fly fishing on television.”

I picked it up. “I never agree with ‘everyone else.’ And the first pages of the book about the birth of capitalism were astonishingly riveting. It may be my new favorite nonfiction book.”

“Lester K. Little is the man. Still, I’m glad I don’t have to read all those books again.”

I put the book down and pushed it a few inches away from me like a half-eaten meal I didn’t want to finish. “Word on the street is you’re a super senior, and twenty-five?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious about you here among the young’uns. I’d love to hear what your story is.”

Sizing me up, Evelyn regarded me with cautious interest. Her strong jaw and expressive eyes constantly betrayed her emotions, even when she thought she was looking calm or neutral. Mature and studious, she did not have the unseasoned look of an undergraduate. Born in 1971, she would be graduating with a class of students mostly born in 1975 because she had taken a few years off from school to tend to her father. In 1992, an industrial accident robbed Mr. Krueger of his fingers, and he was left with an insulting legal settlement and inadequate disability benefits. Compounding the problem, after these settlements were made, it gradually became clear that her father had lost most of his hearing working amongst loud machinery for decades. His body, ruined by factory work, made Evelyn a militant work-safety law champion and working-class rights advocate. She was also emotionally traumatized by his deafness, and wore protective pink earplugs day and night, even when the ambient noise was minimal.

Evelyn and her father were both only children, and Evelyn’s mother had died giving birth to her. She had never moved out of the house she shared with her father. When she took an academic leave of absence, she exchanged her college courses for a series of part-time jobs she used to pay for his regular home care. After a few years, Evelyn

eventually got him into a steady enough routine that she felt able to quit her jobs and return to Geneseo to finish her degree. Ever since her return, Evelyn worked with the librarians and Geneseo Student Health and Counseling office to locate an assisted living residence for her father. Having found three solid options, her remaining problem was talking her father into leaving behind the house both he and she had grown up in, and either selling it or passing it on to her before his death. Stubborn and independent, her father would not be easy to convince.

Of course, Evelyn had inherited both her father's stubbornness and independence, and was a loner to boot. She had grown up in Royville, a village of five-thousand residents, and had made not a single friend or encountered even one romantic prospect throughout her formative years. There was one little girl she played dolls with in first grade, a freckled boy named Harry who held her hand once in third grade, and her psychology teacher, Mrs. Perrine, who made her want to grow up to be a counselor. Those were her only sources of human contact outside of her sickly father. Evelyn's inquisitive mind served as an effective social wedge, preventing her from growing close to anyone in her rural community. By the time she was in high school, she had found her society in books alone, and shied away from males of all ages. Even enrolling in Geneseo, she did not live in the dormitory, because she could not countenance living in close proximity to so many strangers. Instead, Evelyn commuted the less than half-hour drive from her family home in Royville. Classroom discussions and overheard mealtime conversations made it clear to Evelyn that, as much as she thought herself the most cosmopolitan person in Royville, she was the proverbial intellectual big fish in a small pond. Next to the other Geneseo students from Buffalo, Rochester, Long Island, and New York City, she was just another Royville bumpkin. They would not take to her at all, even if she attempted to speak with them. Evelyn, Byron, and I made quite the trio. I thought I had too few friends growing up, and deeply resented my lingering virginity. Byron wished he had had more friends as a kid but was grateful for the romantic companionship of Tammy I through Tammy VI. Evelyn Krueger was, at twenty-five, the least socially adjusted of us all. Her choosing to sit across from me at the table that rainy morning in Siena was the friendliest and most

socially aggressive move she had ever made.

"I have no story to tell," Evelyn said flatly. She pulled a pad out from her duffel bag, flipped it open, and placed alongside it a copy of *Let's Go Italy*. She then produced a map and unfolded it. "You're going to Rome this weekend, aren't you?"

"I don't know," I said. "I know I have to see the Vatican before we leave, but I was considering going to Venice this weekend."

Evelyn pulled a face. "Venice. I hate Venice. There's nothing to see there. No museums, no good paintings, no good sculptures. It's only scenery, seafood, and expensive blown glass." She tapped the side of her head with the eraser on her pencil. "No mental stimulation."

I frowned. This was not the first time I'd heard Venice slammed. In high school, Mike Bonavita complained that it smelled. Just last night, Taran monologued for five minutes during dinner accusing the Venetians of stealing everything good about their city from everywhere else, and proclaiming it a tourist trap of con artists and opportunists. Still, I had to see it. "My mother said that St. Marc's Cathedral was so beautiful that it made her cry."

Evelyn was clearly not impressed by the anecdote but didn't reiterate her dislike.

"I'm named after the Cathedral," I added. "Damien Marc Cavalieri."

Evelyn smiled. "Oh, now I see why you have to go." After a heartbeat she added, "But go next weekend. This weekend you have to come to Rome with me."

"With you?"

Evelyn paused. "Yeah. And Purple Sarah and Bongo Guy and Tuesday. We're all going."

I shrugged. "Okay."

Evelyn reached out and grasped my hand. "Don't worry! We will have a great time."

Bobby Mammolito paused halfway down the stairs. His face lit up when he saw Evelyn holding my hand. "Egon! My man! You're a fast worker! You are the mack daddy, Egon!"

I held up my copy of *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* by Lester K. Little. "I'm just here reading about usury, sin, and the birth of capitalism."

"I'm so jealous of you, man!" Bobby raced the rest of the way down the stairs, stood beside Evelyn and I and patted me on the head. "You're my hero." He glanced at Evelyn. "Nice sweater, Evelyn. You look delectable."

Evelyn shifted in her seat and looked down at her map.

"*You're* jealous of *me*?" I asked.

"Your animal magnetism is astounding!" Bobby pounded his chest in approval.

"Okay, please go away, now," I said.

Bobby sighed. "I will. I don't want to go out in the rain, but Tuesday is forcing me."

Tuesday came downstairs and walked up to Bobby's side. "I don't care how bad the rain is, I'm not staying cooped up a minute longer."

Bobby sighed. "The things you make me do for you, Tuesday."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. Tuesday kicked me in the shin. "Shut the fuck up, Damien! For ten years now, you've been teasing me! Ten years! It gets old. Real old!"

"I'm sorry," I blushed. "I just wasn't expecting him to say that. I really am never trying to make fun of you. I promise. It is always an accident. I swear to God. I have no beef with you."

Tuesday glared daggers at me, daring me to say more. I didn't. Then they left.

"Do you really torment her?" Evelyn asked, once they were safely gone.

"She never sees me at my best," I insisted. "Something weird always happens."

"What's Bobby's deal? I can't tell if he likes you, hates you, or is secretly hot for you."

I leaned forward eagerly. "I know, right? I've been asking myself the same questions since 1987! I used to think people were complicated and deep, and that all the above was true about him. Now I think people are exactly what they appear to be: He just finds me funny."

"There is something funny about you, but I can't figure it out," Evelyn said. She was writing something the entire time I spoke but nodded as if she could pull off multitasking in a way I couldn't. She flipped back a page in her pad and turned it around so I could see what was written in it. "I've made up an itinerary." She ran the pencil past a list of names

written in impeccable handwriting. “These are all the churches I have to see. They each have a work of art that’s important to me. You know how Moses looked in *The Ten Commandments*, with the big, white beard? There’s a church in Rome with the Michelangelo Moses statue that inspired the film. I missed it last time, and I can’t miss it again.”

“I hope you have Trajan’s Column,” I said. “I have to see it. From a certain point of view, it’s the earliest graphic novel. Some comic book scholars think so, anyway.”

“Oh, it’s on the list, for sure.”

I leaned forward. “Show me what else you got.”

She leaned forward, too, and pointed at the next work of art on the agenda.

I liked her perfume.

January 9, 1997

Aside from the incidents related above, our first few days in Siena were uneventful because the time that was not spent indoors waiting for it to stop raining was taken up by Valancourt’s lectures. A three-hour lecture in the morning in the hotel sitting room was followed by a three-hour break for lunch and personal time, and then another three-hour lecture on location in a random Sienese church or museum, where Dr. Valancourt would lead the students from fresco to fresco, using art to bring medieval Italy to life. Unlike Evelyn, I hated medieval art, finding a lot of the subject matters of the drawings difficult to relate to. I had a strong preference for later Italian art by Caravaggio, Raphael, and Artemisia Gentileschi. My first clue that Bobby Mammolito agreed with me came when he said, “How many of these fucking frescoes are we gonna have to look at, at length?”

Much of the art Valancourt showed us dealt with his personal hero, St. Francis. My favorite pieces of Francis-related art, and my all-time favorite St. Francis story, involved the Wolf of Gubbio. Unfortunately, another popular artistic theme was the Slaughter of the Innocents, the killing of all the children in Bethlehem following the birth of Christ. These pieces brought back bad memories of Miss O’Sullivan succeeding

in scarring me for life with her blasted late-term abortion photos. Being particularly sensitive to the notion of dead children, I would have found these frescoes too hard to take if the artwork were not so arcane. It helped that Evelyn was flippant about it all. “Didn’t I tell you that we’d be seeing it everywhere?” she laughed. “In this church, there are three different paintings of the Slaughter of the Innocents. In the church we’re seeing tomorrow, there’s another Slaughter of the Innocents. And there’s more coming still. Pretty soon, you’re going to be seeing the Slaughter of the Innocents in your soup. It’ll be stuck in your head forever.”

“That’s about par for the course for me.” I still saw Miss O’Sullivan’s damn photos in my head from time to time. I guess Catholics have always gone for “dead baby art” in a big way. The next several times Valancourt led us past a Slaughter of the Innocents, Evelyn and I burst out laughing, clutching each other by the shoulder and pressing our foreheads together. By the end of the week, we had seen eight such portraits. On the ninth, I could barely contain my hysterics, much to Valancourt’s chagrin. Perhaps, at long last, I was beginning to find Miss O’Sullivan a little ridiculous, too. The memory of her shrieking in terror at me, like the bride of Frankenstein, certainly helped me cement my new impression of her as a broadly comic figure, like a Nazi lady from the British World War II sitcom *Allo ‘Allo*.

Not every piece of medieval Italian art was fundamentally disturbing and triggered bad memories. The much more benevolently entertaining icon who appeared time and again on our tours of medieval Italian art was the Blessed Agostino Novello, an Augustinian monk who was born in 1240 in Termini and died in 1309. He loomed large in artwork found in more than one church, but most notably in the Blessed Agostino Novello Triptych (Trittico di Sant’Agostino) painting by Simone Martini — an altarpiece found in the collection of the Pinacoteca Nazionale Siena. The altarpiece illustrated the balding, robed monk performing a stunning array of miracles, which collectively inspired Pope Clement XIII to beatify him in 1761. The painting that most impressed our group of students depicted Agostino Novello swooping from the sky to catch a child before it was dashed upon the ground. The scene was featured in the lower left section of the altarpiece and

called, appropriately enough, “Child Falling from a Balcony.” Since I was “the comic book guy,” I didn’t want to say anything, but the image looked remarkably like Christopher Reeve swooping in to save Margot Kidder from falling to her death from the top of the Daily Planet building. As it turns out, I didn’t have to be the one to bring up Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s comic book creation.

Bobby and Tuesday both raised their fists up in the air, imitating Superman in flight. “Superman!” they shouted, in unison. Then, Bobby added, in a bellowing Staten Island accent, “The Blessed Agostino Novello *was* Superman! The very first Kryptonian to arrive on Earth, years before Kal-El landed in Smallville, Kansas!” As Bobby yelled these words, Byron scatted the opening bars of the John Williams theme to *Superman*.

Valancourt cooled his troubled brow by placing his cold can of Diet Pepsi against his temple. “Oh, no! You *all* like superheroes? Not just Damien? That’s truly unfortunate.” He pointed an accusing finger at me. “I had to sit in the row behind him the entire flight across the ocean. You never heard somebody talk so much about Spider-Man. Never!”

Byron laughed and clapped his hands. “We had a great conversation, Dr. Valancourt! Sorry you didn’t enjoy overhearing it.”

“I remember every word!” Valancourt wailed. “About how there should be a *Spider-Man* movie, but it shouldn’t be directed by James Cameron and star Leonardo DiCaprio. Nor should it feature Sandman and Electro as villains. Instead, Spider-Man should be played by an actor who is ugly by Hollywood standards, like Tobey Maguire, and the director should be someone who specializes in horror comedy films, like Barry Sonnenfeld or Tom Holland. Instead of Sandman, the villain should be the Green Goblin and the film should adapt both the Spider-Man origin story from *Amazing Fantasy* such-and-such-a-number, plus *The Death of Gwen Stacy* by Gerry Conway. However, the filmmakers should swap Gwen Stacy out for Mary Jane, who is the more complex character. Blonde actress Kirsten Dunst should dye her hair red to be able to play Mary Jane. The Goblin should throw Mary Jane off the Brooklyn Bridge instead of Gwen, only this time, Spider-Man should catch the girl and she should survive. After all, killing off Mary Jane is too sad for

a first *Spider-Man* film marketed to families. I have to tell you, Damien, I've had this monologue in my head ever since we landed in Italy and I can't shake it. The worst part is, I have no idea who any of these actors or directors or characters are, but I remember every gosh darn word you spoke on that flight! I want the space back in my brain that you stole!"

Byron, Evelyn, Purple Sarah, Bobby, Tuesday, Taran, and Bongo Guy laughed uproariously at Valancourt's impeccable comic delivery, made increasingly hysterical each time my face turned a darker shade of crimson.

Byron pursed his lips. "You know, I really don't see what you've got against James Cameron and Leonardo DiCaprio."

I shouldn't have replied, but I couldn't let that pass. "I'm telling you, the first movie needs to have Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, and some scary middle-aged actor as the Green Goblin. I don't care which. Maybe John Glover. Di Caprio could play the Human Torch, Doctor Strange, Iron Man, or Captain America, but he is way, way, way too handsome to be Spider-Man. Maybe he could be a John Romita-era Peter Parker. Maybe. But only Tobey Maguire could play the Steve Ditko Peter Parker, and Ditko's is the version of Spider-Man that needs to be put on screen first, before John Romita's. I may be a bad Italian saying it, but I still love Romita."

This time, Valancourt laughed along with everyone else, and I was the only one standing there with a serious expression, hoping everyone was taking notes on my genius fan-casting.

Byron and I sat in the sitting-room outside our shared room, failing to come to a consensus on when to have our Roman holiday weekend. I was not making headway convincing him it was in our interest to tag along with Evelyn. "We need a guide in Rome. We need a long weekend. If we go tomorrow, we'll have both. If we wait another week, we'll have neither. Next weekend is short, and Venice is small. We can explore it on our own."

"I don't want to spend three days in Rome," he said. "It's a city. I hate cities."

"Isn't there anything you want to see there?"

"I told Taran I was bored with the same old crap," Byron complained. "Everywhere we go in Italy it's the usual parade of frescoes. He said if I wanted something truly different, I should try the Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini bone mosaic."

I massaged my jaw. "That's different? Sounds like more religious wall art."

"I don't know. It's a bone mosaic. Taran says it is an ossuary."

I scrunched my eyebrows together. "That makes everything a lot clearer, except I've never heard of either an ossuary or a bone mosaic, but if it'll keep you quiet, okay. What else?"

"That's it. I'm not interested in anything else."

I threw my arms up in the air. "So why did you come to Italy?"

Byron shrugged. "I should have gone to Scotland to get in touch with my heritage. I want to put on a kilt, visit a castle, and run across the battlements, pretending I'm William Wallace."

"But you're in Italy!"

"And I'm not Italian and none of this speaks to me."

"I was under the impression my culture was cool to those not in it, but I guess not!"

"Evelyn is visiting all these churches. I hate churches. And I'm not into art much either."

"We'll spend some time in the Vatican, too. See the Pope!"

"That's something you're interested in. I don't like being Catholic. You do."

"Jesus Christ, Byron! If you don't like art, you don't like cities, and you don't like Catholicism, then why the did you come? All Italy is, is one giant church filled with art!"

"Don't shout at me," Byron said quietly. "I don't deserve to be shouted at."

(Years later, when I saw *In Bruges*, the scenes in which Colin Farrell greeted most of Belgium with an indifference that enraged Brendan Gleeson filled me with nostalgic glee. Had writer-director Martin McDonagh overheard this conversation, and noticed that Byron looked even more like Colin Farrell than he did Billy Baldwin? Probably not, but I pretended he did.)

“Byron, all you’ve done from the first second we got here is complain and pick fights with people. How many times are you gonna bring up the nobility of hunting game for food when talking to a bunch of vegetarian girls? I can’t take it anymore. I’ve wanted to come to this country all my life. If you ruin it for me, I’ll never forgive you.”

Byron didn’t move, but it was clear I had shaken him with the force of my words. “Don’t put that on me, Damien. It’s not fair.”

“You put it on yourself.”

Evelyn chose that instant to appear at the top of the stairs. “How’s Happy Boy?”

“Impossible,” I growled, and stalked past her out of the room.

January 10, 1997

The next day was Friday. Valancourt gave us the day off from classes, so Evelyn led Byron and I to the Rome bus early in the morning. It would be a three-hour trip all told, and she knew the best subway stops to take to reach the hotel from our point of arrival. I had chosen the Hotel Fellini, on Via Rasella, because it was named for one of my favorite filmmakers. Finding a poster for my current favorite movie — *Le notti di Cabiria* — in the stairwell gave me exactly the thrill of recognition I was looking for. By happy coincidence, the hotel was mere yards away from Trevi Fountain, making me laugh at myself for picking the hotel for the gimmicky name “Fellini” and not for its proximity to Trevi. By Byron’s standards, the hotel was in a filthy urban area and he was nervous, but he liked the buffet breakfast room, with the deli meats, cheeses, pastries, breads, yogurt, and cappuccinos. As for the accommodations, we all found bathrooms with toilets, sinks, showers, and bidets in each of our rooms, so we didn’t have to play paper-scissor-rock anymore to determine who gets the rooms with facilities. I spent many a long minute staring down at the bidet, wondering what the hell I was looking at.

Armed with umbrellas, Byron and I braved the rain to poke around the city. Taran had warned us all to look out for pickpockets with pinched faces, children included, who glided like ghosts through

the streets. We should shout to frighten them off, he said. Taran also warned the girls to be wary of Italian men on the make, who would follow them about with roses and try to pick them up. I never witnessed, first-hand, an aggressive Italian Lothario descending upon one of the girls in our group. However, on the first day out with Byron, we did see the pickpockets and scare them away. They wore grey clothes and dark blue rain ponchos. Taran and Valancourt had called them gypsies, but they looked nothing like Esméralda from *Hunchback of Notre Dame* or Maleva in *The Wolf Man*, so the appellation seemed inappropriate. I didn't want my pocket picked, but I was actually worried about the children, who looked undernourished and sickly. I've never understood why wealthy countries don't do better helping poor people.

To appease Byron, it was only Byron and me on the first leg of the Rome journey. We did not link up our expedition with Evelyn's. Sadly, two hopeless idiots with a map and no sense of direction meant we spent much of the day on a fruitless search for the Coliseum. You'd think the Coliseum would be easy to spot! It isn't tiny, after all. We did manage to stumble on some of the humbler exhibits, such as the Discus Thrower statue in the Roman Baths, but I was annoyed when we bumped into Tuesday, Bobby, Sarah, Evelyn, and Bongo Guy at the Pantheon. Naturally, Evelyn had seen about eleven major landmarks in the three hours that it took Byron and I to find that Discus motherfucker. I swore that, argument or no argument, we'd be traveling with the expert tomorrow. "Just as long as we see the bone mosaic tomorrow," Byron agreed.

"Why not? I don't know what the hell it is, but I'm curious."

*What is a *bone* mosaic? A 'mosaic' is a kind of pattern or an art installation? And a 'bone' is . . . a bone. So, what is a 'bone mosaic?' Nope. No idea. Can't figure it out.*

Evelyn overheard the bone mosaic discussion and found herself interested enough to want to join us. Byron didn't mind because she was joining his expedition and not the other way around. The next morning, we set out while the others still slept to find the site of the bone mosaic. I didn't like the mutual dislike that hung in the air between Byron and Evelyn, and I attempted to dispel it with the sheer force of my enthusiasm. "Right then troops! No, not troops, team,

um . . . gang . . . no, peeps! We're off!" I hummed the theme to *The A-Team* to build up team spirit between us. This plan did not work.

The Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini was surprisingly close to Hotel Fellini — a six-minute walk to the Via Veneto along the Vias Boccaccio, Tritone, and Barberini — but it took us three times as long to find under Byron's direction, because he refused on two occasions to tell Evelyn its address. "I just want to take in the city, Evelyn. If you spend all your time making straight line journeys from point A to point B, you miss out on a lot."

"That's true," I agreed.

"If you spend all day lost, you miss out on more," Evelyn pouted.

"No doubt we will find it shortly." I offered the sparring partners my most reassuring smile. *Mia Madonna. Everyone I know is stubborn. I'd love to be stubborn, too, but then nobody would be reasonable. So, I guess I'm stuck being flexible.*

The church's distinctive white marble and red-brown brick entranceway featured a pair of stairways, two flights each, facing one another — leading to the same elevated entrance door — forming a horizontal, diamond-shaped design. On the one hand, it looked indistinguishable from any other ancient building in Rome. On the other, the façade gave a sense of foreboding: we were about to enter one of Dario Argento's lairs of black magic, with a relentless Goblin music score starting as we crossed the threshold. Byron went through the entrance first, returning a second later, embarrassed. "I need a translation."

I stepped past Byron into a dark, candle-lit room. A balding, bearded monk in a dark brown habit stood before me. I was half convinced we had gone back in time four hundred years until a car horn honked outside. Silently, the monk pointed to a basket by the side of the door, labeled "Donations" in English and Italian. I pulled a few bills from my wallet. Not feeling much like doing the math to figure out how many lire equaled a reasonable entry price in American dollars, I guessed and carelessly dropped a few of the smaller bills into the basket. I had no idea if I had just been generous, cheap, or about right. Sylvia Plath was right: Tipping *is* hard.

The monk gestured down a long, narrow corridor on the right. We three headed that way. Over the past few days, Byron had used the words “bone,” “mosaic,” “crypt,” and “ossuary” to describe this place, but nothing could have prepared me for the view I was about to receive. Running along the ceiling of the corridor were patterns made from every bone in the human body. There were rows of diamonds made from sets of jaw bones, flower designs made from teeth, and lamps of bone hanging suspended from the ceiling by leg bones. I pointed over our heads at the art and light fixtures made from the pieces of thousands of dead humans. “What?”

The first of three chambers appeared on our left. The walls were covered in jawless human skulls stacked one on top of the other. Hundreds of pairs of empty eye sockets stared at us and through us. In the second chamber, three complete skeletons dressed in monks’ robes stood before another three displays of skulls. In the third chamber was a throne made of pelvic bones. George R.R. Martin’s Iron Throne was made of swords. Both were shocking, but this pelvic bone throne won the fear-inducing championship.

I didn’t know enough about the human body to identify most of the body parts I was confronted with and was glad for it. I could pretend this tableau was a strange prank by a LEGO enthusiast, or something. None of this could be real, could it? Actual dead bodies turned into a madman’s art installation? Indeed, on one level, what I was looking at didn’t appear human at all. You don’t mourn a dead thing that doesn’t look human. The problem was, I knew it was human. These were real bones, pulled from real dead people, shaped by an artistic genius. But what kind of sick mind would make this? I tried not to think of the Holocaust or of dead relatives or my own mortality, but I thought of little else.

“I make art when somebody dies,” I murmured, paraphrasing the Joker.

On the ceiling of the final chamber, the skeleton of a five-year-old child hung suspended from the ceiling, clutching in its hand a giant scythe made of bone. I gaped up at it, trying not to think of abortion or crib death or any dead children of any kind.

“What the fuck is this?” Byron exclaimed. His eyes were wide. A smile of shock, horror and amusement spread across his face.

“This is the weirdest shit I’ve ever seen,” I said.

“Talk about Slaughter of the Innocents,” Evelyn whispered.

Byron pointed to a plaque on the wall beside us. “This says these murals are made from the bones of 3,700 Capuchin friars. When? The Black Death?”

“If these bones are from any other time period, I demand an explanation,” I said.

“But who would make art from piles of Black Death casualties?” Byron asked.

I shrugged. “Speaking as someone who has no idea what in hell he’s looking at right now, if I had to live through the Black Death, I’d be crazy, too.”

“Crazy enough to build something like this?” asked Byron.

Evelyn flipped to the correct page in her tour book and read it aloud. “The monks came to this church in 1631, bringing with them 300 cartloads of the exhumed remains of their order’s friars. Fr. Michael of Bergamo designed and arranged the bones into small, bone-mosaic chapels, using soil imported from Jerusalem.”

“Oh, God!” Byron pointed excitedly at a sign held aloft by one of the skeletons: “What you are now, we once were. What we are now, you will be.”

“Dude!” I exclaimed.

“That’s the scariest thing I’ve ever read,” Byron breathed.

“Yeah,” whispered Evelyn.

I pointed at one of the complete skeletons and adopted my Arnold Schwarzenegger accent. “‘Jim Hopper?’ Byron, ‘I know dis man! Green Beret out of Fort Bragg. But what is he doing here?’” The unbearable tension finally broken, Byron and I tossed our heads back and laughed. I felt guilty laughing hysterically in this charnel house, but something had to give.

Evelyn scowled. “Okay, Peter Parker, that’s enough turning everything into a joke. Now is not an appropriate time to quote the movie *Predator*.”

“Now’s the perfect time to quote *Predator*!” Byron retorted.

"It would be a great pledge location," I observed. "Lock the new guy in here overnight and see if he gets through it without running off or killing himself."

"Too right," Byron said.

"Nothing is as bad as the ookie cookie, but this would come a close second."

We walked among the bones for another ten minutes, drinking in the sight of death, talking about how creepy it was, but not finding a way to get ourselves to leave.

"I've had enough," said Evelyn. "I'll meet you guys outside."

"No, no," I said. "We're coming."

Before we stepped out the door, Byron and I made sure to get postcards of the displays. We didn't know why they were paying to keep that sight with us, but we knew we wanted to remember how it looked in the years to come. As we left, we took one last look at the monk, wondering if his bones would be added to the display after he died. Was that mosaic still under construction? We wanted to know the answer, and we didn't.

Two days later, when Byron and I saw Taran again, we laughingly reproved him for suggesting it to us. "What the hell was that, Taran?" Byron needled.

"That crypt separates the real Catholics from the ones who are just kidding around," he said. "I know a lot of Catholics who walked out of that place as Quakers."