

MORE THAN FRENCH KISSING

A romantic scene of two men in winter clothing embracing and kissing in a snowy setting. The man on the left is wearing a light-colored, textured knit sweater and a scarf, with a pink rose pinned to his chest. The man on the right is wearing a dark blue knit sweater and a scarf. They are standing in a snowy environment, with a white mug visible in the foreground on the left.

CASS WINTERS

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

MORE THAN FRENCH KISSING

By Cass Winters

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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MORE THAN FRENCH KISSING

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Photo Description

Two young men lie kissing on a cobbled street. They're surrounded by unfinished artwork and coloured pencils. A red Fiat 500 with the driver's door open faces a cream moped. A helmet is discarded on the ground beside them.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please can you help these guys get to this picture?

The story is up to you, but please try to include the following: a love of scarves, Europe, some drama, hot sex and humour.

We would really like to welcome and invite a new writer to tell this story.

Sincerely,

Al and Noah

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: college, coming of age, Europe, frottage, second chances, travel

Word Count: 15,032

MORE THAN FRENCH KISSING

By Cass Winters

Chapter One

Dan had discovered the coffee shop quite by mistake. He'd been walking home from the school where he worked as an assistant and had taken the wrong turn—easy enough to do in a new city comprised of narrow lanes, winding alleys, and cobbled streets that all looked remarkably similar.

The café was on the corner of the road he'd mistakenly turned onto, and it had looked so quaint and inviting that Dan hadn't been able to keep himself from venturing inside for a coffee.

Three weeks later, and he was taking the wrong turn on purpose nearly every day in order to visit the café. But it wasn't just the coffee that had him going back, it was the sexy barista who worked there who had caught Dan's eye. Dark-haired and olive-skinned, he had a perfect smile and wide brown eyes. Dan had been entranced on the first day, and now he was entirely captivated.

Today was Wednesday, and that meant school finished early. Dan had been looking forward to the final bell all day, the students in his conversation classes casting him confused glances when he'd left them to their own devices for the first half of the lesson, choosing instead to gaze out the window and daydream.

Today was the day. He was going to ask the guy out. They'd been eye flirting for days but never speaking, because a cashier always took Dan's order, and the sexy barista made his coffee off to the side. The closest they got to a conversation had been the exchange of "*Café crème!*" as the barista placed it on the counter and Dan's "*Merci,*" before he took it to a table. But today that would change. Dan would ask him out, and hopefully, the other man would say yes.

Dan pushed his way into the café, the bell over the door jangling jauntily as he closed it behind him. The coffee shop was small inside, with dark wood tables and overstuffed chairs lending it a cosy, comfortable feeling. There was an old fireplace towards the back, stacked with logs and decorated with fairy lights. The walls were exposed brickwork, covered in French newspaper clippings from long ago, and the one closest to the table Dan dropped his bag onto declared "*La vie française! Incomparable!*"

Dan couldn't help but agree. His time in France so far had been nothing short of fantastic, and if everything went to plan today, it would only get better. He approached the counter, noting his sexy barista wasn't manning the coffee machine. Instead it was a petite blonde girl. That was okay. That was all part of Dan's plan.

He'd chosen Wednesday because he knew the object of his affections didn't start his shift until a little later on, and Dan wanted to catch him before he started work. There would be nothing more awkward than trying to ask him out as he made Dan's coffee only to have the answer be *non*—and then Dan would have to sit and drink in full view of the man who'd just rejected him.

No—better to ask him before he started, and then if the answer was no, Dan could make a hasty retreat.

He ordered his regular *café crème*, a creamy, rich coffee he was addicted to, which had no comparable equivalent back home in England. Sitting down at his chosen table—one with a perfect line of sight to the door so he could see when his crush arrived—Dan pulled out his notes for the following day's classes.

He had been in France for six months, with three remaining—all part of the third year of his university degree. His course required all students to spend a year abroad, either attending a French university or teaching English conversation classes at a French school. Dan had chosen to teach, loving the idea of helping young French students learn English. In fact, he enjoyed the classes so much, he was considering becoming a teacher after he graduated.

The next day's lesson would be on the differences between the French and English school systems, and Dan was just putting the finishing touches to his class notes when the bell above the door jangled and the sexy barista strode through.

Dan's stomach swooped, and his palms began to sweat. He took a deep breath and started to stand up, gathering all his nerve. He was a little out of practice—this was the first time since he'd arrived in France that he'd felt confident enough to try and ask someone out. He hadn't even hooked up with anyone.

The other man looked a little startled to see someone blocking his path to the counter, and Dan decided to just dive right in.

"*Bonjour*," he said, the stilted and overly formal French from the beginning of the year now coming naturally. He slid into the language with only a little

trepidation at making a mistake. “*Je m’appelle Dan. J’ai pensé qu’il était temps de me présenter.*”

The barista quirked an eyebrow, and perhaps Dan’s accent had given him away, for the other man replied in perfect English, a hint of a London accent in his voice. “Nico. Nice to meet you.”

“You’re English too?” Dan said, huffing a little laugh. If he’d known Nico was English, perhaps he wouldn’t have taken three weeks to work up the courage to speak to him.

“Italian, really. But I lived in England until I was fifteen.”

“And now you’re living in France?” Dan asked, stalling a little bit.

“Just for the year. I’m at the university.” Nico glanced at the clock on the wall above the fireplace. “I don’t want to be rude, but my shift starts soon. I’m glad you introduced yourself, though.”

“Oh, yeah, I should let you get to work.” Dan took a deep breath. “I was wondering, actually, if you’d maybe want to get together sometime? Go for a drink or something.”

Nico looked like he was trying to bite back a grin, and his eyes swept Dan’s form as Dan tried not to squirm waiting for the answer. “Sure. I’m always up for making new friends.”

Dan blushed, but he returned Nico’s gaze with a smile, a pen, and an outstretched hand. “Great. Can I have your number? I’ll message you.”

Nico took the pen Dan offered, and held his hand to steady it. Nico’s grip was strong, his palm soft, and Dan shivered a little at the touch. A couple of moments later and Dan stared down at the string of digits on his palm, triumphant.

“I’ve really got to get to work,” Nico said, turning to walk towards the counter. “But I’ll be waiting for your message.”

“I’m composing it in my head right now,” Dan replied. He walked back over to the table where he’d left his notes and started to pack everything into his bag. His abandoned *café crème* had about a mouthful left. He swallowed it down, shouldered his bag, and walked towards the exit with an added spring in his step.

“*Au revoir,*” he called as he left the shop, and both Nico and the blonde girl smiled and waved.

Dan hadn't been lying when he'd said he was composing the message in his head. As he walked back into the centre of town, he tried to think of what to say and where to suggest they go.

Nantes was a city full of beautiful cafés, restaurants, crêperies and bars, but it didn't have much of a nightlife. Dan missed being able to go out to a club with loud, pulsing music and hordes of hot guys to dance with.

There were a few edgier clubs on the other side of the river, but Dan had never been to any of them. Now that he had secured a date with Nico, he wanted somewhere he could get to know him properly.

He took out his phone and, after saving Nico's number, typed a quick message to his friend Fabien. The French student had been one of the first people Dan had met on arrival, assigned by the university to help Dan assimilate and get settled in. They had become good friends—Fabien was a complete anglophile and loved everything English.

Fab, need to think of somewhere to go on a first date.
Suggestions?

The answer came back almost immediately.

You are asking me for advice, Daniel? I haven't been on a proper date since high school.

Ha, but you know the city. Help! I want to impress this guy.

This is the barista?

Yes.

Your bed should suffice, non?

Fab, seriously. That might be the end goal but I barely know the guy!

Okay. There is not much nightlife in Nantes. Hm, perhaps Maison, the bar like the house? It is fun, great atmosphere. There are even beds!

Dan had heard about Maison but never been—a cocktail bar themed around the rooms of a house. A quick Google search later and he decided it was ideal. Quirky enough to suit his taste, live music, and like Fab had said, if they ran out of things to talk about the décor would be enough of a distraction.

You're a genius, Fab. Maison it is.

Chapter Two

It was raining. Of course it was raining. It had been cold and gloomy all day, but the rain had held off, and Dan had been hopeful it would stay that way into the evening. He'd arranged to meet Nico at the tram stop in the centre of town and then walk together to the bar. Now he was going to arrive looking like a drowned rat.

He'd spent far too long getting ready, tossing clothes around his small studio apartment, fussing with his hair in front of the mirror, and trying to decide whether his facial hair was more sexy stubble or messy scruff.

Dan so wanted this to go well. He felt a little stupid to put so much hope and emphasis on this date, but Nico had been the first guy to catch his eye in France, and, well, a six-month dry spell was no fun for anyone.

Forgoing his umbrella, Dan made the dash from his apartment to the tram stop across the road and was pleased to see a tramcar rumbling along the tracks in his direction. He jumped on and sat down, foot tapping nervously.

He startled when his phone vibrated, and his stomach dropped as the pessimist in him decided it would be Nico, messaging to say the date was off.

It wasn't, of course. It was Fab, wishing him luck and sex.

Bonne chance, Daniel! N'oublie pas d'utiliser une capote!

The journey into town was quick—too quick—and Dan felt like panicking as they pulled up to the tram stop. He saw Nico standing under the shelter, hood of his jacket up and hands buried in his pockets.

Dan stepped off the tram and put his own hands in his pockets, feeling suddenly shy. "Hi," he said, stopping in front of Nico and wondering if that was sufficient enough a greeting. Should he shake Nico's hand or draw him into a hug?

He did neither, instead falling back into that old British standby of talking about the weather.

"I couldn't believe it when it started raining as soon as I left my apartment," he said. As he turned to start walking in the direction of the bar, he pulled the hood of his jacket up for what little protection it offered from the rain.

Nico smiled. "I like it. Reminds me of England."

“Do you miss living there?” Dan asked. “I’ve only been here five months, but I don’t think I want to go back. I bet Italy’s amazing.”

“Yes and no. We live in a very small town outside of Rome, and I’m definitely a city person. I was only fifteen when we left London, so I don’t think I ever got the chance to really live that lifestyle, you know? Fast-paced and hectic but amazing at the same time.”

Dan nodded. “I’m from Southampton, which is nowhere near on the scale of London, and I get what you mean. This is a nice city, but I really struggled trying to come up with somewhere to go this evening.”

“And being gay in a small village completely sucks. You have no idea how glad I was to find out I needed to do a year abroad for my degree.” Nico said.

“Why did you pick France and not England, then?” Dan asked, his nervousness having subsided as the conversation flowed.

“I applied to go to London but everything fell through,” Nico said. “France was my second choice. I’m enjoying it, though.”

“Me, too. I love it here.” Dan looked up as they approached the bar. An archway with brightly coloured lettering proclaimed Maison, and they followed it to a small, covered outdoor area.

Dan led the way, the beat of the music already reverberating through the air and the pungent smell of French cigarettes filling his nostrils.

They both removed their jackets at the door, and Dan shook his head a little to shake off any stray raindrops. The interior of the bar was as brightly coloured as the sign had been, the décor decidedly retro and as quirky as Dan had anticipated.

In a room set out as a bathroom, chairs surrounded a tub, covered over to create a table. A kitchen area had cupboards and an oven. The living room had a vintage television, and the bedroom’s chaise longue seating was probably what Fab meant by “beds.”

There was a band set up in the conservatory area, and the music was lively and loud but not deafening, which Dan liked. He’d been enjoying his conversation with Nico and wanted it to continue.

They approached the bar and ordered drinks. Dan stuck to his preferred *vin blanc*, but Nico ordered a fruity cocktail, which had all the umbrellas and sparkly bits Dan had expected based on the atmosphere of the bar.

“This is amazing,” Nico said, sipping on his drink and looking around the place. “How have I never been here before?”

“My friend Fab recommended it.” Dan led the way over to an empty table fashioned out of a bathroom sink. “It’s a bit out of the way, though. You wouldn’t know it was here unless you’d been told.”

“I guess. I’m going to have to give my friends a very stern telling off if they knew about this place but didn’t say anything.”

“Are they locals?” Dan asked. “There are a few English exchange students I meet up with every now and then from uni, but my only French friend is Fabien.”

“I know some local students from the university,” Nico said. “When I didn’t get London as my first choice, I wanted to go somewhere non-English-speaking, and I told myself at the beginning of the semester I wouldn’t fall back on making friends with just English and Italian people. I’m here to learn the language as well as study for my course, you know?”

“Right,” Dan agreed. “It’s a little bit different for me because I’m an assistant at a school, so all my conversation classes are in English. But outside of that, I’m trying to speak as much French as possible.” He shrugged. “And here you are, ruining that for me.”

Nico quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yeah. There I was, all ready to ask out the sexy French barista and impress him with my language skills, but you turn out to be as English as I am.”

“Sorry for ruining your good intentions.” Nico smirked, then took a sip of his drink, and Dan couldn’t help but focus his gaze on Nico’s lips as they pursed around the pink straw.

“And I’m half-English, actually. My mum’s from London, only my dad’s side of the family’s Italian.”

“But you were born in England?”

“No, we lived in Italy with my *nonni*—my grandparents—until I was five, then moved to London, which was my mum’s idea. My dad always wanted to go back, but we didn’t until he was made redundant when I was fifteen.” Nico’s tone turned wistful. “Now he works with his brother in Rome. My mum’s an artist, which means she can work from anywhere.”

“Sounds like you miss them,” Dan said.

“Yeah. My grandparents too. We’re a close family.”

“Do they know you’re gay?”

“My parents do. I think my grandmother suspects, but she’s too old-fashioned to outright ask me.” Nico grinned and pulled the sparkly umbrella from his drink, sticking it behind his ear. “I came out to my parents accidentally when I was sixteen. There was this boy, Franco, and I fancied him something rotten. He came to my house after school one day, and we ended up kissing, fooling around, you know. Anyway, my mum came home early and found us shirtless on the sofa.”

“Wow, I’d be mortified if that happened to me now, let alone when I was sixteen,” Dan said.

“We were,” Nico agreed. “Franco ran off without his shirt and never talked to me again. And I barely spoke to my mum for a week afterwards.”

“But she was cool about it? And your dad, too?”

“Yeah. Dad took some time to come around, but I’m really lucky with how accepting they are. What about your parents?”

“It’s just me and my mum,” Dan said, face souring a little as he tried not to think about his father, who’d left them when Dan was eleven. “I didn’t tell her until last year. I think she kind of knew, though. She wasn’t surprised when I told her, anyway.”

“We’re both lucky, then,” Nico said. “I wish I were brave enough to tell my *nonna* but I’m scared to, because she’s old fashioned.”

“My friend Sean, back home, he told his nan first. She was amazing and encouraged him to tell his parents. They pretty much disowned him.” Dan sipped his wine, throat suddenly dry. “Your *nonna* may surprise you.”

Nico nodded. “Yeah, maybe. I’ll probably wait until there’s a reason to tell her. You know, a boyfriend to introduce her to.”

Dan felt a flush fill his cheeks, as an image filled his mind of Nico introducing him as his boyfriend to a little old Italian lady. It was far too soon to be thinking of such things, and he stood up abruptly. “Another drink? And maybe we should try out another area, shall we move to the living room?”

“Sure. Are you all right to get the drinks? I need to visit the bathroom, and whilst this looks like one, I don’t think they’d appreciate me using it.”

Dan laughed as he made his way towards the bar, and the grin didn't leave his face as he ordered the next round of drinks.

Chapter Three

Dan heard the shrill ringing noise that meant he was receiving an incoming video call, and he cursed at the timing. He dropped his boot on the floor and hopped over to the bedside table to pick up his phone. The display showed his mum was calling, he and swore again. He was already running late, and he didn't want to keep Nico waiting. It was their third date. They'd met up for a coffee the day after their night at Maison, and today they were off to see the famed mechanical elephant.

Dan answered the call anyway, knowing his mum would keep ringing if he didn't. He was an adult, twenty-one years old, but she worried about him as if he were a child.

The connection was slow, but eventually his mother's face filled the screen, and Dan angled the phone so she'd be able to see him properly, too.

"Sweetheart!" she said, with a huge smile. "How are you?"

"I'm good, Mum. Just on the way out actually. Any chance we could—"

His mum interrupted with a wave of her hand. "I won't keep you long, I just wanted to tell you I put a parcel in the post for you today. Some Dairy Milk to keep you going."

Dan smiled, and his heart warmed. "Thanks. Any chance you threw in a pack of digestives, too?"

"Well, I would have, but I didn't want you to get a bag full of crumbs. You know what the postmen are like."

"All right, I'll let you off." Dan glanced at his watch. "Can I call you back later? I'm meeting a friend to go see the elephant."

"Oh!" His mum's face lit up. When she'd visited in November, they'd gone to see *Les Machines de l'île*, and she'd absolutely loved it. "Have fun, sweetie. Never mind about calling me back, just enjoy your day, and I'll speak to you in the week." She waved at him, and Dan waved back before disconnecting the call.

He picked up his other boot, put it on, and grabbed his jacket on the way out the door. The sun was out, but it was February, and still pretty cold.

They'd arranged to meet by the river, and then walk over to the attraction. *Les Machines de l'île* was a tourist trap, and they were meeting early to avoid

the crowds. Though they hadn't planned to, Dan hoped they'd go out for lunch afterwards.

Dan arrived first this time. He leaned on the railings next to the bridge over the Loire and turned his face towards the sky. The sun had gained a little warmth, and it was nice to stand and watch the boats pass on the river.

He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to find Nico behind him.

"Hey," Dan said, an involuntary smile filling his face when he saw Nico.

"Hey yourself," Nico replied and pulled Dan into a quick hug. "How are you?"

"Good. Enjoying the sunshine." He gestured with his head in the direction of the bridge. "Shall we get going?"

"Have you been before?" Nico asked as they crossed the river. "To see the elephant, I mean."

"Twice," Dan said. "First with Fabien and some of his friends when I got here in September, then my mum visited before Christmas and I took her."

"Oh." Nico's face fell. "I thought I'd come up with something original for our date."

"As date's go, it's pretty original. I doubt there are many people who get to ride a huge mechanical contraption when out on a date."

"True." A smirk filled Nico's face. "Although phrased that way, how many people would see 'riding a huge mechanical contraption' as a viable date option."

Feigning horror, Dan replied, "Who knew such a pretty face was hiding such a dirty mind?"

"You know it, baby."

They laughed, and Dan was just wondering if he felt comfortable enough to reach out and grab Nico's hand, when he realised they had arrived at the ticket hall.

They paid, and then walked over to join the queue, ready to ride on the huge elephant. It really was impressive, Dan thought, even for the third time visiting. Made of wood, it trundled along on wheels, but its legs were fully articulated and moved as though the elephant were walking. A balcony protruded from the elephant's stomach, and a viewing canopy sat atop its back.

As they waited, Dan glanced at Nico's excited face and didn't hesitate this time in reaching over to grab his hand. It was smooth and dry, and as Dan slipped his fingers into Nico's, he felt a flutter low in his stomach and a slight ache in his chest when the other man tightened his grip.

They had to board the elephant separately, the narrow stairs only allowing one person at a time. Nico went first, and Dan silently ogled Nico's arse as he followed. Moving through the belly of the elephant, they emerged onto the viewing platform and moved to the front, near the elephant's head.

"Wow," Nico said, shielding his eyes from the sun as they gazed across the river and back towards the city centre. The buildings on the other side of the river looked quaint from where they stood, chocolate-box houses in a quintessentially French style. "My nonni would love this."

"My mum did," Dan agreed, and then took out his phone. He turned to the nearest person and asked if they would take a photo of him and Nico.

Nico slid his arm around Dan's waist and leaned his face in close.

The tourist raised Dan's phone and snapped a couple of photos before handing it back and asking, "*C'est bon?*"

Dan looked at the picture, two smiling young men with their faces pressed together, the sun glinting off the river in the background, and the end of the mechanical elephant's trunk waving behind Nico's shoulder. "*Oui,*" he said, his smile so huge it hurt his face. "*C'est bon.*"

Chapter Four

Dan was frustrated.

He and Nico had been on three more dates since they'd visited *Les Machines de l'île*, and Dan had enjoyed each one more than the last.

But they had yet to do anything more physical than hold hands, and Dan wanted more. He wanted to kiss Nico, wanted to pull those beautiful lips between his own, wanted to kiss him until they were both so turned on they could no longer stand it.

Dan wanted to press his body against Nico and feel Nico's arms and legs entwining with his own.

He imagined kissing his way down the smooth column of Nico's neck and onto his chest, well-defined muscles dancing at Dan's touch. Dan's mind went further as he pictured delving beneath Nico's waistband, his hand grazing Nico's length to make him shudder in pleasure and need.

Dan squirmed in his seat and glanced around the café, hoping no one could read his thoughts or see the hard-on he was sporting beneath the table. He took several deep breaths, hands pressed to his flushed cheeks, until he felt his heartbeat start to calm and his erection subside.

It was Wednesday afternoon, only two weeks after Dan had first asked Nico out. To Dan, those two weeks felt like lifetimes had passed, like he had known Nico much longer.

Dan's school closed early, and the café was on his new route home. They hadn't arranged to meet that day, but if he was honest with himself, he couldn't wait to see Nico again.

Dan wanted to suggest meeting up after Nico had finished his shift, so they could start making his daydream a reality.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Dan concentrated on the work he had spread in front of him. Nico wasn't due to start his shift for a short while, and he had a few worksheets to correct. Dan couldn't help but keep one eye on the door for when Nico arrived, though, and he groaned aloud at his actions.

Two weeks, and he was completely smitten. He shook his head ruefully and hoped the feelings weren't one-sided.

Nico was late for his shift, whirling in with a large art folder in his hands and a long floaty scarf trailing around his neck half an hour after he had been due to start.

Dan watched as the other man barely gave anyone in the café a second glance, rushing behind the counter and through an arched doorway into the staff area. He reappeared a few moments later, scarf and art folder gone, wearing instead a black apron around his waist.

Not wanting to appear overeager, Dan waited for a few minutes before getting up to order another coffee. He'd talk to Nico while he made his drink, and hopefully he'd be able to convince him to come over after work.

Nico looked startled when Dan appeared in front of him, but the surprised look transformed into a huge smile, and Dan began to think perhaps he wasn't the only one smitten.

"Hey," Dan said, with a grin. "You look surprised to see me."

"Surprised," Nico agreed. "But pleased. I didn't think we were meeting today."

"What, you think I'm here for you?" Dan raised an eyebrow. "I'm only here for the coffee."

"Not the Sexy Barista, capital S, capital B?"

"I wish I hadn't told you that." Dan groaned. "You're never going to let me forget about it."

"As far as nicknames go, it's a good one. I'm keeping it." Nico finished off the steamed milk in Dan's coffee with a flourish, and when Dan looked at the cup, he could see a heart formed in the foam.

He stared at the coffee cup for a moment too long, until Nico's nervous cough broke his gaze. Dan looked up to see the other man studiously staring the other way. He was glad to know he wasn't the only one feeling a little nervous about this crazy attraction that shouldn't be so strong after only two weeks of knowing one another.

Clearing his throat, Dan picked up the coffee and took a sip. It was delicious, as always. "What time are you finishing today? I thought we could do something later, get a pizza and watch a film at mine, maybe?"

Nico's face lit up momentarily before he frowned and glanced towards the back area of the coffee shop. "I can't. Since I'm in trouble for getting here late, I told Gilles I'd work the last shift tonight."

Dan wanted to pout as his plans to make his daydream a reality vanished. “Oh. That’s cool. How about tomorrow, are you working then?”

“Not working, but I need to put some more hours in at the art studio for my project.” Nico mock glared. “I let someone distract me over the weekend and didn’t get enough work done. I’ll have to go into the studio on Friday too, but we can do something on Saturday if you’re free?”

Dan nodded his head vehemently in agreement. “Yes, definitely! But I’ll come up with something better than pizza and a film.”

Dan stamped his feet and rubbed his hands together against the cold. It was Saturday morning, and he stood with Fabien at the entrance to the train station, hands wrapped around a takeaway cup of coffee.

“Your friend, he is always this late?” Fab asked, glancing towards the large clock on the wall behind them. “We will miss the train.”

Dan thought back to the previous Wednesday when Nico had been late for his shift at work, and then through all their dates together. Apart from their night out at Maison, Dan had always arrived first. “I guess I can see a pattern forming,” he said.

An echoing robotic voice from the station’s loudspeaker announced that the Paris train was due to arrive in five minutes, and Dan glanced at his watch.

“Call him,” Fabien urged. “If we miss the next train, we will lose an hour of our trip.”

Dan pulled his phone from his pocket and had just thumbed over to Nico’s name in his contacts when the man in question appeared in front of them, out of breath and red cheeked.

Nico grinned sheepishly and stepped forward to peck Dan on the cheek. “Sorry,” he said with a grimace. “I have issues with getting up early.”

“At least you’re here,” Dan said. He peered down towards the end of the platform where the train had just started to pull in. Deciding to get the introductions out of the way, he gestured between Fabien and Nico. “Nico, this is Fabien; Fab, this is Nico.”

“Bonjour,” Fabien said, and held out his hand to shake Nico’s. “I apologise for interrupting your day. But really, I will only be with you for the travel. My friend Adeline will meet me at the station.”

“I don’t mind,” Nico replied. “I’m just looking forward to visiting Paris.”

The train pulled up and the three men boarded. They found their seats easily, and Dan sank down with a sigh. It really was an early start—he had wanted to make the most of his day with Nico, and they were due to arrive in Paris a little before ten a.m.

“I had so many good intentions to travel this year,” Dan said, when they had settled and the train pulled away from the station. “But this is my first trip outside of Nantes.”

Nico nodded. “We’ve still got plenty of time left. When it warms up a bit we can go to the coast. Maybe make a weekend of it.”

It was difficult for Dan to picture it, cold as it was that morning, but a day out at the beach with Nico sounded like fun. And, he mused, it would be a good opportunity to see Nico in a few less clothes. He was currently bundled up in a warm coat and scarf, but Dan imagined the other man in nothing but a pair of black swimming trunks. He shivered, and this time it was nothing to do with the cold.

“All right?” Nico asked. “Cold?”

Dan nodded, and Nico shuffled himself a little closer, moulding his body against Dan’s side and taking his hand. The gesture was ineffectual against the chill, but it warmed Dan through anyway.

Paris was one of those cities Dan had always imagined visiting. He’d grown up picturing a combination of a buzzing metropolis and a quaint storybook town.

The reality was little different from his imaginings. *Gare Montparnasse* had been incredibly busy upon their arrival, and they had waited with Fabien until he met up with his friend Adeline. After a frenetic journey on the *Métro*, they had emerged into beautiful sunshine. It was still cold, but the air was crisp and clean, the sky a stunning blue with only a few white clouds scudding by.

Framed against the blue of the sky, the Eiffel Tower loomed, and they were truly in the Paris of Dan’s imagination.

They spent the rest of the morning playing tourist. Nico insisted on trying to pose for a cheesy photo of the two of them ‘holding’ the top of the Eiffel Tower, and it took them several attempts to even come close to pinching the tip.

Dan kept erupting into fits of giggles every time Nico held up the camera, and when it was Dan's turn to act as cameraman, the laughter hadn't subsided enough for him to hold the camera steady.

Eventually they managed some half-decent shots, and after a quick stop at a nearby café for a brunch of warm croissants and milky coffee, they hopped aboard a tourist bus headed towards *L'Arc de Triomphe*.

Dan was determined to fit in as much of the tourist side of Paris as possible on this trip, already planning to return in a few weeks with Nico to explore the hidden side of the city.

For now, the bus speeding along the *Champs Elysées* was more than enough.

Chapter Five

“*Non, non, non! Merde!*” Fabien swore and kicked at the wall with the toe of his boot. “What now, Daniel?”

Dan gazed helplessly at the retreating train, the train they were meant to be on. They had purposefully booked themselves onto the last train of the night, wanting to get the most out of the day and spend as long in the city as possible—and now they had missed it.

He and Nico had managed to tick off most of the attractions on their list. After the *Champs Elysées* and the *Arc de Triomphe*, they had visited *Notre Dame*, making a game out of spotting as many gargoyles as they could before enjoying lunch on the banks of the Seine.

Nico had wanted to visit *Le Louvre*, and they had spent the last half of their day wandering its halls, taking in the art and sculpture and history of the place. Dan didn’t feel that he was the most cultured person, but even he had been able to appreciate the art on display.

Nico had been so enthralled that they had lost track of time, and even though they had hurried back to the station as quickly as they could, they had still managed to miss the train.

“That was the last train,” Dan finally replied. “Is there a bus, maybe?”

“Let us hope so,” Fabien said, leading the way back towards the main concourse. “I will find out.”

After a rapid conversation in French with a tired-looking desk attendant, Fabien reported back. “He says there is a train in half an hour that will take us to Le Mans, then we can wait there for another hour before taking a direct train the rest of the way.” Fabien sighed. “It will also cost us seventy euro each to do this.”

Dan swore under his breath. “There’s no other way back?”

“He said it would be better and cheaper for us to transfer our ticket for the first train tomorrow morning, that will only be ten euro each. There are plenty of hostels nearby to stay the night.”

Looking towards Nico, who nodded, Dan sighed. “All right, let’s do that.”

Fabien headed back to the information desk and sorted out the ticket transfer. When he returned, Dan handed him thirty euro. “It’s our fault we didn’t make the train,” he said. “It’s only fair we cover the cost.”

Fabien looked like he was about to refuse the money, but in the end he shrugged and pocketed the cash. “All right. I will buy breakfast tomorrow.”

“Where are we headed?” Dan asked, his hand entwined with Nico’s as they followed Fabien out of the station. “Did he recommend anywhere?”

“He said there were a few hostels on Rue Stéphane that should have spaces.”

They let Fabien navigate, his knowledge of the city more sound than either Dan’s or Nico’s, especially now that it was fully dark.

“It’s kind of exciting,” Nico said, as they finally turned onto Rue Stéphane and saw, as promised, several hostels advertising vacancies. “Stranded in Paris.” He nudged Dan’s shoulder. “Kind of romantic.”

Dan begged to differ when they entered the first hostel. It was endemic of youth hostels to feel slightly grubby, but *La Jonquille* looked especially grimy, and they had no more than taken a step inside when they were hit with the pungent stench of freshly smoked marijuana.

“*Pas du tout*,” Fabien muttered under his breath as they turned and left the establishment.

Luckily, the next hostel they tried was much better. *La Grenouille Célèbre* was a peculiar name, translating directly as “The Famous Frog,” but the inside was clean, had no particular smell, and best of all, it was only twenty euros each for the night.

The hostel was different from others Dan had stayed at, with smaller rooms instead of dormitories for several people. He didn’t mind in the least, he’d much rather share with only Nico than with strangers.

For the moment, Fabien was in a room on his own and would only have to share if someone else turned up to stay the night.

Nico and Dan’s room was small, but functional, with two good-sized twin beds, a small wardrobe, a sink, and a mirror. There was a shared bathroom down the hallway, and they both made use of this before returning to the room and locking the door.

Dan stared at Nico, not sure what to do now they were sequestered away. They had spent the whole day together with no awkwardness, their conversations ranging from serious to silly in an instant. They had laughed, and hugged, and shared chaste kisses on the streets of Paris. Now, the air between

them felt thick and tense, the night ahead looming. Dan still felt energised and knew he's have trouble falling asleep if he lay down now.

Kicking off his shoes, Dan made his way to the bed nearest the window and sat down, plucking at the thin duvet. "So, this feels kind of weird."

Nico toed off his boots and unwound his scarf. He came to sit down next to Dan, leaning his forehead momentarily on Dan's shoulder. "Maybe you should go share with Fab."

Dan pulled his head back to look at Nico questioningly. "If that's what you want."

"No." Nico sighed and fell back onto the bed. His T-shirt rode up a little, and Dan stared at the sliver of skin revealed. "I don't want that."

Sitting up again, Nico shuffled along the bed until his back hit the wall. He drew his knees into his chest and rested his arms across them, his eyes fixed on Dan's. Neither said anything for a moment but the atmosphere felt charged, and the intense look in Nico's eyes indicated the ball was in Dan's court. If Dan wanted, they could lie down in separate beds and go to sleep, and let the night end there.

A voice in Dan's head told him that was the most sensible option. The flush of Dan's skin and the beat of his heart clamoured for attention and in the end, the result felt almost inevitable. Dan turned, angling his body towards Nico. Kneeling, he shifted until he was beside the other man. He touched Nico's shoulder and ran a hand down his arm until he could lace their fingers together.

Dan leaned forward slightly, the pressure of his body a signal to Nico, who turned until he lay flat on the mattress. Dan hovered above him, their hands still clasped tightly.

"All right?" Dan asked, the first words spoken in several minutes sounding overly loud in the otherwise silent room.

Nico nodded, his legs shifting so Dan could lie comfortably between them.

Dan groaned as their bodies made full contact, and he thrilled to feel Nico pressed fully against him. Placing a quick kiss to Nico's lips, Dan pulled his hand away from Nico's grasp to thread his fingers through Nico's hair. When Dan tilted Nico's head back, he let the kiss linger, opening his mouth against Nico's.

Their noses bumped, and Dan smiled against Nico's mouth. He pulled back a little to stare at the pink flush of Nico's cheeks and his now disheveled hair.

Nico's fingers against Dan's face felt cold, and when they travelled down his back to the waistband of his jeans, Dan shivered. Nico's hand skimmed the skin of Dan's lower back, then pulled on the hem of his T-shirt. Taking the hint, Dan sat up and pulled the shirt off, dropping it to the floor without a care.

Nico's gaze roamed over Dan's body, and he pressed his hips up to where they met Dan's. Dan gasped at the contact. They were both hard, cocks straining at the denim of their jeans, and Dan felt he could come at any moment just from the sight of Nico beneath him.

"Come here," Nico said when Dan had stared for too long. Dan found himself pulled back down into Nico's embrace. As they kissed again, harder this time, Dan thrust his hips against Nico's. He jumped when he felt Nico's thumb brush his nipple, then moaned when Nico's mouth left his own to lick a path down his chest.

"Shirt," Dan ground out. Although Nico straddled his legs, Dan wasted no time leaning forward to pull Nico's shirt off, dropping it onto the floor to join his own discarded clothes. "Fuck, you're hot." Dan ran his hands across the ridges of Nico's stomach, delighting in the way they twitched at his touch, just as he'd imagined.

They kissed again, and the feel of their bare chests rubbing together was almost more than Dan could stand. He fumbled with the button and zip on his jeans, pushing them and his underwear down almost desperately before doing the same to Nico's until they were both naked.

Nico's cock felt hot and heavy against Dan's thigh, and Dan took a shuddering breath, trying to stop himself from coming with embarrassing quickness. Looking down, Dan saw that, like himself, Nico was uncircumcised. Their erections were of similar length, and Dan shifted his hips so that they lined up, before grasping both cocks in his hand and stroking them.

Dan flipped them over and Nico moaned, pulling Dan's head down to kiss him again. He then took Dan's hand and licked his palm, before returning it to its grasp of their lengths. The wetness added a slick slide that made Dan wish for proper lube, and he sped up his hand as Nico thrust his hips harder.

The sound of their groans and sighs filled the room, and Dan felt his cock get even harder as he neared orgasm. Dan looked down again, and the sight of his hand wrapped around their straining erections, Nico's tip wet and red against his own, sent him over the edge, his orgasm rushing through his body like nothing he'd ever felt before. His release painted the flat of Nico's stomach and he let out a strangled yell. "Fuck, fuck."

Nico followed shortly after, his cock jerking as he came, his mouth pressed hard against Dan's, his orgasm less vocal but seemingly no less earth-shattering.

Dan let himself fall on top of Nico, his sweat-slicked body buzzing, before rolling away to lie at his side. They breathed harshly in silence for a few moments, and then Nico turned his head to look at Dan.

"All right?" he asked, echoing Dan's question from before.

Dan nodded, unable to keep the grin from stretching across his face. "More than," he said. He reached for Nico's hand and squeezed. They lay still for a little while longer, then Dan dabbed at Nico's stomach, his face wrinkling into a grimace.

"I'll go get something to clean up with."

Dan clambered out of the bed and rummaged on the floor amongst the pile of discarded clothes until he found his underwear. He pulled them on and headed to the door. "Be right back," he said.

Nico nodded, and Dan went out into the corridor, wondering if he should perhaps have put on his T-shirt too. In the bathroom there was a basket of clean washcloths and he grabbed a couple, dampening one under the tap.

Dan bumped into Fabien on the way back from the bathroom. His friend took one look at his half-dressed state, ruffled hair and flushed skin, and drew the obvious conclusion, his face breaking into a knowing grin. "*Ahh, Paris. La ville de l'amour.*"

Chapter Six

The thump of frenetic dance music resonated through Dan's body. He felt the beat pulsing from the tips of his fingers down to his toes. Letting the French lyrics pass over him as he danced, Dan pushed his body up against Nico's, his attention focused on the way their hips met.

He pushed his thigh farther between Nico's legs, plastering their bodies as close as they could possibly be. Nico had his arms raised in the air, and Dan slid his hands up Nico's sides until their palms met and he pulled Nico's arms down and around his neck.

They were back at *Maison*, and the small dance floor was packed with people, all writhing to the music. Dan turned and pressed his back to Nico's front, and he groaned when he felt the hard bulge at Nico's groin pressing into his ass.

He tilted his head back to rest on Nico's shoulder. "Let's get out of here," he said, voice raised to be heard over the music.

Nico spun Dan to face him again before placing his mouth close to Dan's ear. "I'm dancing."

Dan pouted. "We can dance at my place." He wiggled his eyebrows and faked a lascivious grin. "And the kind of dancing I have in mind involves a lot fewer people and a lot less clothes."

"Tempting," Nico replied, "but we've only been here twenty minutes, and we did promise Fabien we'd come out tonight."

"Fabien's busy." Dan nodded towards where his friend was dancing, wrapped in the embrace of a pretty brunette. "I doubt he'd notice if we left." He sighed and started to manoeuvre Nico to the edge of the dance floor and towards the bar. "You're right, I guess."

Since returning from Paris, they'd spent almost every free evening together, usually in Dan's dorm room. They made half-hearted attempts to start the night elsewhere—be it the cinema, or a bar in the city, but they invariably ended up back in Dan's bed before very long.

This was the first night in almost three weeks that they'd made plans with someone else, and it looked like Nico was determined to keep them.

Nico excused himself to the bathroom, and Dan ordered drinks—white wine for them both as it was ridiculously cheap. Out of breath and a sheen of sweat across his brow, Fabien joined him at the bar.

“Having fun?” Dan asked, nodding to the barman to add another drink to his order.

“Yes.” Fabien grinned brightly. “Elise was very nice.”

Dan paid for the wine before picking up his glass and gesturing with it at Fabien. “Cheers.”

“*Santé*,” Fabien replied. “Where is Nico? I thought you two were attached at the hip.”

Dan blushed. “Bathroom. And we’re not that bad.”

“I think I’ve seen you maybe twice since we came back from Paris. And Nico was with you both times.”

Dan shrugged, a little uncomfortable at having it pointed out to him. He knew he was getting in deep with Nico, and he knew it had happened quickly, but so what? People met and fell for each other all the time. “I’m not sure what to say, really. I like him. A lot. It’s not... I’ve never really had anything like this before.” He added defensively, “I’m allowed to spend time with someone I care about.”

Fabien held his hands up. “I didn’t say you weren’t. Just, you know. Be careful.”

“I am.” Dan knew Fabien meant be careful with his heart, but he grinned nonetheless as he added, “*J’ai pas encore oublié ma capote!*”

Three weeks later and spring finally decided to make an appearance. The leaves on the trees had been green for weeks now, but it was only as April became May that the weather caught up and daily sunshine became the norm.

Dan didn’t want the season to change. Every day that passed brought him one step closer to the moment when he’d have to return to England and say goodbye to Nico.

Neither of them had brought up the end of the year and what they were going to do. Dan wanted to, but every time he thought about it, every time he opened his mouth to verbalise those thoughts, he chickened out. Better if he

didn't know. At least then he could pretend their relationship would last past the end of May.

He'd already imagined a thousand ways they could keep things going. They both had only a year left at university, which wasn't that long, not really. Dan could fly out to Italy for a couple of weeks over the summer, and then Nico could visit in the month before the first semester started. They could Skype, and text, and it would completely suck, but it could work.

But his fear of being the only one with these thoughts held him back, and he hadn't mentioned anything to Nico.

"You're quiet," Nico remarked. His fingers plucked at the grass and he looked up from where he lay with his head in Dan's lap and smiled. "Penny for your thoughts?"

They were making the most of the warm weather and lounging in the grounds of the Château des ducs de Bretagne, the fifteenth-century castle in the heart of the city. It was midweek, and there weren't many people around, lending a peaceful atmosphere to the castle's grounds.

They'd brought work with them—Nico had his final essays to submit, and Dan had to prepare for an assessment of his year as a language assistant. But Dan didn't feel inclined to open his notes, and Nico hadn't cracked a book either.

Instead, they'd spent the morning soaking up the sun, their conversations light. Dan didn't want to ruin the day with his pessimistic thoughts. He shook himself and smiled back down at Nico.

"Just enjoying the weather," he replied eventually. Smoothing back a strand of Nico's hair from his forehead, Dan slid his hand around the back of Nico's neck. The skin there was warm and soft, and Dan had the absurd urge to bite him, right there, where neck met shoulder. He wanted to mark Nico's smooth bronze skin for everyone to see.

Neither said anything for several more moments.

"I booked my flight," Nico offered, sometime later.

Dan jumped; he'd been gazing off into the distance watching a blackbird peck at the grass.

"Huh?"

“I fly out on the twenty-ninth,” Nico said, sitting up and shielding his eyes against the sun as he looked at Dan before darting his gaze to the ground. “Back to Italy.”

“Oh.” Dan felt sick. He’d known it was coming, but it felt like he’d been punched in the gut. “I haven’t even looked at flights yet.”

“Are you back in Southampton for the summer?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Dan hadn’t really thought about his plans for the summer, beyond his imagination running riot at continuing his relationship with Nico.

“Dan? Are you all right?” Nico peered at him, his face uncertain, and Dan wondered what Nico would say if he made his thoughts known.

Fear held him back, and Dan shook his head angrily. He should just man up and ask whether Nico saw a future for the two of them together. At least then he’d know.

“I’m fine,” he said instead and reached for his bag. He pulled his notebook out and opened it to a random page. “We should study.”

Nico frowned, and it looked like he wanted to say something else, but he too grabbed his books and they revised in silence.

Time sped up in the week after their day at the castle, Dan was sure of it. Things between him and Nico had been weird ever since, their interactions less playful than before, both of them more prone to snapping at the other over silly, inconsequential things.

Dan knew the solution. He told himself daily that today would be the day. He would talk to Nico about their relationship, confess his feelings. And then he wondered—why? Why should he be the one to start the conversation? Surely Nico was experiencing the same thing? Why didn’t he bring it up? Did it mean Dan felt more strongly about the relationship than Nico did? Did Nico not care that in a few short weeks they would go their separate ways?

Dan groaned in frustration and almost threw his notebook across the room. He was supposed to be preparing his presentation, the assessment was only a week away now, and all he could do was obsess over his boyfriend.

He considered calling Fabien and asking for his advice, but his friend had been notably absent of late, his own exams and assignments surely taking up his time.

He even thought about calling his mother.

In the end, he did neither, dropping his notebook on the floor and flopping back down onto his bed with a sigh. Nico was at his last exam and then coming over with dinner at six. Dan supposed he should probably go shower, but that meant moving, and the bed was so comfortable.

Dan woke with a start sometime later, confused and disoriented when he realised how dark it was in the room. His head felt fuzzy, like it always did after he'd napped during the day, and he groped on the nightstand for his phone, peering at the display to see it was almost nine p.m., and he had three missed calls and several texts from Nico.

Groaning, he sat up, rubbing his eyes and trying to shake off his disorientation. He slid his thumb across the phone's screen to unlock it, then read Nico's texts.

I need to talk to you.

Why aren't you answering your phone?

Dan, for fuck's sake answer your phone.

This wasn't how I wanted things to end.

Dan felt a jolt of panic hit him when he read the last message. End? What was ending?

He hit Nico's name on his contacts list and raised his phone to his ear with a shaking hand. It rang until he heard the robotic voicemail greeting.

"Fuck." He hung up and was about to dial again when Nico's picture appeared on the screen as an incoming call.

Dan could barely answer the phone quickly enough. "Hello? Nico?"

"Hey." Nico's voice was subdued. "I tried to call you."

"I know. I fell asleep and my phone was on silent. What's going on?"

"My *nonna* had a heart attack."

"Shit." Dan stood up and reached for his shoes. "Is she all right? What can I do? I'm coming over. Do you need anything? Did you eat?"

"My dad said she's stable, and she's been awake, at least." Nico replied, his tone flat. "But, Dan. I'm at the airport. My flight leaves in half an hour."

Dan nodded to himself and sat back down on the bed. “Okay, yes, of course. Of course you’re going to see her.” He swallowed against the lump in his throat. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Dan... this is it. I’m going back to Italy for good. I don’t—” Nico’s voice broke, and Dan could hear him take a deep breath before continuing. “I don’t know how long Nonna’s going to be in hospital for. There’s no point in planning to come back. I’m sorry.”

“No point?” Dan repeated, feeling like a dick for what he was about to say. The man’s grandmother was in hospital and all Dan could think about was their relationship. “What about us?”

“I said I didn’t want things to end like this. Listen, Dan, I need to go. The plane’s boarding soon.”

Dan felt panicked, felt like if he didn’t do something or say something now, this would be the last he’d ever hear of Nico. “I’ll come with you,” he blurted. “I’ll get on the next flight, and I’ll come with you. Be there for you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve got your assessment, and you can’t just up and leave.”

“Fuck the assessment.” Dan stood up and began to pace the length of the room. “I can just up and leave, because that’s what you’re supposed to do, Nico, when someone you love—when someone you care for is hurting. You do everything in your power to help them. Let me come with you. Be there for you.”

“What?” Nico’s voice rose on the other end of the line. “You can’t, Dan. I can’t have you there. My nonna just had a heart attack and you think I should take you with me when I visit her in hospital? You think I should introduce her to the guy I’ve been fucking? No.”

Pain bloomed in Dan’s chest and he wondered whether he was the one having a heart attack now. His mouth twisted as Nico’s words repeated in his head. *Guy I’ve been fucking*. Was that all he was? Dan thought back to one of the first conversations they’d had, when Nico had said it would be worth coming out to his grandparents for the right guy.

Maybe now wasn’t the right time for that. His offer to go with Nico had been impulsive, he knew, but Nico’s words made Dan wonder if there would ever be a right time with Nico. If he could ever be that guy.

The call was still connected, and Dan could hear Nico's uneven breaths on the other end of the line. "Okay."

"I-I have to go. They're calling my flight."

"Okay." Dan repeated. "I hope your *nonna* is all right."

"Thank you." Nico's voice was a whisper that made Dan's heart ache. "Bye, Dan."

"Bye," he echoed.

Dan kept the phone against to his ear even after he heard the click which told him Nico had hung up. He pressed his lips together in a hard line and took several deep breaths before setting it back down on the nightstand, then lay down on his bed, curled into a ball, and cried.

Chapter Seven

“Are you in for dinner, love?” Dan’s mum ruffled his hair as she passed behind the sofa on her way to the kitchen. “Or are you going out with Sean again?”

Dan paused the film he was watching and turned to look at his mother. “I’m going out, but I’ll have some food if you’re making it.”

“It’s sausage and mash, that all right?”

“Sure.” Dan nodded. He glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed. “Suppose I’d better go get ready so I can go out straight after dinner.”

Heaving himself up from the sofa took more effort than it should have, and he shivered as he made his way over to the stairs. He was recovering from the flu, and probably shouldn’t be going out to the pub that night, but Sean had insisted and Dan had said yes.

The shower was quick and perfunctory. A month had passed since Dan had returned from France, and England was in the midst of a heatwave. Dan dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and called himself ready. No point dressing up when they were only planning on visiting the local.

Glancing at his phone as he headed back downstairs, he saw he had a message, and his heart skipped a beat, as he wondered if maybe this time it was Nico.

It was only Sean, reminding him they were going to meet at The Captain’s Rest in an hour, and Dan cursed himself. He’d barely heard from Nico in the month and a half since that last phone call, and when he had it had been brief text messages, always in reply to one of Dan’s own enquiring after his nonna’s well-being.

Nonna’s fine, and I’m okay. Thanks.

And that was that. Their time in France felt like something out of a dream, a hazy few months that barely seemed real now.

His mother had noticed his mood, and he’d told her bits and pieces of what had happened between him and Nico, but he didn’t let on how truly heartbroken he’d been by how things had ended. Dan imagined his mum knew him well enough to see how he felt because she’d been extramotherly in the past few weeks.

Sean had been great as well. His best school friend was back from university too, and once Sean had found out what had happened in France, he went on a one-man mission to cheer Dan up.

Mostly this involved lots of afternoons and evenings spent in the pub, or nights out at the local gay club where they danced together and fought off the attentions—imagined or otherwise—of other men.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, he sent off a quick reply to Sean confirming their plans, then looked over to where his mum was grilling sausages at the stove.

“Anything I can help with?” he asked.

“Not really. You can get the butter out if you like, but I’m almost done here. Where are you and Sean off to tonight then?”

“Captain’s Rest,” Dan said. He grabbed the carton of orange juice while he was in the fridge and poured a glass for each of them. “There’s a band playing, I think. Should be good.”

Moments later his mum set two steaming plates full of sausages and mash on the table, and Dan’s stomach growled. “Thanks, Mum.”

The Captain’s Rest was a popular local establishment, known for its animated atmosphere and almost-nightly events—be it the pub quiz on Tuesdays, curry night on Wednesdays or that night’s offering, live local music.

The band was warming up when Dan and Sean walked into the pub. After buying their drinks at the bar, they found a table just off to the side.

“Good to see you out and about again,” Sean said, having taken a big sip of his beer, the foam leaving a residue on his upper lip.

“Yeah, thanks,” Dan replied. “Flu really took it out of me this time.”

“Probably ’cos you weren’t feeling good anyway. Sickness always hits you harder when you’re run down.”

Dan shrugged. “I guess.”

“How are things with the Italian Stallion?” Sean smirked. “Heard off him again?”

“Don’t call him that. And no, not since the last Nonna update.”

Sean scoffed. “And you’re what, okay with that? You had this mad, passionate French love affair, and then he blows you off with a phone call on his way out of the country. ‘Au revoir, Daniel!’”

Dan peered at Sean and realised it was more than likely his friend had indulged in some pre-pub drinks at home. “We’ve been over this already. You know his nonna was ill, and he had to go.”

“Yeah, but you’ve barely heard from him since. I’d have thought, the way you said things were with him, he’d have made more of an effort to stay in contact.”

“What’s the point?” Dan frowned at the beer mat he’d been studiously shredding into pieces. “He obviously doesn’t want anything more to do with me. We live in different countries. He’s just too polite to tell me to fuck off and stop texting him.”

“But you’re still in love with him!” Sean all but shouted.

People at several of the nearby tables turned to look, and Dan blushed as he tried to shut Sean up.

“You should fight for him,” Sean said, nodding. “Book a flight to Italy, find him, confess your love, and then fuck his brains out.”

Dan snorted. “I wish it was that simple.”

“Ahh, but it is,” Sean said. He pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped at it a few times. “Look, here, direct flight from Southampton to Rome. Not a bad price.”

“I can’t just go to Rome. He told me not to.”

“That was when his nonna was sick, right? She’s fine now, as he keeps telling you. Give me your wallet.”

“No.” Dan shook his head. He wasn’t going to let Sean persuade him this was a good idea. The man was half-drunk and a hopeless romantic, not a good combination.

“Fine, I’ll do it.” Sean grabbed his wallet and slid out a credit card. “You can pay me back when you’re happy and loved-up again.”

“Sean, don’t be a bloody idiot.”

“Too late.” Sean grinned. “Scary how easy it is to buy things online these days, isn’t it?”

“You bastard.” Dan tried to swipe at Sean’s phone to see if he really had booked the flight. “I’m not going.”

“I’ve just shelled out a hundred quid so you’ll stop moping around,” Sean said. “You’re going.”

Finally managing to wrangle the phone from Sean’s grasp, Dan gaped as he saw the confirmation page of the booked flight, leaving at six a.m. the next day.

“You utter bastard,” Dan said again. He shook his head in disbelief, but even as Sean cackled with laughter next to him, Dan could feel hope rising in his chest. Perhaps his friend was right. The relationship hadn’t ended how it should have, and maybe it was time to set things right between him and Nico.

Dan didn’t enjoy the flight. There were strong winds and turbulence as they approached Italy, and he already felt sick with nerves. His mother had driven him to the airport, wishing him luck, and he’d received a text from Sean as he waited in the departure lounge telling him not to chicken out.

He could hardly do that now, anyway. The aeroplane taxied on the runway and Dan took a deep breath, wondering whether he should have texted Nico before he left England.

There was no plan of action, not really. He knew the name of the small village where Nico’s family lived, and whilst he didn’t know the precise address, he hoped he’d be able to find someone who could tell him the location of the Taglieri home.

Disembarking from the plane and exiting the airport took some time, his small suitcase being one of the last to appear on the luggage carousel, and Dan took several wrong turnings as he tried to find his way out of the terminal.

He managed to find the taxi rank outside the airport and went over to the nearest available car.

“Castel di Tora?” he asked, peering in at the driver.

“Sì,” the driver said, nodding. “*Bellissimo villaggio.*”

Dan smiled and nodded, his Italian, though limited, was enough to understand the driver thought it was a beautiful village. He put his suitcase on the backseat then climbed in after it, slamming the car door shut behind him.

The driver wasted no time in driving off, and Dan felt the thrum of nerves return. His stomach swooped with every mile they travelled, but he had to believe that seeing Nico again would be worth it.

It was a fairly long journey, longer than Dan had anticipated. He wondered if he should perhaps have tried to find a train or bus to take him. The amount displayed on the cab's meter rose rapidly, and he winced at the thought of handing over his euros.

Eventually, though, the driver slowed as the roads became narrower, and Dan's breath caught when he saw the village for the first time. It was beautiful, rising from the outcropping of a cliff, surrounded by the clear blue waters of a lake. The buildings were quaint and typically European, meandering up the hillside.

The taxi driver took them over a bridge before driving a short way into the outskirts of the village. He pulled to a stop at the side of the road. "Ok?"

Dan nodded. There was no point in furthering the journey by car when he didn't really know where Nico lived. "Ok. Uh, *quant'è?*"

The man told him the cost, and Dan grimaced as he passed over the brightly coloured currency. "*Grazie,*" he said and stepped out of the car, pulling his case behind him.

It was early afternoon, and the sun felt deliciously warm on Dan's skin. He took a moment to look around, enjoying the peaceful atmosphere as he scanned the lake. There was barely a sound, only the gentle lapping of the water and birdsong.

Dan took the first path he found into the heart of the village, and as he walked down the narrow cobbled street, he saw nobody around. It was as though the place were deserted, and despite the warmth of the day, he felt a chill along the back of his neck.

He'd planned to find a shop or café and ask the proprietor if he knew the Taglieri family—surely in a place as small as this everyone knew everyone else. He had forgotten, however, that small villages across Europe shut down almost completely on Sundays, and as he trawled the village, he wondered if he'd end up having to knock on random doors in the hope that someone would answer.

He reached a small square in the centre of the village and saw, to his relief, what looked like an open café. There were tables outside and an open door, at any rate.

When he went in, the coffee shop was empty but for the elderly man behind the counter. Dan nodded a greeting. "*Buongiorno.*"

The man replied with the same, and Dan forged on, hoping his rudimentary Italian was enough to be understood. “*Conosce il Signor Taglieri? La famiglia Taglieri?*”

Frowning, the man peered suspiciously at Dan. “*Lei è un amico?*”

“Sì,” Dan said, and an idea struck him. He pulled his phone from his pocket and opened one of the pictures of him and Nico from when they had ridden the mechanical elephant. He showed the photo to the man. “Nico Taglieri, *amico, sì.*”

Losing the suspicious look, the man nodded and smiled at Dan. He began to talk in Italian too quickly for Dan to comprehend, and the man must have seen the bewildered look on Dan’s face, because he tore off a scrap of paper from the notebook on the counter in front of him and scribbled something down.

He handed it over with a flourish and Dan saw that it was an address. “*Cinque minuti.*”

“*Grazie,*” Dan said, and then feeling as though it would be rude not to, he ordered an espresso, which he swallowed down in a couple of gulps. He said thank you again and left the café, stepping out into the early afternoon sunshine.

He could already feel the caffeine zinging through his body, and he tried to focus on that rather than his nerves building again. This was it—five minutes’ walk and he’d see Nico again.

Dan typed the address the café owner had given him into the maps app on his phone and swallowed as he saw the red dot of his destination appear. He followed the walking directions, ending up outside a two-storey house painted white like all the homes in this village. It had rustic shutters on the windows and a small balcony on the side that overlooked the lake. A vintage Fiat 500 was parked outside, and everything felt quintessentially Italian.

It was idyllic, and Dan couldn’t help but feel like he was intruding as he came to a stop outside the front door and knocked.

The two-minute wait for someone to answer the door felt like an age, and Dan bounced nervously on the balls of his feet. He could hear shuffling from inside, and eventually the door opened to reveal an older man, broad-shouldered and olive-skinned, with salt-and-pepper hair and a well-groomed beard. Dan had seen pictures of Nico’s parents and knew this was his father.

“*Signor Taglieri? I’m Dan, Dan Taylor.*” Dan paused, and when Nico’s father said nothing in reply, he continued, “*I’m a friend of Nico’s. Is he here?*”

The man pursed his lips. "I know who you are," he said, his English accented. "Come in."

Dan followed him through a narrow hallway and into a large, bright kitchen. A scrubbed wooden table dominated the space, and Dan didn't notice the elderly lady in the rocking chair by the window until she spoke, saying something in Italian to Nico's father. The woman was wrapped in a thick blanket, and Dan guessed she was Nico's grandmother.

Dan heard his name mentioned when *Signor* Taglieri replied to Nico's grandmother. It was another moment before Nico's father turned back to Dan, gesturing to him to sit at the table.

"Nico didn't mention you would be visiting," *Signor* Taglieri said, once they were both seated.

"It was, uh, a bit spur of the moment," Dan replied, feeling more uncomfortable by the second. He couldn't get a read on Nico's father, and he didn't know how much Nico had told his family about their relationship and how it had ended. "I didn't tell him."

"No," *Signor* Taglieri said. "I don't suppose he'd have gone off to Rome yesterday if he knew you were coming."

Dan stared at him, heart sinking. "He's not here?"

"He's helping with my brother's business for the week."

"Oh." Dan felt the sharp prickle of tears behind his eyelids. He blinked rapidly, determined not to let the other man see his reaction. He felt deflated and tired. "I should go, then."

"*Luca!*" The old lady's voice was sharp and commanding, and Dan jumped almost as much as *Signor* Taglieri did at the sound.

Nico's grandmother let loose a string of Italian, her voice harsh at first, but softening towards the end. Whatever she said left *Signor* Taglieri with a thoughtful look on his face, and he sighed as he turned back to Dan.

"My mother says you should go to him. She says Nico hasn't been the same since he returned from France, and she thinks it is her fault your relationship ended. She wants you to take our car and drive back to Rome to find him."

Dan gaped. "She knows about me and Nico? I thought... he told me he'd never come out to her."

"My mother has a way of finding things out." *Signor* Taglieri smiled wryly. "She is a true Italian *nonna*."

“Danilo,” the old lady said and reached her hand out to Dan.

He went over and took it. Her hand felt very fragile, her skin soft but thin over bone, and she gripped his hand tightly. “You go. Take car and go. Make Nico happy.”

Dan squeezed her hand and felt the tears from moments before stinging his eyes again. “I will.”

Signor Taglieri had given Dan directions to his brother’s house on the outskirts of Rome and had handed over the keys to the red Fiat 500 with a warning to drive carefully.

The car was small and easy to drive, and Dan used his phone’s satnav to guide him back to the city. When he arrived it was almost evening, and the roads were crowded with cars, rush hour well and truly underway.

Eventually, the traffic eased and he followed the last of his phone’s directions. Pulling up outside a row of terraced townhouses, he put the handbrake on and took a deep breath.

This really was it.

Dan rested both his hands on the steering wheel and tried to calm himself, going over in his mind what he would say when he saw Nico again. On the drive from Nico’s house, Dan had considered pulling over at the side of the road to call Nico or text him. Fear of rejection stopped him from doing so. He refused to entertain the possibility Nico wouldn’t want to see him, instead imagining a reunion with very little talking and plenty of kissing.

Lost in his thoughts, Dan jumped and hit his head on the low roof of the Fiat when a Vespa zipped past the open car window and screeched to a stop opposite where he was parked.

It took Dan several moments to realise the man who jumped off the scooter, messenger bag slung over his shoulder and helmet under his arm, was Nico.

Dan’s heart thumped almost painfully, and he scrabbled for the door handle, opening it wide and pulling himself out of the car. Nico hadn’t seen him, and Dan drank in the sight of him—dark hair messy from the helmet, skin tanned even deeper than when Dan had last seen him, and a bright lightweight scarf strewn carelessly around his neck.

Swallowing hard, Dan opened his mouth to say something, anything, when Nico looked up and met his gaze. Emotions flashed across Nico’s face, and Dan

could read them like an open book—shock and disbelief—followed swiftly by a softening around his eyes.

They stared at each other for what felt like hours, before Dan smiled tentatively and took a step forward.

That seemed to be enough for Nico. He had a hesitant but determined look in his eyes, and he moved swiftly until he had his arms wrapped around Dan's body and his face burrowed in Dan's neck.

"I missed you," Dan said, whispering the words into the shell of Nico's ear. He pulled back to look at Nico and saw nothing but happiness and affection shining from his eyes.

Dan ran a finger across Nico's top lip, then traced the line of his nose and the stubble on his cheek. He leaned in and kissed Nico, who opened his mouth with a groan and kissed Dan back.

"I'm sorry," Nico said, when they pulled apart. "I'm so sorry for how I left things." He let out a shuddering laugh. "God, I can't believe you're here."

"I had to come," Dan said, and the words came so easily. "I love you."

Nico kissed him again, harder this time, his body pressing against Dan's in a way that made Dan wish their reunion was happening somewhere more private. When they pulled apart this time, Nico rested his forehead against Dan's and whispered back, "I love you, too."

Dan grinned, the words sending a thrill through his body, and he hugged Nico to him, sliding his hand down Nico's arm and lacing their fingers together. "I went all the way out to your village to find you, you know." He gestured to the Fiat. "Your *nonna* lent me her car. I'm under strict orders from her to find you and make you happy."

A wicked smile lit Nico's face, and he pulled out of their embrace, tugging on Dan's hand and gesturing towards the house. "I can think of plenty of ways to make me happy," he said. "And all of them involve you, me, and my bed."

Dan didn't even try to resist.

Epilogue

Ten Months Later

Dan bounced on the balls of his feet, cursing the people milling around him as he tried to see over their heads. The arrivals hall was busy. It was the day after the May bank holiday, and it appeared as though everyone was returning from their weekend away.

He cursed as a big blond man bumped into him, not even sparing Dan a second glance, let alone an apology. Dan was caught up in glaring after the man and didn't notice the sudden influx of people from Gate Two.

A hand on his shoulder startled him, and then he felt himself pulled into a tight hug. Nico's scent filled his nostrils and he felt a thrill run through his body. *Finally.*

Dan pulled back to look into his boyfriend's face, as tan and bronzed and handsome as the last time he'd seen it over the Easter holidays.

Nico leaned in, and Dan's lips met his with fervour. The kiss was heading off into the realm of inappropriate for a public place when Nico pulled back, his mouth stretching into a wide grin. "Hey."

Dan couldn't help but smile back. "Hey yourself." Though he knew Nico was now here for good, he pulled Nico into his embrace again and clung on for long seconds, not wanting to let go.

They walked to Dan's car hand in hand, which made transporting Nico's large suitcase and holdall difficult. The rest of his things were being sent over in a few weeks, and Dan could hardly wait. When everything was here, it would feel permanent.

As it was, Dan could barely believe Nico was finally here for good. The past ten months had been long and difficult at times. They'd seen each other as often as they possibly could—but holidays and weekends never lasted long enough, and saying goodbye was always difficult.

Dan looked over to Nico as he manoeuvred the car from the multistorey. "I'm so glad you're finally here. This last month's absolutely crawled by, I've been driving Mum crazy."

"Same." Nico's smile turned wistful. "I don't think my parents really wanted me to go, but they were ready to see the back of my moping."

Nico's parents had been an issue. They'd accepted Dan as their son's boyfriend, but completely disagreed with Nico's choice to move back to England to be with him. Dan had heard about the many long, painful arguments on the topic: Nico's mother simply didn't want Nico to go so far away, and his father felt there were more opportunities for Nico in Rome.

It had been his *nonna* who'd settled the argument, reminding Nico's dad that he too had followed his heart as a young man, disobeying his parents to move to another country and marry his English girlfriend. Nico's father was further persuaded, because Nico was planning to start a Master's degree at Bristol University in the autumn, and Dan had a teaching job lined up already. Hearing that, his father had begrudgingly given his blessing for Nico's move abroad.

The drive back to the city didn't take too long, and Nico was fairly bouncing in the car seat by the time Dan pulled up outside their new apartment complex.

He hadn't seen the place, only pictures online and a blurry video call when Dan had viewed it with the rental agent.

It was a small, ground-floor one-bedroom flat, but it had a good-sized lounge and kitchen, a terrace overlooking the shared garden, and was only a fifteen-minute walk from the university.

It was perfect for their first place together, and Dan had fallen in love with it straight away. He hoped Nico would, too.

He grasped Nico's hand as soon as he stepped out of the car, and they walked up the path together. Dan reached into his pocket and pulled out two sets of keys, handing one over to Nico.

"You ready?" he asked, squeezing Nico's hand.

Nico took a deep breath, a moment's hesitation on his face before it relaxed into a smile. Nico's eyes filled with warmth, and he leaned over to peck a kiss to Dan's lips. "Absolutely. Let's do this."

The End

Translations

Je m'appelle Dan. J'ai pensé qu'il était temps de me présenter.
My name's Dan. I thought it was time that I introduced myself.

Bonne chance, Daniel! N'oublie pas d'utiliser une capote.
Good luck, Daniel! Don't forget to use a condom.

Ahh, Paris. La ville de l'amour.
Ahh, Paris. The city of love.

J'ai pas encore oublié ma capote.
I haven't forgotten my condom yet!

Bellissimo villaggio
Beautiful village

Quant'è?
How much?

Conosce il Signor Taglieri? La famiglia Taglieri?
Do you know Mr Taglieri? The Taglieri family?

Lei è un amico?
Are you a friend?

Cinque minuti
Five minutes

Author Bio

Cass Winters is an avid reader from rural Worcestershire. She's been enthralled by stories for as long as she can remember, and doesn't see that stopping any time soon. Aside from reading, Cass is a major Harry Potter nerd and hardcore Whedon fangirl.

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