

Temporary Absentee
By Laney Cairo

The fountain outside of Castello Sforzesco gushed jets of white water thirty feet into the air, and Mark sat down on the limestone surround, camera in his hand. He pushed his hair out of his eyes and settled back to watch the people around him.

Two women walked by with cropped hair and baggy clothes, and Mark decided they were German. Or dykes. *And* dykes perhaps? He could never tell, not with the women's solid posture and short haircuts. Another woman flicked her skirt as she walked past him, giving him a glimpse of her thighs, her legs long and smooth. She was probably Italian. The Americans he could pick out too, because they ignored him; he was just another wandering European to their eyes.

A young man sat with his feet in the fountain across from Mark. He looked Scandinavian, his skin gorgeously tanned and smooth, his hair buzzcut and blond, with matching stubble, face hidden behind sunglasses, and Mark let his eyes wander across this young man's body, safe behind the screen of his own shades.

The young man took his shirt off and lay back, and Mark watched him covetously. The man was slender and lean, his ribs showing, his belly concave, his skin achingly smooth. Desire uncurled itself from Mark's groin and slid into his bloodstream, spreading warmth and need through his body, urged on by the sunshine. He welcomed the feeling as a sign of returning life. He hadn't felt real desire, above and beyond a mechanical need for release, for about six months, not since he had split with David, and he realised it felt unbearably good.

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The late afternoon sun was still gloriously warm on Logan, and he looked up at the sky. Endlessly clear, deepest blue. It was probably raining at home. Logan slipped off his shirt, which had been hanging undone, and lay back on the warm stone of the fountain. The splashing water was white noise, masking all but the conversations of the people nearest to him, and he wadded his shirt up and pushed it under his head. He would enjoy the last of the heat and the sunshine in peace.

Movement and a voice beside Logan made him turn his head sleepily, just to see if someone was talking to him. A man crouched beside him, camera case over his shoulder, speaking Italian. The man was dark and unshaven, attractive in an unwashed kind of way he appreciated, and Logan decided not to ignore the man. The man smiled, and Logan smiled back.

"No parla Italiano," he said. Then, in English, "But I think you just asked if you could take my photo, right?"

The man's voice was rough when he spoke, his was accent British to Logan's surprise. He'd been expecting Italian. "That's right. May I take your picture?"

Logan sat up and swung his feet onto the ground. "Yeah, you can, but it'll cost you a panini and one of your smokes."

The man laughed suddenly. "Sure. If I give you the packet and buy you dinner, may I take several pictures?" He handed the packet of cigarettes in his shirt pocket over as he spoke, and Logan took them with a grin. "Thanks," he said, and the man had his camera out and was backing away from Logan quickly, clicking as he went, his hands confidently adjusting the camera settings as he moved. Logan called out, "Anything special you want me to do?"

The man shook his head and clicked the case back over his camera. "No, that was great as it was. Thanks."

He walked back toward Logan, and Logan said, "I feel like pasta tonight. How 'bout you?"

"Sounds good. Anywhere you'd recommend?"

Logan leaned over and splashed water from the fountain over his face, then shook himself quickly to dislodge the droplets, jangling the collection of pendants round his neck. "There's a place on the main street. We can go there and pretend to be beautiful people," he said, and he rubbed droplets of water off his scalp.

"Yes, let's," the other man said. "I'm Mark."

Logan shook out his shirt and pulled it on, quickly doing up a couple of buttons, then slipped his feet into the sandals beside his pack. "I'm Logan."

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The maître d' sneered ever so slightly at the pair of them when they stepped into the café, and Mark flicked his wallet open to show the man his credit cards. The maître d' was suddenly obsequious, showing them to a table on the sidewalk.

A waiter was beside them in an instant and Mark ordered in Italian; wine for both of them, and a plate of antipasto.

Logan leaned forward, elbows on the table, and smiled at Mark. "So, what're you doing in Milan, Mark?" he asked. "And you can tell me the truth. I'm just this anonymous stranger you're sharing a meal with."

Mark decided he must look doubtful, because Logan continued, "I'll tell you about me in exchange, if you like."

"I came to Milan today to see Michelangelo's Rondanini Pietà and Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper." He paused, wondering whether to continue, and his mouth decided for

him. "If you want to know the truth, I just had a relationship break up, and we divided up the frequent flyer points between us, so I thought I'd use my share. I'm really here to escape."

Logan shrugged. "I blew the little money I'd saved on a Eurail pass for the summer and have been wandering around Europe for the past few weeks. I'm just about out of money and time."

"I'm out of money too," Mark admitted, "but I've got some really pretty credit cards I'll never manage to pay off. Figured since the ex got almost everything, I might as well enjoy my debts."

The waiter came over with their wine, and with a bottle of water and extra glasses, and took their orders. Logan said, "That sounded like the truth. Me, I've got fifty pounds and a train ticket to Amsterdam. Thought I'd finish my summer in an orgy of pleasure, then slink home in a few days and sponge off my family until semester starts again. Where are you heading now, Mark?"

The plate of antipasto arrived, and Mark watched with vicarious pleasure as Logan started ravenously into the food. "Paris on the night train. Time for some Impressionism, I think."

Logan lifted his eyes, and desire warmed Mark again. "I'm on the same train."

Logan stayed beside Mark after dinner, smoking and watching the parade of people past the café. "Do you ever wonder what it's like to be one of them?" he asked Mark, breaking the silence.

"One of whom?" Mark asked, leaning across to light Logan's next cigarette.

"One of them," Logan said, nodding toward a woman tottering past them on painfully high heels, clutching onto the arm of a smooth looking man in a rumpled linen suit. "You know, fighting getting old, spending too much money on themselves."

The sun had set by then, and Mark's sunglasses were pushed up on top of his head, holding his hair out of his eyes. "If we're being honest, what makes you think that's not what I'm doing?"

Logan's sunglasses were hooked into a buttonhole of his shirt and they clunked against the table as he reached for his coffee. "I don't think you're at all worried about getting older, or about how you look."

Mark nodded slightly. "I'd like to agree with you, but we are being honest here."

"You're a bitter man, aren't you? Is this from the break-up you mentioned?"

Mark stood up, making a waiter rush over with the bill. "Can we not talk about this?" he asked Logan, then he turned to hand a card to the waiter.

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Logan watched Mark disappear off to reclaim his stored luggage. He shouldered his own small pack and headed for the loos to brush his teeth and change into a cleaner T-shirt. He fancied Mark, and it was pretty obvious Mark had the hots for him too, but Logan suspected that he would have to be the one to make a move. If he was going to do that, he wanted clean teeth.

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The couchette Mark had booked was horribly cramped and he kicked himself for having decided to economize and travel Second class. The guard looked into the cabin and, in Italian told Mark to put his luggage on his bunk, and Mark had a sinking feeling that he was really going to regret not spending the extra seventy five Euro to go First class. He shoved his case and pack onto the foot of his bunk as a tall black woman squeezed her suitcase into the cabin and politely asked him, in French, to move. He shrugged mentally, crouched down and slid sideways onto his bunk, giving the woman room to lift her enormous case onto the bunk above his. Kicking his shoes off, he sighed, realizing it was going to be a long night.

A large man carrying two cardboard boxes took the top bunk opposite Mark, then a teenage girl clambered up the ladder, dragging her backpack behind her.

Logan was next into the cabin, tossing his small pack onto the bottom bunk opposite Mark and grinning at him.

Mark grinned back. "A coincidence that we meet again."
"No coincidence," Logan said, sliding into the bunk. "I swapped with someone."
Mark went to ask Logan why he'd do that and didn't get the chance before a muscular woman pushed her way in, blocking Mark's view of Logan. She heaved her case onto thebunk above Logan, and it creaked alarmingly as she hauled herself up too.

The air in the cabin was hot and stuffy, Mark heard the train doors closing, and the train lurched as it began to move. He couldn't straighten his legs out at all, not with his belongings at the foot of his bunk, and he couldn't sit up to read. He looked across at Logan, and Logan's eyes were laughing back at him.

The train picked up speed, the conductor appeared and collected their tickets and passports, then flicked the light off as he left the cabin. Shouting came from the cabin next door, and thudding, and someone in Mark's cabin started a tape or CD player; Mark could hear it over the rattle.

A few minutes later, Mark opened his eyes to find Logan crouching between their bunks. He leaned forward with his head close to Mark's. "If we put all the luggage onto one bunk and share the other one, at least we can both stretch our legs out."

Mark could hear warm invitation in Logan's voice, and his body stirred in response to the thought of being pressed up against Logan for the night.

"You know you want to," Logan said quietly, his head even closer to Mark's.

"If we're still being honest, I do," Mark admitted.

"Then do it," Logan said, and reached behind him for his pack.

Mark slid off his bunk and grabbed his pillow and blanket as Logan shoved his pack beside Mark's case, then climbed back into his own bunk.

Mark followed a moment later, relieved to be stretching his legs out straight again, even though it couldn't have been more than half an hour since they left Milan. Logan moved closer so his head rested on Mark's pillow in the confined space. "Isn't that better?" he asked, his mouth against Mark's ear, and then his lips pressed against Mark's, warm and urgent.

Mark kissed Logan back, letting Logan lead the kiss, letting him choose when their lips opened, when their tongues touched.

It was dark apart from the occasional flickering of lights shining through the cabin window as the train rattled along. Mark felt a thrill in knowing there were four strangers in the cabin too, a thrill matched by delight as Logan's body pressed against his under the blankets.

No one would be able to hear the tiny sounds of their kisses, not over the rush and racket of the train. No one could see, not in the darkness and under the cover of the blankets, and Mark let his hands begin to explore Logan's back and arms as they kissed.

Logan moved again, and Mark moaned against his open mouth at the feel of Logan's cock brushing against his thigh through clothing.

"Mmmmm, you taste so good," Logan murmured against Mark's ear.

Mark felt like he was on fire, on that crowded bunk, his hands underneath Logan's T-shirt, stroking his skin, sure he could still feel the warmth of the sun there. Logan was breathing hard against his ear, his fingers pulling the buttons of Mark's shirt open, running across Mark's ribs, circling a nipple. Mark let his hand slide down, out from under Logan's T-shirt and across his arse, pressing through his jeans.

"Slow down," Logan whispered. "It's a long way to Paris."

Mark rolled onto his side, pressing Logan up against the wall of the bunk. If this was all a tease, it was the best tease he'd ever had and he loved every moment of it. With his body pushed against the other man's like it was, Logan could be in no doubt of how much Mark was enjoying this too.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," Logan whispered as Mark's hand slid under Logan's T-shirt again.

"Am I?" Mark whispered back.

"You are. Now roll over and close your eyes."

Mark thought about pressing the point, about taking this farther, then there was a snore from the bunk above them.

Logan whispered, "I'm very, very loud. We need to stop or you're going to make me come."

Logan was trembling a little when Mark's hand slid across his belly and cupped his cock through his jeans, and Mark dropped his hand. "Okay."

He rolled over and moved across the bunk to give Logan some more room, and Logan slid his arm around Mark's waist, drawing him back closer so their bodies pressed together again.

The train rocked them gently, moving their bodies in a simple rhythm, and Mark felt wanted for the first time in a long time. His eyes closed in the darkness and Logan's hand pressed comfortingly against his bare chest.

Mark woke to stillness and quiet; the train had stopped completely. He was stretched out on his back, Logan's head on his shoulder. Someone in the cabin rolled over on their bunk, making it creak, and Logan's hand stroked across his chest gently.

Logan was awake.

The train rumbled over the points, moving again after its temporary halt. "Want to roll onto your side?" Mark whispered to Logan.

Logan rolled over so he was facing the wall, and Mark moved behind him, bending his knees in behind Logan's.

Their bodies were close like this, and Mark's cock awoke again, pressing against Logan's arse, rubbing up against him. Mark lifted his head and began to kiss Logan's neck, sliding his hand back under the soft T-shirt, finding the silk of skin again, the heavy weight of the collection of chains and cords around Logan's neck.

Mark was in heaven now, tasting Logan's skin, salty and alive. Logan smelled clean, of shampoo and soap and sweat. And arousal. Mark could smell how turned on they both were, waves of pheromones rolling off of their bodies. He sucked harder on the flesh of Logan's neck, and the train built up speed, rumbling over the tracks, rushing through the cool night air.

Logan moaned faintly, pushing back against Mark, urging him on, and Mark found Logan's nipple with his hand and rubbed his thumb across the hardness at the same time as he drove his cock up against Logan's arse.

"Come to Amsterdam with me and I'll let you fuck me," Logan whispered.

Mark groaned against Logan's neck. "Is that a promise?"

"Yes," Logan said, wriggling over in the narrow space so he was facing Mark in the darkness. "But we have to stop now or I'm going to scream the place down."

"Okay," Mark said, rolling away onto his back, and Logan settled his head back where it had been on Mark's shoulder.

Logan's hand stroked the stubble on Mark's cheek. "Good. Will you let me shave you too?" he said, his mouth against Mark's ear.

"Yes," Mark said. Sleep crept up on Mark again as the train lulled him with its movement, and he could feel himself smiling contentedly in the dark. He was crazy to be doing this, going to Amsterdam with a painfully young man he had picked up and, God, it felt good after years of monogamy.

The grey light of morning stung Mark's eyes when opened them. The door was open, letting cold air from the corridor of the train in, and Logan stirred beside Mark.

"Is it morning?" Logan asked sleepily.

"Looks it," Mark said, stretching his legs out so his feet hit the bottom of the bunk.

Logan stretched beside him, thumping his feet beside Mark's. "Let's get out of here; I need to stretch more."

In the corridor, Logan lifted his arms above his head, yawning and rolling his shoulders sinuously. Mark yawned too and leaned against the glass of the window. They weren't alone, other people drifted along the corridor, watching the grey world rush past. The train was louder here too, and Logan smiled invitingly at Mark and raised his voice to be heard above the rattle. "I'd love a smoke."

Mark looked up and down the car, then pushed at the window, lowering it. "Hang on," he said, disappearing back into their cabin, coming back a moment later with a crumpled packet of cigarettes and a lighter. He lit Logan's cigarette, then his own, and blew the smoke into the blast of cool damp air belting in the window. "Better?"

"Unbelievably good," Logan said over the racket.

A fog bank outside Paris blanketed the world in a cold dampness, making Mark close the window again. Logan shivered a little beside him in his thin T-shirt, and Mark pulled him into his arms, sharing body heat.

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Logan watched Mark at the ticket counter at Gare du Nord, talking enthusiastically to the clerk; at least that's how it looked to Logan. Mark was being careful. He had his pack and

case beside his feet at the desk, instead of leaving them with Logan. Logan approved. He was a careful person himself, at least when it counted, no matter how unplanned his life seemed. This wasn't the first time he'd let himself be picked up by a bloke like this. Men seemed to like him, and they could usually afford to buy him cigarettes and booze.

And Mark looked well off. His lighter was gold and engraved with his name, even though he dressed as shabbily as Logan. His shoes were Birkenstocks, his pack Arc'teryx, all worn and grubby, but once expensive.

And he was gorgeous. There was no way around that. Despite the stubble and ripped jeans, the man was a total hunk. Logan would have hooked up with him regardless, even if they'd had to shag in the showers of the youth hostel in Milan because neither of them could afford a hotel room.

And Mark's hands. The way it felt when he touched Logan. So intense. Logan had nearly come the night before on the train, had nearly lost control and begged Mark to Just. Fuck. Him. Right there and then. There was a throb of blood to his cock at the memory, and Mark looked up from the ticket counter at that moment, meeting Logan's eyes. Logan smiled back.

Mark was walking toward him a moment later, ticket in his hand. "Done," he said to Logan. "Even if I did go blank on the French for 'no, the credit card is not stolen'. I must look pretty bad; he did a security check on the card before he issued the ticket."

"You should've pointed out that you'd just spent the night on one of Trenitalia's couchettes. He would have believed you then."

Mark shrugged. "Didn't think of that. Not sure my rudimentary French is up to a really detailed description of my opinion of their couchettes. We've got an hour. Want some breakfast? I could really do with some coffee."

Logan nodded and picked up his pack. "Me too."

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Mark watched Logan demolish his omelette, practically wolfing it down, while his cooled in front of him. "Want another one?" Mark asked when Logan put his knife and fork down on his empty plate.

"You must think I'm starving or something, the way I keep eating," Logan said a little sheepishly. "I've been living on bread and cheese in Italy, trying to make my money last. That's why I asked for a panini in exchange for having my photo taken."

"If you're still hungry, you should keep eating," Mark said gently.

Logan nodded. "I am hungry."

Lifting his hand to call a waiter over, Mark smiled at Logan.

While Logan ate his second omelette, Mark opened his travel journal and looked up the number of the hotel he used whenever he was passing through Amsterdam, then called them on his cell phone. He had a stack of missed calls when he turned his phone on, and he scanned the numbers and ignored them all. There was no way he wanted to talk to his lawyer or his accountant right then.

When Logan curled up on the seat next to Mark on the train to Amsterdam, he smelled of toothpaste again, making Mark glad that he had cleaned himself up at the train station. He'd thought about shaving his stubble off then, but had decided to wait until they got to the hotel where there was plenty of hot water. And there had been an intensity about the way Logan had asked if he could shave him that made Mark wonder.

They both slept on the train, leaning against each other. Mark woke first and spent some time studying Logan's hand, where it curled on the train seat. Logan's fingers were long and smooth, unmarked by calluses, the skin tanned. His nails were clean and short, confirming Logan was fastidiously clean, even when travelling around Europe with no money.

Mark looked at his own hands next. They were rough and burred, callused from the fence he had fixed before leaving, the last task in readying the house he'd shared with David for sale.

He carefully took Logan's hand in his.

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Logan stared up the flight of stairs to the hotel lobby. "Are these for real?" he asked. "They're more like a ladder than stairs."

"They're for real," Mark assured Logan, and handed his case to the man who rushed down the stairs to meet them.

The stairs were incredibly steep, with a bend at the top, and the man dashed back up with Mark's case, leaving them to follow behind.

When Mark had finished checking in and had the key, Logan leaned over the top of the railing, staring down the stairs in bewilderment.

"C'mon," Mark said. "I need a shower."

Logan was tanned and lean when he stripped his clothes off, dropping them onto the hotel room floor beside his pack. Mark's eyes were drawn first to Logan's cock, already lengthening as Mark watched, then the closely cropped dark blond curls surrounding his cock.

Mark's cock was standing proud when he undid his jeans and shed them and his boxers, and he saw warm approval in Logan's eyes when he looked up.

"You wanted to shave me?" Mark asked, and he undid his pack and took out his shower bag and pushed the bathroom door open.

The hotel bathroom was tiny, and there was a moment of delicious contact as Logan brushed past Mark to turn on the shower taps, his own razor in his hand. "And me," he said.

In the shower, Logan slid his arms around Mark's neck, bringing their bodies together. Their cocks brushed, then slid against each other in the warm water and Mark opened his mouth for a kiss. The erotic charge of the kiss lingered after Logan pulled back and reached for the soap, making Mark achingly hard.

Logan's smile was wicked as he lathered up Mark's face and reached for Mark's razor. "Ready?" he said, and the safety razor blade slid across Mark's face slowly, scraping away at the coarse hair. Logan's hands were deft as he concentrated on what he was doing, and Mark felt no nicks or scrapes when Logan stepped back and said, "Rinse off for me."

Mark rinsed his face under the shower and ran a hand approvingly over his chin. "Good job."

Logan grinned and rubbed a soapy hand over Mark's cock, making him groan, sliding his hand down to cup Mark's balls.

Mark reached out for Logan's body, and Logan dropped to his knees in the shower, out of his reach. Mark thought his heart might stop right then, just from the sight of Logan kneeling before him, looking up at him, then Logan winked at him and began to scrape the razor slowly through Mark's pubic hair.

"Fuck!" Mark said and Logan looked up at him quickly, quirking an eyebrow at him, then returned his concentration to what he was doing.

Mark held completely still while Logan slowly and carefully shaved around his cock. Logan's hands were firm and capable, holding Mark's cock to one side, then the other, and twice, wondrously, Logan let Mark's cock brush against his cheek. His heart was pounding in his chest, but Logan was focused on what he was doing, tongue protruding slightly between his teeth as he bit it in concentration.

Finally, Logan said, "All done." He guided Mark back under the stream of water and stood up again, carefully rinsing the suds and loose hairs off of him.

It felt raw and sensitive where Logan's hands touched him, making Mark feel vulnerable and very naked. He looked strange when he glanced down, his cock still rock hard, the skin around it pink and bare.

Logan looked down too. "You won't believe how intense it'll feel when we fuck," he said, and reached for his own razor.

Logan shaved himself quickly and methodically. Mark gazed at his body when he turned off the water. Logan shaved was an unbelievably erotic sight, all smooth skin the color of honey, and Mark had no words for the lust that ran through him.

Logan stepped out of the shower and handed Mark a towel, and by the time he'd rubbed himself over quickly, Logan was out of the bathroom and on the bed, two packets of condoms in his hands. "Ultra-thin for oral, extra strong for anal," Logan said.

Mark nodded and crawled onto the bed, moving the tube of lube Logan had put there, lowering himself over Logan to kiss him.

There was a shocking intimacy to the feel of their cocks touching now and Mark murmured, "I think we both need to come right now, don't you?"

"Fuck, yeah," Logan agreed and he held up an ultra-thin condom.

Logan moaned loudly at the first touch of Mark's mouth through the latex, moaned again as Mark took him into his mouth, then just kept moaning. He was moving too, trying to thrust up into Mark's mouth, and Mark clamped one hand on Logan's hip and held him still, pressing the thumb of the other hand behind Logan's balls.

Logan was still for a moment, then his legs kicked out and he shouted, "Fucking hell!" his body shaking as he came.

Mark rode it out, keeping as much of Logan's cock in his mouth as he dared, sucking hard, until the other man lay quietly on the bed.

Logan's mouth was waiting for him when he crawled back up the bed and Mark kissed him gently. "Was that good?" Mark murmured.

"Fucking brilliant," Logan said, and Mark watched as he pulled the condom off and dropped it beside the bed. "Your turn."

Mark wasn't used to wearing a condom while someone went down on him and he thought he'd miss the sensation, but Logan's hands were everywhere, touching him, cupping his balls, stroking his newly shaved skin, so that he moaned and began to come.

Finally coming after all the build-up was bliss, and Logan's hands skilfully coaxed Mark through, keeping him coming for as long as possible, until he finally collapsed back on the bed, his breathing slowing again.

Logan pulled the condom off Mark and dropped it onto the floor too, then flopped down beside him. "Next?" he asked, and he handed Mark the tube of lube.

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Mark touched Logan with care, finger slick with lube, and Logan closed his eyes and moaned. Mark obviously knew just what to do, squeezing the finger inside Logan against

the thumb resting under his balls. Logan shouted then and grabbed his own cock. "Fuck!" he yelled. "Fuck me!"

"Does that feel good?" Mark's voice murmured against Logan's ear, finger and thumb squeezing again.

Logan made himself open his eyes, and Mark was grinning at him. "Just fucking fuck me!" Logan ordered.

Mark shook his head and pushed a second finger into Logan's body. "Not yet."

Logan could hear himself yelling again when Mark added a third finger, and he pushed his body down onto Mark's fingers. "Yes," he cried over and over. "Yes, yes, please, yes."

Then the fingers were gone and Mark was rolling a condom onto his own cock. "Roll onto your side, like last night," Mark said.

Logan rolled over and pulled his knees up. He had no intention of stopping Mark at that moment, no intention at all. He felt a fumble behind him, then he could feel Mark's fingers guiding his cock so he slipped in quickly.

"Fucking hell," Logan said.

Mark's voice was right behind his ear. "This is what I wanted to do last night," he murmured. "I wanted to fuck you so desperately, like this."

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Logan was moaning steadily by the third thrust, clutching the bedding and pillows, squirming on the bed to push Mark in deeper, and Mark wrapped his fingers around Logan's cock. He was rock hard again, so hard that Mark asked, "You about to come?" as he thrust in.

"Fuck, yeah," Logan managed to gasp out between moans.

Mark grinned to himself and thrust in harder the next stroke, working his hand more quickly on Logan's cock. Logan reacted to the increased sensation, pushing himself hard back against Mark, shouting and swearing and then coming again, shuddering in Mark's arms.

When he lay still, Mark stopped stroking his cock and used that hand to cradle Logan to him. "Wow, that was a hell of a ride. Need me to pull out?" he asked quietly.

"Stay still for a moment, and I'll be fine. And you should try it from my side," Logan gasped, breathing hard still.

"I plan on doing just that later on."

Logan stroked Mark's arm and pressed his head back beside Mark's, his breath starting to slow. "You all right with me being so, umm, demonstrative? It freaks some people out."

"More than all right. I think it's wonderful. Means I'm absolutely sure you're having a good time. Though I can see why you didn't think you should come on the train."

Logan chuckled. "Hell, yeah. You want to start moving again? I'm sure I can catch you up."

Mark moved again, sliding in and out of Logan slowly and gently, letting himself thoroughly enjoy the feeling of being inside someone. He'd missed this, missed pleasuring someone, letting things happen slowly. Logan was right about the feel of his buttocks, now slick with lube, slapping wetly against the shaved skin of Mark's groin. It was a naked feeling, an added intimacy. He slid his hand over Logan's belly and chest as he fucked him, touching his skin the way he had longed to the afternoon before at the fountain, kissing his neck and shoulder, finally letting his hand stroke Logan's cock back to hardness and beyond, taking him all the way again, until Mark came, too, from the sheer ecstasy of listening to Logan's cries.

Mark pulled out carefully and dropped the condom over the edge of the bed, adding to the collection, then wrapped the pair of them in the stained coverlet. Logan was quiet and sleepy in Mark's arms, and Mark kissed him gently and let his own eyes close drowsily.

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When Mark woke it was late afternoon. He could tell because Logan had pulled the curtain beside the bed open, letting in the golden light. Logan was gazing out of the window from his side of the bed and Mark pressed himself up against Logan's back and looked over his shoulder.

"Good view, isn't it?" Mark asked quietly.

"It is," Logan murmured back. "I can see all these people on their bikes and in their cars, and they can't see me."

Logan's stomach growled loudly, making Mark laugh.

"Take me out and feed me, Mark," Logan said. "Again."

Mark rolled himself off the other side of the bed, bending down to pick up the condoms, then headed for the shower.

In the café, after dinner, Mark ordered two Afghan Gold joints, lit one and took a drag, then slid his arm around Logan's shoulders and pressed their mouths together to slipstream the exhaled smoke. By the end of the second joint, Logan was wasted beside Mark, no longer even trying to talk to him, and Mark leaned back in the chair and let Logan enjoy the feeling. Mark felt good too, buzzed and relaxed, but he'd been feeling pretty damned good when they came into the café.

"This is good stuff," Logan had said earlier, before he had drifted away.

Mark had nodded. "It's really smooth, doesn't make you jumpy or twitchy at all."

Now, Mark took Logan's hand in his and lifted the fingers to his mouth to kiss them. He tried to tell himself that what he was feeling was from the sex and the joints, but Logan was smiling back at him, contentment in his eyes, and the evening seemed gloriously full of promise.

"Want to walk around for a while?" he asked, and Logan nodded.

Logan leaned over the parapet of the bridge and gazed down into the canal, shimmering with reflected lights. "Take me back to the hotel," he said to Mark, who was leaning over beside him. "I want to fuck you."

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Mark woke the next morning to find that one of Botticelli's angels had fallen into his bed overnight. He was impossibly thirsty from smoking joints, and he ached a little from being fucked, but he knew he was the happiest he had been for at least ten years.

He brushed a fingertip over the stubble on Logan's scalp, making Logan wrinkle his nose a little in his sleep, then crawled out of bed to drink several glasses of water from the bathroom tap. The shower was inviting too, and he turned the hot water on and stood under the spray. He hadn't let anyone fuck him for a long time, and he had kind of forgotten the mess it made. He let the water wash away the smeared lube and come, and he ran a hand over the sensitive shaved skin. Logan was crazy, there was no doubt about that, crazy and horny, and he was going to wear Mark out completely at this rate.

Logan held Mark's hand at the Vincent Van Gogh Museum, letting Mark lead him around the paintings. Logan asked questions, trying to get him to explain the paintings, but Mark found he had no words. "Just feel them," he said. "Just let them into your soul."

Logan squeezed Mark's hand and stared at the painting of The potato eaters. "Why is it so dark?"

"Because Van Gogh didn't know he could paint with bright colors," Mark said. "But look at the chair; you can see that's going to be the chair in his later paintings. It's the same chair."

Logan nodded and let Mark lead him on.

At Undergrowth, Logan looked at Mark. "What does it mean?"

Mark shook his head. "I don't know. But the world is a better place because these paintings exist."

Afterwards, Mark fucked Logan slowly and gently, and Logan shouted and shook and came and clutched at the bedding until Mark came too.

Exhausted again, Mark fell asleep. When he woke, Logan was dressed and doing up his pack. Mark sat up in bed, shaking his head to clear it. "You're leaving?"

Logan nodded, putting down his pack. "It's time."

"But..." Mark began. "But why? At least let me give you my phone number."

Logan sat down on the edge of the bed. "Just because. And you can, but I'll never call you."

"Please tell me why," Mark asked, hearing the pleading in his own voice.

"Because this is perfect. If I leave now, we'll both always have these memories. I'll think of you and wonder what might have been. If I stay, you'll tell me about your ex, and I'll tell you about my childhood. It'll be complicated and difficult and painful. I don't want that. I want you to be a perfectly honest stranger."

Mark felt perilously close to crying, and he blinked hard. "Do you need money?"

Logan shook his head. "I've got enough to get home from Waterloo."

Mark nodded, not sure his voice would let him speak, and Logan leaned across and kissed him gently, then was gone.

Mark didn't cry because that would have been crying for his failed relationship, not because Logan had left. He held on to the pillow that smelled of Logan for a while and was sad that something so beautiful had slipped away from him. He was as raw and scraped as his skin had felt yesterday when Logan had shaved him.

He went back to the Vincent Van Gogh Museum the next day and stood in front of Almond Blossom and thought maybe he understood what it took to be happy. What he needed to do was to risk himself, risk everything, in the sure knowledge it would be rejected. If he could do that, he could live again.