

**Romeo and Julian:  
A Near-Tragedy Near Verona**  
by **KD Sarge**

The second time Romeo Balducci met Julian Areyas, it was just as embarrassing as the first time.

The Vocelli house was an oddity, a small house at the very end of a narrow thread of big summer homes. Romeo liked its age, liked that it had never been brought up to date, liked that it was highest in the village and butted right up against the steep hillside and that the balcony on the back was completely private because of it. Another selling point was that it had been empty for years, the Vocelli family too busy elsewhere to come and relax in their pretty little—in relation to the other homes on the winding road—vacation home.

Topping it all, Romeo had found years ago that if he followed the stream up the hill from behind his own well-filled and noisy home, as the flowing water grew narrower and louder the steep banks would rise enough to hide his approach from every eye, letting him slip up to the balcony in peace. Only the snow-melt or a week of heavy rain would foil him once he was in the creek-bed.

So it was that on the first truly warm day of the spring when his mother would not let up about the baker's curvy-hipped and single daughter and his father was grumping around muttering imprecations at the changes Romeo had suggested, he slipped out to the well-house and from there to the stream, and made his way up the hill. He wasn't a hostler's son for nothing—on his shoulder he had a big dinner, with plenty for feeding to birds and whatever else caught his eye, and on top and hopefully not sloshing about being damaged he'd packed half a bottle of his grandfather's best efforts.

With luck—he slipped his hand in his pocket to touch his St. Sebastian medal—his mother would think he'd slipped off to woo the approved girl of the week and he wouldn't catch hell when he got home. Even without luck, a day of quiet would be worth the scolding later. Besides, it would be nice to be lectured for something he'd actually done for once.

The creek was a bit high, but Romeo had worn his boots in case, and he attained the balcony with the high-mud mark only as high as his protected ankles.

The balcony was just as he'd remembered it. Two years of weather hadn't altered the wide stone blocks of house and deck, of course, and the railings and metal furniture had held up as well. The stream ran below, rushing and roaring. The long but narrow arc of sky above held two fluffy white clouds, the contrast strengthening the blue of the rest of the sky. Somewhere nearby birds sang, but that and the creek were the only sounds. Romeo sighed, smiled, and took the bag off his shoulder with a grunt.

Should have used the other arm. Should have remembered. Next time he would, and be more careful climbing onto the balcony as well. Now he carefully rolled his shoulder to loosen the muscles and wished he'd packed his painkillers with his lunch. When would he learn? Every time he got to feeling better, he forgot and hurt himself again.

The sunshine on his shoulders helped. Romeo kicked off his boots, pulled the blanket from his bag and spread it on one of the lounges, then pulled off his shirt and stretched out face-down to let the heat soak

into his injury and the peace soak into his soul.

When he woke the day was hotter but the sun had moved, so he lay in the shade. He also was no longer alone, as he realized when he turned his head and someone huffed soft annoyance. Romeo scrambled up and hurt his shoulder again doing it, planted his behind on the lounge when his head spun from the pain.

"It's all right," the man said. He nodded at Romeo's right hand, holding his left arm to his body. "Or are you?"

"Old injury," Romeo said. "It's mostly healed, unless I move just wrong."

"Sorry I scared you."

"I think that's my line."

The man smiled. He was young, maybe Romeo's age, and his Italian was accented. Not heavily, and not so Romeo could tell where he was from beyond "not here." His hair was dark and curly, his eyebrows dark and straight. He sat in one of the chairs by the table, a large tablet in graceful hands.

"We'll call it even on the trespassing. You invaded my privacy, and I invaded yours." He turned the tablet so Romeo could see it was a sketchpad, the page filled with sketches. It took him a moment to realize the man had been drawing him as he slept.

"I'm, uhh..." he said, "...wearing pants." Romeo couldn't decide if it was good or bad that the sketch didn't include genitalia.

"To get the anatomy right, draw the nude then add the clothes." The young man turned the sketchpad back around. "Would you like some Tylenol—some Paracetamol for your shoulder? I'd like to go on sketching you. I'd bribe you with dinner, but I don't have food in the house."

Romeo grinned and poked his bag with his toe. "I can supply dinner. Paracetamol would be lovely. Do you also have wineglasses?"

The young man raised a dignified eyebrow, but a smile lurked about his lips. "Probably. I'm Julian."

"Romeo."

Julian let his eyes trail the balcony before they came back to Romeo. "You are not," he said, but his smile had grown.

"Ask my mother. Some other time, please. I don't want her to know my hideout."

"Hmm, leverage," Julian said, but he set the tablet down and went inside. Romeo pulled his shirt on carefully and took his bag to the table. Two years of weather had left a film of debris on it, though, so he waited for Julian and hopefully a washcloth before spreading out the meal. Instead he lifted the sketchpad.

Julian had a skilled hand. Romeo could barely draw stick figures and funny faces, but still he was Italian and he knew art when he saw it. The raw sketches of his back, his arms, the whole-body nude, spoke of power and strength, belying the injury throbbing in his shoulder. Looking at them, he could see the best forward Italian football had seen in twenty years. He knew again how it felt to plow down the infield with the ball before him and half the opposing team too far behind to catch him.

Stupidly he hoped Julian wouldn't decide to draw him hurt, sitting down hard to keep from falling as he cradled his shoulder and cringed in pain.

"Now you're getting intrusive," Julian said, returning with a tray and a scowl. Romeo turned the pad to show the page he was on.

"I didn't look at anything but what you showed me," he said. Julian's face lightened.

"In that case, you can wipe—no, hold the tray." Julian handed it over, took a wet washcloth and dry towel from it, and wiped the table down. "I brought the whole bottle. I hope you won't take a stupid amount, especially if you're drinking."

Still on the tray were two wineglasses, filled water glasses, plates, silverware, napkins, a tablecloth, and a bottle of medicine. Romeo rolled his eyes.

"I'm Italian," he said. "I know how to drink."

Julian chuckled as he flipped the tablecloth out and draped it over the table. Then he shoved his hair back from his forehead and Romeo knew him. He'd seen just that gesture—

"Romeo?" Julian was trying to take the tray but Romeo's hands were clamped on it. He tilted his head in question and Romeo laughed and let go.

"Sorry. Just realizing we've met before."

"I doubt it." Julian turned away to set the table. "I've only been here for a few flying visits since I was...oh, six or so."

"Seven," Romeo said. "The last day before you left, you were up in the little wood, at—" Oh hell. Romeo stopped talking, but Julian had turned back to him.

"At my parents' grave," he said. "I was saying goodbye and some boy fell out of a tree behind me."

"I didn't mean to spy on you," Romeo said. "Back then I thought they were my woods, and I didn't realize it was a grave—" Julian waved a hand and Romeo managed to shut up.

"Every time I come here, I go to the grave," Julian said. "And it's always tended. Sometimes there are flowers."

Romeo shrugged and winced at renewed pain in his shoulder. "You were so worried about it," he mumbled, looking up the hill. "I thought, if it were my parents..." He shrugged *again*, damn it! Julian grabbed his good arm.

"Sit down, Romeo. Take some medicine." He guided Romeo into a chair. Romeo went, somewhat surprised. Julian's grip was stronger than his artist's hands suggested. Romeo could have resisted, but he'd have to put some effort in. Julian twisted the bottle open, set it and a glass of water in front of Romeo, and went back into the house.

He came back short minutes later carrying another tray, this one holding an icepack and a steaming towel.

"I didn't know which you needed," he said, and set the tray in Romeo's reach. He looked at the food Romeo had spread out one-handed. "Did you pack for a hike to Verona?"

"My father's training—never let a guest leave the table unsatisfied. Means I can't make small meals."

"Ahh." Julian lifted the bottle and raised an eyebrow at the lack of a label. He pulled the cork and sniffed it and this time both eyebrows went up.

"My grandfather's private vintage," Romeo said, putting the steaming towel to his shoulder in a move he'd practiced far too much in the past three months.

"Well then." Julian poured both glasses half full, set the bottle down and lifted his glass. "Here's to your family."

"May they not hunt me down for skipping out," Romeo added and clinked his glass.

Julian sniffed the glass before he sipped, and tasted the wine before he swallowed. He lifted the glass again, silent toast to the wine, and Romeo grinned. Julian's lips quirked in an acknowledging smile that widened as he reached for the antipasto.

"I've seen five-star restaurants take less care in presentation."

"Some people take pride in their work."

"You're a chef?"

"Naw." Romeo broke the bread in half and offered it to Julian. "I'm a football player. Soccer, I mean."

Julian didn't take the bread. His eyes were half-closed as he chewed salami and cheese. "*Where* did you get this food?" he asked when he could.

"You've been in the big city too long, my friend."

Julian wrinkled his nose at Romeo, his mouth again full so he couldn't speak a response.

"Try the *cajonata*," Romeo suggested, offering the bread again. Julian ripped off a piece and scraped up some of the mixture. He knew what *cajonata* was and how to eat it...but Romeo would have sworn he wasn't native despite his parents buried on the hill.

"Mmm!" Julian said, eyes fully closed this time.

"I made that," Romeo said. "This morning."

"You're an evil man, Romeo."

"And a hungry one." Romeo moved food onto his own plate. For a time they ate silently but for Julian's occasional sounds of delight.

Julian had sat facing the hillside. When he wasn't looking at his food, his eyes rose to the escarpment. Romeo faced the house, but mostly he looked at Julian.

Fifteen years, from child to adult, had changed him of course. But Romeo could still see hints of the boy he remembered so clearly. The hair gesture, though the unruly mop was more controlled now. His eyes, wistful as he looked on the location of his parents' grave. Romeo remembered how lost Julian had looked that day and wondered why, as the silence went on and Julian got distracted from eating, that look was coming back.

Julian dropped his gaze, caught Romeo watching. Romeo smirked.

"Love to watch my food enjoyed."

"Unless you're a damned good soccer player, you are wasted on sports," Julian said, ripping off more bread.

"I am." Romeo jerked his head at the towel on his shoulder. "Usually."

Julian tilted his head. "Missing the season?" he asked. Romeo shrugged with one shoulder.

"We weren't going to the championships anyway."

"Well," Julian turned his attention back to the food, "I hope it heals."

"How about you?" Romeo asked. "What brings you back after so long?"

"Family," Julian said, pouring more wine into glasses that didn't need it yet. Romeo replenished his plate and let the conversation go. Into the quiet birdsong grew, and the rushing of the creek, and the flute of a shepherd up on the hill.

Family. But the gravestone--one for both people buried on the hill--read "Areyas" and the house belonged to the Vocellis. Also, Julian was alone. Only a man alone could move into a years-empty house and not bring food.

Maybe he'd been sent ahead to get the house ready? Proper stocking couldn't be done in a few hours.

"Do you need help cleaning?" Romeo blurted. Julian started, then smiled and picked at his plate.

"I can manage, thanks."

"This is Italy, Julian. Neighbors like to help."

"I know what country I landed in, Romeo."

"If you run out of time," Romeo said, "let me know. I'll call in the family and we'll have the house fresh and full of good food in a day."

"I'm sure." Julian picked up his wineglass and swirled it. He watched it circle the glass, but he didn't drink it. "What does this amazing family of yours do when not rescuing neighbors from their own foolishness?"

Romeo grinned. "We run an inn, and rescue them there from bad cooking and away-from-home-ness."

Julian laughed. Romeo decided he'd like to hear that again, and set about earning it.

When the first star shown pale and hesitant in the darkening sky Romeo knew he should take himself home and he didn't want to. Julian didn't look tired of his company, but the moon was rising to light his way and his mother would be worried. Romeo sighed and started collecting his things.

"All good things..." Julian said, and helped. When Romeo moved towards the railing, though, Julian grabbed his good arm.

"I have a front door, you know. No climbing involved."

"That," Romeo said, "would break the spell." He handed Julian the bag. "Hand this down to me?"

"Hurt yourself again and I'll drop it on your head."

"Noted." Romeo stepped over the railing. "I'll be back. I still owe you some lounging about shirtless!"

"I think," Julian said as Romeo climbed down, "that I'm the one in your debt."

"Then you'll have to let me draw you!"

Julian laughed. Romeo grinned and slipped into the twilight. As he walked downhill beside the stream, Romeo knew two things. First, that he was utterly addicted to Julian's laugh.

Second, that despite years of trying to change, he most certainly was irredeemably gay.

The next day Romeo made *baccelli e pecorino* under his mother's careful eye. When it was done and she turned to something else, he filched some prime bits of roast pork to round out his offering and slipped out the door.

The day after that, he made *carabaccia* and then *salvia frita* under his father's supervision, escaping with his spoils when a bribed busboy tried to put dirty dishes in the prep sink.

The second time Romeo climbed the balcony rail with his bag, Julian laughed and protested that he had food now. The third time he just shook his head with a grin. The fourth time, he had the table set. By then Romeo was making everything he took up the hill himself, and his mother and father were exchanging sly smiles and carefully not watching him head out the door.

In three days Romeo and Julian had talked of football and what Americans named football, of Australia where Romeo had visited and Julian had lived, of the United States where Julian had gone to school a few years and Romeo had never been, of Brazil where Romeo had played and Julian had never gone. Julian's guardian—whoever that was—had taken him all over the world, it seemed.

They talked of Italian food and French food and what the Americans called food. Of the skies and the oceans and the exploration of both. Romeo talked of his vague and unmotivated thoughts of eventual college and Julian mentioned he'd gone to art school, but changed the subject when Romeo asked about his degree.

Several topics ended that way--the talk got too close to home, and Julian shied away. A younger Romeo

might have gotten frustrated, but not anymore. "Each pass moves the goal closer," Coach Rossi had said so many times. The first five hundred or so times, he'd followed it with "and if you're in center-field sulking, someone else gets that shot." After a while, though, the first half of the advice had been all Romeo needed, and he learned to map the passes, finding the weaknesses of the opposing team while exploiting the strengths of his own.

Normally that wouldn't end well. Even his family got angry when Romeo brought his game tactics into friendly discussions, but Julian stood his ground. Talking with Julian was like the most challenging matches, was exhilarating and captivating like a fencing duel between masters. The mysterious young man could meet Romeo on any field, whether it be science, politics, travel, or the arts, and make his points with eloquence and passion. He spoke Italian, English, and Russian fluently, could get by in Hindi and Arabic, and could ask for food or the restroom in five more languages. He was widely read, deeply curious, and staunchly courteous. Not to mention as beautiful as a Greek god. By their fourth shared meal Romeo was helplessly, hopelessly in love.

He had no idea how Julian felt. Romeo knew Julian could meet his intensity with heat of his own when they talked politics and who should be doing what. He knew he could be silent and still be comfortable with Julian as so rarely happened with any but the oldest friends. He could make Julian laugh. He could make Julian close his eyes and groan delight at something he'd prepared with just that goal in mind. What he couldn't do was make Julian tell him what he most wanted to know.

Indeed, he was so in awe of what he'd found that Romeo was afraid to breathe wrong, let alone ask a question that could so easily shatter the magic forever.

So he cooked, and he talked, and he ignored the guilt when every day he left the afternoon work to his family while he headed up the hill. Between breakfast-cleanup and the lunch rush each day he hit the tiny village library, and in the evenings he read until he couldn't keep his eyes open because Julian had been nearly everywhere and knew so much and he had to keep up. On top of his practical measures and in a nod to the fairy tales of his childhood, he always arrived by balcony and he left by balcony and if Julian invited him into the house he made excuses.

Caution went against his nature, though, so when Julian looked up at the hill for perhaps the hundredth time and sighed, Romeo suggested a hike for the next day.

"It's Sunday," Julian said, his attention coming back to the balcony and his dinner partner. "Shouldn't you be in church?" Romeo shrugged one-shouldered. He'd gotten better at remembering since Julian threatened to put him in a sling if he didn't.

"Good day for a hike. We'll have the hill to ourselves."

"It's supposed to rain," Julian pointed out.

"Are you likely to melt?"

"Not really. Can I wear a hat, though, or will that destroy your respect for me?"

Romeo grinned.

That third night when Romeo stepped into the den to kiss his mother good night, she dropped her knitting and clung to his good arm.

"Romeo," she said. "I stopped by the bakery this afternoon. I talked to Rosaline for an hour. You weren't there."

"No, Momma."

She darted a look at his father, bent over a new carving. One of Romeo's suggested changes was to turn the coatroom into a gift shop, since his mother knit more than the whole family could possibly wear and his father was always making beautiful little statuettes he then stuck in a cupboard and forgot. The idea had not been well-received.

"You're not going off to see Marino, are you?" she whispered. "Your father—"

"No, Momma." Romeo winced. "I'm just going up the hill." Marino was his father's brother, living in exile with his boyfriend in Florence. Romeo's favorite uncle despite distance and disapproval, and sure to be blamed when—

"Good, good." Momma patted the sofa next to her. "Sit down and talk to me."

Romeo held back a sigh and sat. He dug a skein of yarn out of her basket and looped an end around his fingers, started rolling it into a ball for her. She patted his knee.

"It's good to have you home, my son."

He'd been home two months aside from day-trips to the city for medical appointments.

"But I worry," she said. "It's time you had a home of your own."

"Momma..."

"No, I know," she interrupted. "You're young. You want to play, you want to chase all the girls. I know." She picked up her knitting. "But think. Bianca's married now. Your first girlfriend and she's expecting. Edda is engaged. Gia, Imelda, both married. You're going to blink, my son, and there won't be any girls left to marry!"

"The world is not running out of girls, Momma."

"Sure, sure. But the village is. How many girls out there in the world would want to leave everything to live here, hmm? Even your own family—you're the only one still here, Romeo. Marcellus said he'd come home, I know, but that girlfriend..."

"That girlfriend" was a favorite topic. Romeo didn't mean to, but he tuned Momma out, thinking of the planned hike. She jerked Romeo back with a knitting needle to his arm.

"Up the hill?" she demanded. "I heard the Vocelli house is opened up."

Oh damn. "Momma—"



"You stay away from that Vocelli girl, Romeo Balducci. She's older than you, and—"

"What Vocelli girl?" Was there—right, yes, there was. "I haven't seen her, Momma, not since the day you dragged me home by my ear." Two hundred years ago, a Vocelli and a Conti—Momma's family—had killed each other in a duel. Every generation since had some tragedy or betrayal to ascribe to the Vocellis. Romeo had compared stories with Donata once, and surprisingly the Vocellis had a similar list about the Contis.

"Good." His mother settled back to her knitting. "Now. Rosaline hasn't a fellow yet. Nunzia's daughter is coming home next week; I'll invite them to the dinner. And there's the Palmiro girl—"

The dinner. The anniversary dinner, celebrating thirty years with the man she loved. Romeo sighed.

"I'm tired, Momma." He set the yarn in the basket. "I'm going to bed." He kissed her and patted his father's shoulder and made his escape, up to his room under the eaves where he'd slept since he was little. It had never felt less like home.

When he arrived the next day, Romeo stopped Julian from climbing down until he could hand his bag up. Julian shook his head as he set the bag inside.

"We'll be here for lunch? I thought you were plotting an expedition."

"That's dinner." Romeo tilted his shoulder to show the bag he still carried. "This is lunch."

"If you always eat the way you're feeding me, you should be as fat as Santa Claus," Julian grumbled, stepping over the railing. He wore boots and a hat, as well as a windbreaker that would repel most rain. Romeo had a hat himself, and a walking stick. When Julian stood on the bank, he eyed the stick.

"You're injured, remember. In recovery."

"If you get tired, I'll help you," Romeo promised, pushing away the silly thought that they hadn't really left the balcony yet--he could still back out and keep the spell intact. Instead he tossed his head and showed Julian the steps he'd made climbing in and out of the gully in the previous week.

For a while they walked in silence, Romeo following the stream nearly straight up the hillside and robbing both of them of extra breath. When they reached the edge of the woods, he scrambled out of the gully and Julian followed. After that Romeo set an easier pace, zig-zagging up the hill and making sure their path found those places he knew to be best for spring flowers. By the time they neared the little graveyard, Julian's hands were full.

"Do you know where we are?" Romeo asked. Julian rolled his eyes.

"If you ask, it must be a place I know. Also, yes, I recognize that tree. I have to say I've never come up by a more roundabout path."

"I thought you'd enjoy the scenic route." Romeo pointed his stick at the old hermit house on the edge of the cemetery. "I'll set up lunch while you pay your respects, if you want."

"That—thank you."

Romeo had long since explored every nook and cranny of the graveyard, but he was never disrespectful inside it or in the one room stone house. He whispered an apology to the Madonna statue inside, and gratitude for the shelter, before he spread out the lunch he'd brought.

The clouds were thickening and Julian was taking a long time, but when Romeo was about to take his stick and see if wolves had rebounded in Italy just to eat his friend, Julian stumbled out of the dimness and sank down on the stone floor. Romeo poured coffee from the vacuum bottle and offered it. Julian reached for it with a shaking hand.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine." Julian took the offered sugar and dumped heaping spoonfuls into his cup. Romeo offered the cream, but Julian shook his head and sat back, half-falling against the stone wall behind him. He huddled there, his entire focus on the cup he clutched in both hands to ease the shaking. Romeo filled one of the wooden plates with a bit of everything and set it in front of Julian while he wondered if he'd overdone it on the hike. He knew he tended to do that when he wasn't careful. His brother Gastone wouldn't wander with him anymore, even called him spawn of a mountain goat when his parents weren't around to be insulted. And every team he'd ever played on hated when he led practices.

Julian was pretty fit--Romeo had spent enough time looking to know--but maybe he'd been living somewhere flat too long.

"Have you ever wandered up here?" Romeo asked, making a plate for himself. Julian didn't answer so Romeo kept talking. "This little cemetery has been in use since the fifteenth century. In school I'd write reports about it. Once for an art portfolio I made tracings of the stones."

"Kind of a morbid interest," Julian said, but he didn't sound disapproving. Romeo nudged the plate closer to Julian and chuckled.

"I already knew everyone down there!" He waved in the direction of the village. "Up here...I could make up their adventures. And they never tried to tell me what to do."

"Always a plus." Julian set the coffee cup down empty and reached for the plate. His hand only shook a little. Romeo nodded at the icon above them.

"There's more. Look at her."

Julian looked up, then stared. "That's not...where did that come from?"

"England." Julian raised an eyebrow. Romeo laughed and went on. "Most recently, I mean. Apparently it originally stood in a chapel in Egypt. Some crusader looted it to keep it from the heathen, hauled it home, and a century or two later his grandson gave it to a de Luca so he'd look kindly on marrying off his daughter. De Luca loved it but his wife ordered it out of the house, so he put it up here. Legend has it after the wedding he built the house around it and moved up here too."

"Must have been some wife," Julian said. "But it is beautiful." He wiped his hand on his pants then made a face as Romeo held out a napkin. "You're so prepared it's disgusting," he grumbled, wiping his hand again before pulling his sketchbook from his bag. Romeo grinned and refilled his coffee. Outside the wind moaned in the trees and rain came crashing down.

"Damn," Romeo said.

"Good day for a hike, though," Julian said.

"And we have the hill to ourselves," Romeo said. Julian laughed as he bent over the tablet, then muttered about the dimness. Romeo grinned wider as he pulled two candles and a lighter from his bag. Julian spat a couple swear words and Romeo snickered. He whispered an apology to the Virgin for his friend's manners as he lit the candles. He put them close together and whispered a serious prayer, asking for understanding since he would not beg forgiveness. He lit every other candle that would light as well, then sat back down across from Julian and watched the light play across him.

Julian sketched boldly, in quick strokes that he refined as he worked. He'd shoved his hair back, but one stubborn curl lay on his forehead. When he frowned at the icon, his eyebrows met. When he bent over the tablet again, he started humming. Romeo smiled. Julian surely didn't realize he did that, as he hummed just a couple bars of something over and over and did it off key. It was hard not to join in, but the last thing Romeo wanted was to make Julian stop.

He was lucky Julian was so wrapped up in his art. Romeo knew he was smiling stupidly at the other man and he didn't care. Everything Julian did, even the temporary uni-brow and the off-key humming, charmed him. He told himself the man had flaws--the mysteries he clung to, for instance, or the stubbornness that hadn't let him just tell Romeo he was getting tired before he ended up shaking--but he couldn't get annoyed by them. Romeo was bewitched and he knew it, too far gone even to hide it if Julian were to look.

A splatter of cold rain in his face jerked Romeo back from his adoring. The daylight flickered brighter, and thunder crashed a few seconds later. Romeo cursed under his breath. A little rain was one thing. Bringing Julian up the hill to strand him in a thunderstorm--

Luckily Julian hadn't noticed. Romeo realized he probably should be offended, or at least discouraged, at how Julian forgot him so easily, but instead he smiled. Another crash of thunder jolted Romeo back before he got lost in his feelings again. He leaned across the picnic spread to put food in Julian's not-drawing hand.

Julian didn't seem to notice, but the next time he looked up at the icon the food went to his mouth. Romeo chuckled and started putting the food away, feeding himself and Julian as he did.

His plan was that as soon as the worst of the storm moved away, Romeo would get Julian to the gully as the fastest way down the hill. It would be muddy but do-able, and the quickest way to get Julian out of a real rain that could have health consequences. If the rain went on too long, though, they couldn't risk it--Romeo would have to take Julian to the road instead, and that had its own dangers.

The storm, though, was not interested in Romeo's plan. Each time lightning danced, the thunder came faster. Romeo told himself the house had stood there for hundreds of years and could easily protect them through the night if needed, but then he wondered if the little building wasn't about due for a lightning strike...

Outside the wind tore through the wood, groans and creaks punctuating its roar. A gust spattered rain into their shelter and wailed on to blow out most of the candles.

"Wow," Julian said in the sudden dimness, "it's really going out there."

"And some of it is coming in here." Romeo wiped his face with a napkin. When he looked again, Julian stood silhouetted in the entry. "You shouldn't--"

Brilliant light flashed and Romeo snatched. Smashing sound rolled over him, battering his senses then rumbling away. Romeo staggered back against the wall blinking to clear the after-image of Julian's silhouette so he could see--

Julian was in his arms. Romeo stared at him just a breath away. Julian stared wide-eyed back.

His hand was on Romeo's chest. Thrown out for balance maybe as Romeo yanked him backwards, but now that beautiful hand lay across Romeo's heart and when he realized that heart lurched into doubletime.

"...Romeo?" Julian said softly. Or maybe loudly, but Romeo barely heard him over the ringing in his ears and the thudding of his heart. And still Julian didn't move away, though he got his feet under him and lifted his hand. Romeo caught it unthinking and replaced it, held it to his heart.

"Romeo..." Julian said and trailed off as if he'd forgotten any other words. The world, the storm, the wind and rain and thunder all took a step back, left Romeo alone with Julian in a tiny infinity of just-them.

Julian's fingers were cold under his. Romeo lifted Julian's hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Oh my god," Julian breathed.

Romeo's heart pounded and his head whirled as he held his breath, but he slowly put Julian's hand to his cheek and pressed it there. Still staring into Julian's astonished eyes, he turned his head just enough to press a kiss against the inside of Julian's wrist.

*I love you*, he meant, and a thousand things more, passion and promises and poetry tumbling in his heart and entangling his tongue. *Love me*.

Julian's face firmed. His fingers curled; his other hand came up. He caught Romeo's face and tugged him forward until their lips met.

Fireworks, brilliant bursts of silent color, exploded all around Romeo. The very air shimmered and he thought he heard an angel choir. Or maybe that was lack of air but it didn't matter because Julian was kissing him.

Romeo pushed through his shock to kiss back before Julian gave up. He closed his eyes and inhaled and all the world narrowed to the scent and taste and feel of Julian kissing him.

A thousand years too soon, it was over. Julian stepped back and his hands wouldn't let Romeo follow. He dragged in a deep breath and let it out shakily.

"I...wow," he said. "Romeo, I..." He laughed. "God, I'm such an idiot, I'm sorry..."

"You're not. You're brilliant," Romeo said. Julian still held his face; he'd retreated but he hadn't let go. At Romeo's words his expression softened.

"You're amazing," he breathed, his eyes searching Romeo's face. "How can you even be real?"

If Julian thought him amazing, Romeo wasn't going to argue. Instead he put his hands on Julian's.

"I'm right here," he said. He slid Julian's hands over his face, closed his eyes to receive the benediction of

his beloved's touch. Julian's fingers lightly explored. Romeo kissed his palms. Julian gasped. Romeo guided Julian's hands down, over his jaw and onto his neck. Julian's eyes widened.

"Your heart...it's beating so fast."

"It's--" Romeo's mouth was dry; he swallowed. "It's because of you," he said.

"I didn't know..." Julian whispered. He lurched forward to kiss Romeo again, noses mashed until they got the angle right. Romeo dared to hold Julian, put his hand on the back of his head and his arm around Julian and the angel choir started again.

Or maybe he just wasn't breathing again.

Maybe Julian wasn't either, because when they parted both gasped for air. Julian slid his arms around Romeo's waist and leaned his head on his shoulder.

"I've known you a *week*," he whispered. "How can this be?"

"You've known me fifteen years," Romeo murmured back, planting a kiss in soft curly hair.

Julian laughed softly, and that was the best laugh yet. Romeo squeezed him and the windbreaker crackled. The spell broke, the world came back, and Romeo realized it was still pouring outside but the lightning seemed to have moved on.

He had no idea what time it was, and he couldn't even guess. It seemed like forever since Julian touched him, an eternity they'd stood holding each other and he'd love to have another eternity, but time had returned and he knew he had to think about things.

"If we're stuck up here," Julian mused, "at least you brought enough to feed us a few days." Did he sound hopeful? Romeo knew he was, but it wouldn't work.

"Yes, but if I don't make it home," he said, "my family will be all over this hill looking by midnight."

Julian winced. "No, we can't have that. I guess we'll just have to get wet."

Romeo kissed his temple. "You still probably won't melt."

Julian sighed and stepped away to stow his sketchbook. Romeo re-lit the two candles he'd brought, sent a silent but heartfelt thanks to the Virgin, and picked up his bag.

The gully wasn't an option. Romeo took Julian's hand and kept it as he led to the road instead.

"There's a road?" Julian gasped, laughing. "You jerk!"

"Roads are boring. I showed you the hill." Romeo led off at a good pace, determined this time to keep an eye on Julian.

Julian made that harder by hunching under his hat to avoid the rain as much as possible. Romeo kept his head up watching Julian and watching for cars. He didn't expect any, but if one came--well, in some places on that road, there was nowhere to go.

Once they did have to leave the roadway. Romeo slipped in the mud as the car passed and Julian blocked his slide with himself. Romeo took the chance to lean under Julian's hat and kiss him.

It was still wonder-filled, but not time-stopping since he had to take his own hat off to do it and the rain was cold.

The road led to the front of Julian's house, of course, not the back. Romeo looked up at the house as they walked up the driveway.

"Huh. I'd forgotten there was a balcony on the front too."

"Actually, it's the only one," Julian said. "In back is the deck. Crazy men who walk in streams think it's a balcony, but it's a deck. On the corner there," he pointed, "is a veranda. It is also not a balcony."

"Is that your room up there?" Romeo asked casually. Julian laughed.

"No, my room is above the garage, formerly the ballroom. Also, don't climb the balcony. The neighbors are sure to call the police."

"Not on me," Romeo said, examining the climbability of the garage end of the house. "They know me."

"Do they know you're crazy?"

"That too."

"This time you're walking in the front door," Julian said, wrapping Romeo's hand in both of his so there'd be no escaping. Romeo wouldn't have dreamed of escaping, but if the idea made Julian hold onto him tighter he wasn't going to say that.

Julian led up the wide steps and into the portico. Both shed hats and jackets and boots and bags, leaving them on a bench there. A great wooden door let them into an elegant columned foyer.

"This way," Julian said, leading to the left. "Kitchen is there," he waved as they passed the hall, "and you can use this bathroom. Get a shower; I'll get you some dry clothes."

"You should go first," Romeo protested.

"It'll just take me a minute to grab you clothes, silly man."

Of course the house had more than one bathroom, what was he thinking? Romeo let Julian shove him into a marble-decorated guest bath.

When he came out in a pair of drawstring yoga pants--yoga pants!--and a shirt he hoped he wasn't ruining since he was built wider than Julian was, all he had to do to find the man of the house was follow the singing.

Romeo didn't know the song or even the language, but he was relieved to notice that Julian sang much better than he hummed. The voice led him to the kitchen and he stopped in the archway gazing at heaven on earth.

Unlike the outside of the house, the kitchen had been updated--but carefully, with modern conveniences put in and none of the Tuscan flavor taken out. It was bright, spacious, and lined with hand-carved cabinets and cupboards of aged chestnut. The counters were marble, the floor terra cotta tile, and the appliances made to blend in. Loveliest by far, though, was Julian, wearing tight jeans and a flannel shirt too big for him, padding about in rainbow-striped toe socks and singing as he set out the dinner Romeo had brought.

"But soft," Romeo said, "what light through yonder window breaks?"

Julian laughed. "You're the one in the doorway, Romeo."

"You're the one who's beautiful."

Julian blushed. Romeo found that too charming to resist. "I'm going to kiss you," he told Julian as he walked forward, fair warning because he held glassware. Julian smiled and set it down. Romeo stepped close and leaned in, aiming for no more nose-mashing. Julian caught Romeo's face and helped. Romeo closed his eyes and kissed.

A slow breathless eternity passed, filled to overflowing with the taste of Julian's lips and the touch of his hands. Romeo prayed it would last forever, but Julian broke the kiss, turning his head but pressing his cheek to Romeo's.

"Sorry," he gasped out, "I'll get better."

Romeo chuckled and slid his arms around Julian's waist. "I think," he said, "we're supposed to breathe."

"I know. I just forget."

"Me too." Romeo buried a hand in Julian's damp hair and kissed the cheek next to his. Kissed Julian's ear. Kissed a curl drying on Julian's neck. Julian shivered.

"Cold?" Romeo pressed Julian to him, but Julian pushed away. Romeo released him; Julian caught his hand.

"I'm all right. But we should...probably eat." Julian turned towards the table. Romeo tugged him back.

"Julian," he said, raising Julian's hand to his lips.

"Yes?" Julian breathed.

"I love your socks."

That laugh, too, went in Romeo's collection of Julian's best laughs. Romeo pulled out a chair and guided Julian into it before he sat and reached to pour the wine.

"Oh!" Julian said. "I didn't even think. Did you want to heat this up since we're not picnicking tonight?"

"Do you want me to?"

"No." Julian caught Romeo's hand as he started to stand. "No. It looks amazing as it is."

"Try the *gnocchi*," Romeo suggested. Julian took one and closed his eyes with a groan. Romeo grinned.

"How," Julian asked as he filled his plate with more *gnocchi* and other selections, "Romeo how are you not as big as a house eating like this all the time?"

"Lots of hiking. Walking in streams. Chasing a soccer ball all over the damned place."

Julian shot him a shy smile. "I...looked you up and watched a couple games. You're really good. Very..." he waved a hand, "tenacious. One commentator said you're the only reason your team wins."

"We're a team." Romeo had heard that too, and it annoyed him. "They do the set-up and the defense; I get the shot and get the glory."

"I...wasn't watching anyone else," Julian admitted, making Romeo want to kiss him again but he was just on the far side of close enough for that. Romeo took his hand and kissed it instead. Julian smiled and blushed and took his hand back.

"Eat your marvelous food, Romeo."

"Yes, Julian." Romeo sipped his wine and smiled back and turned his attention--some of it, anyway--to his plate. A sock-covered foot crept onto his under the table and he grinned at his food.

"It's the strangest thing," Julian said when the first rush of hunger was blunted. "You're so easy to talk to, but tonight I can't think of a single thing to say."

"Me either." Romeo chuckled and refilled the wine. "So," he said, "how was your day?"

"Oh, I like that," Julian said, leaning his cheek on his hand. "My day was *amazing*. How was yours?"

"Joyous," Romeo said. "Utterly glorious. The most unbelievable thing happened to me."

"Me too," Julian breathed.

Romeo stood up. Julian frowned, but when Romeo put his hands on the table to lean across it, Julian tilted his head and met him with another time-stopping kiss.

Leaning on the table made Romeo's shoulder hurt. He stepped around the corner and pulled Julian up and into his arms.

Some not-long-enough time later, Julian put his hands on Romeo's chest and pushed.

"I'm tired," he said with a breathless laugh. "Can we sit down?"

"I'm sorry!" Romeo blurted. "I didn't--"

"Then sign you up for the next Iron Man." Julian took Romeo's hand and led into the next room. It was as big as the dining room at the inn and twice as high, but here and there were huddled seating groups. Julian led to a couch/lounge/chair grouping that faced the tall windows with a view onto the deck and the hill



beyond. The storm still rumbled about the hill's crest. Flickering lightning and distant thunder punctuated the view.

"Your house is amazing, Julian."

"It's not mine." Julian turned towards the other end of the room. "But yes. It is. I use the loft for my studio. I can see most of the hill and down into the valley from up there."

The loft ran across the end of the room and above the foyer. Romeo saw a flash of lighting and realized that window was where the balcony was--Julian's studio. Since he hadn't been invited there yet, Romeo stored that fact away for later use.

"Geez, Romeo." Julian shoved and Romeo fell into the couch.

"Hey!"

Julian grinned and sat. He took Romeo's face in his hands and in a joyful heartbeat they were kissing again.

Far too soon he pulled away again. "Turning my head like that gives me a crick in my neck," he complained.

"Let's try--" Romeo turned towards Julian, but their knees clashed. Julian grabbed an ottoman and sat in front of him, but Romeo shook his head. "Now you're too far away."

"Well, damn it, something has to work," Julian growled.

"You could put your legs across my lap?"

"No." Julian jerked his head in denial. "Hell. Didn't you ever kiss anyone before?"

"Not anyone I wanted to kiss more than once."

"Oh..." Julian said softly. "We...need to figure this out."

"You're the smart one." Romeo sat forward to take Julian's hand from Julian's knee. "I'll just amuse myself while I wait."

"You're just as--oh!"

Romeo grinned and nibbled the next finger.

"Oh..." Julian said again.

"Haven't you ever kissed anyone?" Romeo asked, continuing his exploration.

"Not...not really? That...Romeo..."

"You're twenty-two," Romeo said. "Never dated?"

"No." Julian took his hand back. "I really should tell you--"

"Oh, I know." Romeo turned sideways in the couch, putting his bare feet up. Romeo patted the space next to him. The sofa was deep and Julian was slender; there was plenty of room. "Come here."

"Romeo--" Julian stood, but he didn't sit. Romeo grabbed behind Julian's knees and pulled, folding his legs. If Julian could push him, that was fair too.

"Whoa!" Julian landed kneeling on the couch. Romeo wrapped a hand in his shirt and tugged.

"Oh hell," Julian said, and kissed him.

Romeo had always thought kissing-with-tongue gross until it was Julian's tongue slipping into his mouth. Julian's hands held his face, pulling him closer; Romeo buried a hand in Julian's hair and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, clinging just as tightly. When the not-breathing head-spinning got emphatic, he broke away to heave in air. Julian's lips brushed his jaw, nip of teeth, oh...Romeo gasped on Julian's neck and Julian shivered against him and Romeo realized he'd done that and set out to do it again.

All the world shrank down to Julian, to touching him and kissing him and gasping for air. To shivers and soft sounds and an occasional sloppy slurp. Romeo nibbled Julian's ear and tasted his neck while those incredible hands tangled in his hair. Julian kissed his eyes, his nose, his lips in a gentle touch that deepened until they clung together desperately trying for just...a little...more...then had to break for air again. Julian let his head fall to Romeo's shoulder and he lay there being breathtaking, his cheeks flushed and hair mussed, his lips reddened and eyes dreamy. Romeo swallowed hard and reached a reverent hand to touch. Brushed back Julian's hair, traced his cheek, stroked his thumb across Julian's lips, trailed his fingers down Julian's neck.

Julian's shirt was soft from wear and in the aggressive snuggling several buttons had come undone. Romeo traced over bare, heated skin to let his hand rest on Julian's thudding heart.

"Julian," he said, "I love you."

With a lurch and a wriggle Julian was gone, on the other side of the coffee table with his head turned away, the shirt closed and his arms wrapped around.

"Romeo," he said softly, "you'd better go."

"I'm sorry! I--"

"Please," Julian said more softly. He didn't look angry. He looked...sad. Lost, like the day they met at his parents' grave. In the rainbow-striped toe-socks his toes were clenched. Romeo bit back further argument and went to gather his things.

He didn't say anything and Julian didn't either, even when Julian opened the door for him. And he still wouldn't look at Romeo. Romeo sighed in his wet clothes and slung his bag on his shoulder and went out the front door wishing they'd just stayed on the balcony--on the deck--forever.

"I'm sorry," he said again before the door closed, but he doubted Julian heard.

Romeo was soaked when he got home, and he didn't care. His father was angry he'd worried them. His

mother was angry he'd been foolish enough to get soaked. Romeo let them scold and did what he was told and went to bed washed and warm and fed and lay staring at the beams of the ceiling until the storm had rumbled on and a grey day dawned.

Then he got up and started cooking. He didn't know what else to do.

Julian didn't believe he was sincere. Or maybe he'd just moved too fast. He had to prove his love, or apologize enough. Either would be helped by steadfastness and a fantastic meal. He had to believe that.

Every time he thought of Julian's sad avoidance, Romeo had to hold himself back from the hill. He couldn't go too soon. Though he was dying to run up there, to kneel at Julian's feet if his love would allow it, Romeo held out until after the lunch rush. "A goal is like a lover," Coach Rossi would say. "Push too fast, and it all goes kablooeey."

He wouldn't push Julian. That included not showing up hours before he was expected. So he waited until nearly the time he'd been leaving, packing his bag slowly and with more than usual care, and only a little early he headed up the hill and wondered if he dared pray about what he'd find.

The creek was a little high, but not a problem. His boots and his stick and his urgency let him keep a good pace despite the mud.

If Julian was on the balcony--the deck--at the usual time, Romeo couldn't see him as he came up the gully. He breathed a little prayer to the Blessed Virgin and climbed the little trail he'd made and stood where he usually did. He never climbed the rail until Julian welcomed him.

"Hello, the house!" he called. It took a moment, but he heard a door open.

"Romeo?" In a moment Julian was there and for an instant he smiled, but then he shook his head. "You--"

"Julian?" a woman's voice said. "Whatever are you doing?" She appeared next to Julian, a pretty young woman Romeo felt he ought to know. "What on earth? Deliveries go to--"

"He's my friend," Julian said. "He brought dinner. But Romeo, this is--"

"Then he should come up!" The woman took the bag Romeo was still holding out. "It's lovely to meet you, Romeo. I'm Donata Vocelli."

"I think...he was just dropping it off," Julian said, but Romeo climbed over the railing and Julian didn't send him away.

"We've met, Miss Vocelli," Romeo said. "We threw apples at Moretti's cows once." And only once. Word had gotten home.

"Romeo Balducci!" Donata set the bag down to hug him, kissed him on both cheeks. "I'm not supposed to talk to you!"

"I won't tell if you won't," Romeo promised. "I never knew you had a brother."

"Julian was a sickly child and couldn't keep up with me." Julian growled at her; Donata grinned wider. "And he's not a Vocelli, so you're clear to hang out with him."

"Donata—" Julian began. She ignored him, sniffed the bag and declared herself starving and went in the house for plates. Julian followed her. Romeo took a deep breath and spread the tablecloth.

"What a lovely spread!" Donata said when she came back, Julian behind her. "Are you the reason Julian is finally looking a little healthier, then?"

"He's been feeding me," Julian said.

"Well, I'm glad someone is looking after you. I was not pleased when Momma told me you'd come alone." She set the table quickly, putting Julian at the end and herself and Romeo facing each other. "How did this tradition start?"

Romeo didn't want to explain, but Julian told her of finding a stranger on his deck and deciding to draw him instead of calling the police. He left out Romeo's shirtlessness, and the fact that they'd met before. Romeo watched and listened and wished he had some clue what Julian was thinking, but Julian wasn't looking at him again.

He kept doing that. Julian spent the meal with his eyes mostly on his plate. He didn't look at Romeo, and he didn't look at the hill. Sometimes he glanced at Donata when he answered a question. Mostly he pushed the food Romeo had worked to make perfect around on his plate, but when Donata patted his arm--she did that a lot and Romeo saw no pattern of affection or comfort to it--he usually took a bite.

Nothing Romeo had made earned Julian's eyes-closed appreciation, though Donata exclaimed over everything. Romeo ate and talked and played the host as he always had, but he couldn't help feel like every moment took Julian further from him. As the meal went on he responded less to Donata, his shoulders hunched, he kept his eyes more on his plate...he was so clearly miserable and Romeo would have cut off his arm to know why, and his other arm to fix it, but Julian didn't even notice him.

When Donata had wriggled delight over the last bite of *tiramisu*—Julian didn't touch his—and the light was fading, at last she rose from the table. "How does this part work?" Donata asked. "I hope you don't take all the dishes home to wash yourself."

"I take mine," Romeo said, standing to gather his things. "It's no trouble."

"Your family runs the inn," Donata said. "I suppose you're used to washing dishes."

"A bit, yes."

"Well, I'll put these in the dishwasher, at least," Donata said, taking Romeo's plate to stack on hers. Julian put his on top of hers and she frowned at the food on it, but she stood with the stack and went into the house.

"I'm sorry," Julian said before Romeo thought it safe to speak. "I tried to tell you--"

"She doesn't make you happy."

Julian's eyes jumped to Romeo, then away. For an instant that lost look painted his face, but then it was gone too. "Don't," he said softly.

Romeo reached out and touched his hand. Julian moved it away. Romeo finished clearing up and packed his bag and handed it to Julian as he had many times, to hand back when he was on the ground.

"Romeo," Julian said when he was climbing down, "you probably shouldn't come back."

Romeo reached up and Julian held out the bag. "I would obey," Romeo said, "but she doesn't make you happy." He took Julian's hand and kissed it, took the bag and dropped to the ground and left.

It wasn't true that Romeo was the only reason his team won, but he was the reason they won when they shouldn't. *Tenacious* was the word Julian had used. Newscasters and teammates had others. *Obstinate* for instance. *Stubborn*.

*Bullheaded*.

By the time he reached his home Romeo had a plan. He didn't know if it was a good one, and the possible consequences terrified him, but he had to do something and he had a plan.

It was almost derailed when he was greeted at the door by his big brother Gastone, home for the anniversary dinner Romeo had managed to forget. In the den crowded the rest of the family—Momma and Poppa, his younger brother Marcellus and "that girlfriend," his sister Agnese, her two young children and her husband. Gastone's wife, his twin sons, and his daughter. Gastone dragged Romeo in with an arm around his neck.

"Here's our wanderer!" he announced, shoving Romeo into the middle of the room. "Explain yourself! What do you think you're doing, traipsing off up the hill when you know we're coming?"

Nearly everyone he loved in the world, waiting for an explanation. Romeo swallowed. His mother dropped her knitting.

"Gastone, you hurt him! Romeo, is it your shoulder? Here, sit down. Marcellus, get the heating pad. Agnese--"

"I'm all right, Momma."

"You got a cold, didn't you?" she demanded, guiding him into her chair. "What did I tell you, roaming about in the rain? Agnese, get him tea--"

"I'm all right, Momma!"

"Lavinia," Poppa said. Agnese sat back down. Momma sniffed and picked up her knitting. Ariana, "that girlfriend," sighed loudly as she gave up her seat for her boyfriend's mother.

"How was your trip, Gastone?" Marcellus asked, and "Agnese, is little Paolo sleeping any better?" his mother asked, and the conversational chaos that was his family leaped up around Romeo. Soon Gastone was explaining something to Agnese while his sons tried to wrestle him to the floor. Marcellus was prodding hesitant music from the old upright piano, Gastone's daughter singing along. Momma chattered with Gastone's wife, Agnese's youngest in her arms. Poppa dandled a toddler on his knee and talked to Agnese's husband about the garden. Romeo tried to imagine Julian in the middle of all of it and he couldn't.

No, he could. He could imagine Julian alone in a corner, stared at and whispered about, isolated and unwelcome.

"Have a drink," Ariana said, offering a small glass. The smell announced *grappa*, twice as strong as wine. "You don't look all right."

"Thanks." Romeo took the drink. She smirked.

"Any time." Ariana moved on, taking the bottle with her. Romeo had never told his mother that Ariana didn't drink nearly as much when he visited Marcellus as when Marcellus brought her home.

"Romeo, Paolo wants you," Momma declared, giving him a sudden lap-ful of year-old baby. Paolo stuck his little hand in his little mouth and stared. Romeo made a face. Paolo grinned around his fingers. Momma smiled and kissed them both before she moved off to lean over Poppa's shoulder, smiling at Paolo's older brother on Poppa's knee.

Gastone's wife touched his arm; Gastone smiled and leaned down to hear her. On the sofa Agnese leaned her head on her husband's shoulder as she talked to Gastone's daughter. Across the room Ariana leaned on the piano, watching Marcellus play with a fond smile.

Little Paolo smacked Romeo in the face. Romeo turned him upside down.

Within an hour the kids were flagging. One by one their mothers carried them off, returning child-free. Romeo held onto little Paolo asleep and drooling on his neck as long as he could but finally Agnese made off with him. As soon as Romeo stood Gastone grabbed Romeo's good shoulder.

"You're so quiet tonight, *fratellino*. Are you sure you're not sick?"

Romeo swallowed. Cursed his timing and prayed for strength. And mercy. "I..." he cleared his throat. "I have to say something."

"So say it, little brother." Gastone was always loud. It often made him the center of attention. Romeo took a deep breath as everyone looked from Gastone to him.

He stepped away from Gastone, slipping his hand in his pocket to touch his St. Sebastian medal. He'd spoken before a hundred thousand people. He could speak to seven--eight. Agnese slipped back in, frowned at the silence, but sat by her husband on the sofa.

"I wasn't...I wasn't going to say anything," Romeo blurted. He rubbed his face, ran his hand up into his hair. "I...have to tell you. I'm sorry it will upset you," his eyes found his parents, Poppa looking confused and Momma starting to be frightened, clinging to his father, "but it's not something I can change."

"Ha! Told--" Marcellus silenced Ariana. Romeo closed his eyes. Opened them.

"I'm gay," he said. "And I'm in love."

Poppa stared at him, a storm gathering in his face. Momma buried her face in Poppa's side. Gastone stared. His wife stepped close. Agnese took her husband's hand. Ariana held out her hand palm up to Marcellus, who rolled his eyes and pulled out his wallet.

"You...are not," Poppa said. Romeo shook his head.

"I tried that, Poppa."

"But Rosaline!" Momma blurted. "And Bianca. Gia and Imelda! And--and, Romeo, you're *<i>Catholic!*

Romeo spread his hands. What could he say?

"It's not a choice, Momma." Marcellus stepped to Romeo's side. Ariana came too, and handed him another drink. "Even the pope will figure that out eventually."

"Marcellus Balducci, you watch how you speak of the Holy Father!"

"I'll respect him when he respects my brother!" Marcellus shot back, taking Romeo's arm.

"This..." Momma said, turning on Poppa. "This is *your* family. Your brother--"

Poppa started. "He is not--"

"Easy, Mr. Balducci." None of his sons would have dared, but Ariana walked right up to Poppa, holding out a full glass. "Have a drink."

"Young lady--"

"Come on," Marcellus muttered, propelling Romeo out the door. In the hall he drew a deep breath. "Well, so much for Poppa's idea that gays are sissies. That was the bravest thing I've ever seen."

"I should--"

"What, give them a chance to toss you out before they think? No. Let Ariana do some damage control."

"She knew," Romeo said.

"Yeah, she guessed over Christmas. I thought she was dreaming, but then I have some stereotypes stuck in my head too. Uncle Marino is pretty feminine. Not saying he isn't brave as hell too; coming out twenty years ago had to be even worse."

"I...need to sit down."

"I bet." Marcellus guided Romeo into the kitchen, sat him on a stool and found a half-finished bottle of wine. "So," he said as he poured, "tell me about him."

Julian. Romeo could talk about Julian now. Except-- "He's...I don't know if he's...we haven't talked..."

"So don't tell me his name. He must be someone special, to have you all confused."

"Oh my God," Romeo rubbed his face with both hands, took a deep breath, took up his wine. "He's brilliant, Marcellus. Beautiful. And he draws. His hands..." Romeo shook his head. "I can't even..."

Marcellus grinned. "Head over heels, huh?"

"More like flat on my face."

"So does his family know?"

"I don't think so." Romeo shook his head. "There's this girl..."

"Uh oh."

"No. He doesn't love her."

"Well." Marcellus sipped his drink. "When you claim your man, big brother, if Poppa can't see past the past--well, me and Marino are two Balduccis-in-exile already. Might as well make it three."

"You're not in exile."

"I am if I marry Ariana. Can you imagine her and Momma living in the same village? We're in negotiations--right now we're stuck on how many times a year I'll try to drag her home for visits."

"I'll play wingman for her any time," Romeo said. Marcellus laughed.

"Yeah, we thought you were an ally." He slapped Romeo's good shoulder. "You all right? I should go remind them that if they toss you out, the Balducci Inn comes to an end. Ariana won't think of that."

"Thank you, Marcellus."

"Thank you, Romeo, for never letting Gastone dunk me in the toilet or lock me in the wine cellar." He took the bottle and his glass and left. Romeo sat alone in the kitchen that had been the center of his world since he could remember and finally understood why Poppa didn't want a work-saving shiny stainless steel commercial dishwashing unit. Why Momma resisted updating the oven to something younger than she was. He tried to imagine cooking in Marino's apartment and he couldn't.

He tried to imagine cooking in this kitchen for all the world except Julian, and that was worse. Romeo set his glass down and stood.

*When you claim your man*, Marcellus had said, and that was exactly what he was going to do.

He started off by cleaning his room, planning what and how he would pack if it came to that. He found all his financial statements and put them in a folder. He found his best suit in the back of his closet and washed and pressed it. He went out to the old barn and checked the fluids on his car, took it out for a spin as he hadn't lately and brought it home and washed it as best he could in the dark.

When he went back into the inn he could hear Marcellus talking fast and his mother crying, but he went on past the den and upstairs to shower.

In the morning Romeo started breakfast before anyone else was up. His mother and father joined in when they came, but they had a hard time looking at him and the usual cheerful conversation was replaced by terse requests and information.

Once Momma cornered Romeo. "I had a choice once," she said quickly, her eyes darting to Poppa across the room shredding cheese. "I chose family. I never regretted it."



Poppa wasn't her first choice? Romeo would have asked more, but she hurried off.

It didn't matter.

When the dishes were done, Romeo went upstairs and showered. He put on his best suit and combed his hair and wished he had time to get it cut. He took his financial statements and his keys and trotted down the stairs.

Only Ariana saw him go. She nodded approval of the suit, kissed his cheek and wished him luck.

In Julian's driveway--in Donata's driveway—Romeo shut off the car and took a deep breath before he got out. He left the statements in the car. He really couldn't imagine that Julian's reason for clinging to Donata was her money, but he wanted his argument ready.

When he came up the steps Julian was coming out the door, a bright red messenger bag on his shoulder.

"Oh," Julian said. "I...thought you were the cab. You look really nice." His gaze slid by and fell on the car; his eyes widened. It was a Ferrari, yeah, but not nearly as nice as the one Romeo had advertised to earn it. "Is that yours?"

"Yes. Julian, give me a chance--"

"Romeo." Julian grabbed his hand. "I'm sorry. I've made a mess of everything and I'm a jerk besides, but will you help me?"

"Anything," Romeo said. Julian winced.

"You'll get over that. But please take me to the hospital anyway? Donata sent a cab, but it's still not here and my grandmother--"

Romeo took his arm and put him in the car. "Buckle up," he ordered as he slid into his seat.

"Thank you," Julian said, dropping his bag on the floor. Romeo reached over and snapped the seat belt around him.

"You'll need it," he said as he backed out, tires squealing on the turn.

Romeo had been told he drove more aggressively than he played, but Julian didn't notice. Every time Romeo slowed for a traffic hazard, Julian begged him to go faster. He almost beat his head on the dash when they got stopped by a farm tractor trying to angle a trailer of hay into a driveway, both vehicles sideways across the the road. Romeo leaned out the window and yelled they were headed to the hospital and the farmer backed up as far as he could. The car slipped by with maybe three centimeters between Julian's door and the tractor, but Julian only urged Romeo on.

"What happened to your grandmother?" Romeo asked, flooring the accelerator on the far side of the obstacle.

"She's dying," Julian said.

"I'm so sorry."

"I don't know..." Julian buried his face in his hands. "I don't know what to do," he said softly.

"I'll get you there."

"She's dying," he said again, leaning his head on the window with that lost look Romeo so hated to see. He wrapped his arms around himself. "I don't know what to do."

Romeo reached over to take his hand.

"I love you," Julian said. "I'm sorry."

Romeo kept his eyes on the road. "You won't be," he promised.

"You're crazy and I love you but I won't go against my grandmother on her deathbed. I'm sorry."

Romeo bit his lip and drove. Despite what he'd said, Julian clung to his hand. Even when Romeo needed it for twisting roads, he didn't take it back. He shifted with Julian's hand in his. They drove into a storm and rode in silence through grey and rain.

In the city it wasn't raining. Romeo parked and was fast enough to help Julian out of the car; Julian was so upset he was unsteady. Romeo grabbed his bag and held his arm and ushered him inside.

In a pretty little room but for the medical equipment, Donata leaned over a big bed with a small old woman in it. Donata shot Julian a forced smile, stared at Romeo an instant, and stepped back. Romeo wondered if he should have come in but didn't want to leave, so he stood against the wall by the door. Julian bent over the bed to take his grandmother's hand.

She said something soft and Julian answered, smoothing his grandmother's hair. She waved her free hand and Donata came back. The old woman took Donata's hand and put it in Julian's.

All the world went dim and Romeo slipped out.

Beside the door was a bench. Romeo sank down on it.

He should go.

A nurse walked past.

Donata was there, with her cabs and her money. She would look after Julian. He should go.

A cart went by with covered trays. A beeping noise down the hall brought footsteps hurrying.

Someone guided a dustmop around Romeo's feet and moved on.

A cart rolled by piled with trays and meal remnants.

He should go.

"Romeo! Are you all right?"

His mother. Oh hell, and his father and Gastone, how? Romeo stood to kiss Momma and she let him. His father glared when Romeo stepped towards him. Gastone stood to the side as if he wasn't part of the group.

"I'm fine, Momma," Romeo answered. "What are you doing here?"

"Did you think we wouldn't hear?" his father snapped. "Romeo Balducci, racing for the hospital like the hounds of hell chased him! Your mother nearly fainted! Not a call, not a word!"

Romeo groaned. All the neighbors did know him, and his family. "I'm sorry to scare you, Papa. My friend needed to get here. His grandmother--"

"Your friend?" Momma asked. She stepped back against his father. "Romeo, in *public?*"

Blessed Virgin, please not here! Romeo stepped towards the lobby. "It's a hospital, Momma. Let's talk outside."

"Now you have shame?" she hissed. "You come here racing so everyone can see, but when it's your parents you want to talk outside?"

"It's not about shame!" Romeo lowered his voice. "I'm not ashamed and I *won't* be ashamed, unless it's of my close-minded hidebound relations!"

She slapped him. He deserved it; he let her. But he wished with all his soul Julian hadn't come out of the room at that very moment.

"Romeo?" he asked. Romeo's mother glared, so hard Julian took a step back. Romeo stepped in front of Julian, swallowed as the glare he'd feared from childhood centered on him.

"Momma, *please,*" he said. "Can we talk outside?"

"Romeo, come home." She stepped close, kissed his cheek where she'd slapped him. "I'm so sorry. We'll talk. Come home."

"I can't right now, Momma. His grandmother--"

"You'll put him above your family? Some gigolo that you met--"

"I do hate to interrupt," Donata said at Romeo's elbow, "but could you take your stupidity outside? She doesn't need to listen to you."

"My--" Momma drew herself to the top of her four-and-a-half feet, but then she tilted her head. "Who is your mother?"

"Momma," Romeo cut in, "Donata Vocelli." Momma recoiled. Romeo took her arm. "Donata, I'm sorry. We'll go outside. Tell Julian--"

"Where is Julian?" asked a new voice. A tall distinguished man, a tall, fashionable woman--Romeo blinked and realized they must be Donata's parents.

"Arenza Lovato," Romeo's mother said and his heart sank even further. He'd heard that name. Once his mother's best friend--

"It's Vocelli now, Lavinia. For the last thirty years." The woman turned to Donata. "Darling, is she awake?"

"Sleeping, Mother." Donata kissed her parents. "And I want to know too--" she turned to Romeo, "--where is Julian?"

Nowhere in sight. Well, Romeo didn't blame him--he'd have fled that scene too if he could. "Let him be," Romeo said quickly, but Donata shook her head.

"That's his bag. I gave it to him two years ago."

Romeo still had the bag on his shoulder. "I'm sorry--"

"Damn it, are you stupid too?"

"Don't you--" Romeo's mother began, but Donata cut her off.

"We have to find Julian," she said. "Now. Mother, find the lounge. Father, the chapel. Romeo--"

"I'm sure he's just wandered off," Mrs. Vocelli said. "Let me see Nonna Maria, and then--"

"Damn it!" Donata swore. She waved a hand at the bag. "Mother, he's left his candy. He doesn't eat when he's upset and he's wandering alone in a strange place and he was already shaky--"

Romeo grabbed Donata's arm. "He's diabetic?"

"Thank God someone has a brain!" She dug in the bag and came out with hard candy that she pocketed. "Get candy in him if you find him. I'll find the lounge; you look for the chapel."

Romeo left while the adults were still protesting searching for a grown man. He started at the admissions desk, but when he asked if a tall young man, pale with curly hair, had asked for directions, the nurse shook her head.

"No, just shuffled out the door."

Romeo ran outside.

The hospital was on a small side street that curved down to trees in one direction, and met a major street the other. Julian was nowhere in sight, and he could be anywhere...Romeo went for his car.

A ringing phone startled him until he realized he still had Julian's bag. He dug inside and answered the cell phone he found.

"Julian?"

"Donata, you idiot. He wouldn't call his own phone. He's not in the lounge and I can't find anyone who's seen him."

"He went outside. I'm going for my car."

"I'm calling the police." She hung up.

Coming out of the garage Romeo turned left. There were trees that way, maybe the river since the street sloped down. He thought that would appeal to Julian. He tried not to think about a confused and clumsy sick man stumbling by a river because that made it hard to drive.

There was a river, and a riverwalk. Romeo prayed and chose a direction and prayed more. Went farther than he thought Julian could have gone in maybe ten minutes, and turned to circle back and go the other way. As he neared the larger street and signaled a right, he glanced in his rear-view to check the bike lane and he saw a woman on the sidewalk step sideways, twitching her skirt away from a reaching hand.

A diabetic in trouble could easily be mistaken for a drunk. Romeo jumped on his brakes and the guy behind him hit his horn. Romeo shifted into reverse and cranked the wheel. His back end bounced onto the sidewalk, the nose of the car out of traffic. Romeo left the car and ran.

It was Julian. He sat slumped against a planter, curled up where Romeo never would have spotted him. He was pale and confused and shaking and Romeo thanked God for the sight even as he sat on his heels.

"Julian, hey." He swallowed hard as Julian looked at him and for a moment nothing registered. Then Julian blinked.

"Romeo?"

"Yeah. Here." He held out a candy. Cursed and unwrapped it and offered it again. "Eat this."

"Romeo."

"Yes. I'm here." He took Julian's hand and put the candy in it. Finally Julian put it in his mouth. Romeo put another in his hand, then pulled out the phone.

"I found him," he told Donata when she answered. "Have a doctor ready." He took Julian's hand and pulled. "Come on, Julian. Let's get you to the hospital."

Donata Vocelli had urges like anyone, but she'd never been a violent woman. That was going to change if her father muttered "Conti" one more time, or if Romeo's mother didn't put the damned rosary away since she was praying about sin and not safety, or if any of them ever said "sodomites" again. Or if Donata happened to get her hands around Julian's neck...

"I'm sure he's all right," her mother said again and Donata added that to her list. "He's had it for years. He knows how--"

"He hates it and he never takes care of himself," Donata interrupted, shielding her eyes to scan the street again. She'd got them all outside to watch for Romeo, but she was the only one looking and she didn't know what he drove. "He left art school because he had to think about it all the time or land in emergency. As he did, three times."

Romeo's father said something like "idiot."

"You want to talk idiots?" she demanded. "How about the man who drives off a devoted and talented son for something that has *nothing* to do with him?" It was all out, of course. Donata had suspected after the way Romeo stared at Julian staring at his plate through the entire meal that night, but in the arguing after she called the police it had all come out except for something very old between her mother and Romeo's mother that nearly had her cool collected mother ready to claw the other woman's eyes out.

She hoped Nonna Maria lasted long enough that she could wheedle that story out of her.

"I don't understand," her mother said again. "If he's gay--"

"He's not gay!" Romeo's father snapped.

"She's talking about Julian, not Romeo, and Romeo is too; he told you himself!" Donata snapped. She wondered how many of them she could bite before they restrained her.

"But he loves you!" her mother almost wailed.

"We've been brother and sister since we were little. He's never been in love with me."

"Nonna Maria--"

"Nonna wanted to know he'd be taken care of," Donata said. "She didn't want him to be left alone, and we've been family since you hired her, and she's an old woman with silly romantic notions. *I* knew he didn't love me like that, and *I* never planned on marrying him *or* leaving him alone, and *I* plan to marry a man who wants me desperately, not someone three years younger and gay besides!"

"But--"

She'd guessed they'd come from the river; Donata had been sure Julian would go that way no matter how confused he was. She saw Romeo when he pulled his little red sports car—of course—into the intersection and stopped, waiting for the light to change to make a left. She saw him start his turn.

She saw the tanker truck that didn't stop.

Romeo didn't. Distracted by Julian or the hospital so close or who knew what, for one second too long he didn't see the truck. Donata knew when he did because he turned into it, throwing the little car around to take the impact on the hood instead of Julian's door. The truck ran right up the hood and over the car.

The sound of the crash stopped her scream. Donata snatched the doctor who'd been standing off to the side and dragged until he ran on his own.

Someone tried to hold her back, but she used her self-defense knee and got past him. The doctor was

checking the truck, useless sod...she threw herself to her knees by the Matchbox-sized car.

"Romeo? Julian!"

"Juliaaaannnn!"

Well, Romeo was alive. "Romeo! Is he conscious?"

"Juliaaaannnn!"

"Romeo Balducci, don't make me crawl in there and slap you!" Donata snapped. "Can you reach him?"

"Juliaaaannnn!"

The doctor appeared and tugged on the door handle. Naturally since the car was squashed, it didn't open.

"Dear God, I'm surrounded by idiots," Donata grumbled, dialing emergency again.

Romeo came to himself with his mother talking to him from far away, begging him to calm down and not to move. Sirens wailed over her voice and people shouted. Someone was crying. In a rush he knew where he was and why and reaction set him shaking. A woman spoke to him.

"Romeo, I'm Zeta. I'm rescue personnel. We moved your mother back for her safety. How are you doing?"

"I'm--oh God, Julian--"

"Don't move him, Romeo. Tell me how you're doing."

Julian. Blessed Virgin--Julian lay half under him. Romeo forced down the urge to shake him, reached gently instead though it made his shoulder scream. Found Julian's neck and a pulse and that let the panic back off a little. He stopped his next instinct, which was to scramble free of everything pressing on him and drag Julian from the wreckage.

"Julian's alive."

"Good. That's good. How are you?"

"I'm...pinned. Can't move." He'd turned as he spun the car, shoving Julian down, and now his chest lay across Julian's back. He couldn't straighten; the roof of the car was there. Probably the bottom of the truck as well.

"I don't want you moving. You're going to relax and let us take you out, all right?"

"Sure. Relax. No problem." He couldn't see. Well, the engine light was on; he wasn't blind. He just couldn't see--the car was smashed down to the doors. No, there was light behind him, from the driver's window, but it didn't show much.

"Is Julian conscious, Romeo?"

"I don't think so." The airbag had deployed and deflated out of the way, but something held his leg too, and he couldn't wriggle down out of the seat or sideways so he could get off Julian and look at him. Romeo stroked Julian's face awkwardly. "He only got two pieces of candy. Is that enough?" Blessed Virgin, was he even now slipping farther--

"It will hold him, Romeo. You won't believe how fast we'll get you out when we get started."

"Start now! He's--"

"What...?" Julian said. "Romeo?"

"He's awake! I'm here." Romeo patted Julian's shoulder or maybe his upper arm. "We're going to be okay. The firemen are here; they'll have us out soon."

"Firefighters," Zeta corrected. "You guys are doing great."

"How...are we in your car?" Julian asked.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I don't know how I didn't see the truck!" But he did. He'd had his eyes on the hospital, needing to already be there and forgetting for one crucial instant that people would always be stupid when you weren't looking.

"My head...is in your lap." Julian shifted, but he too had nowhere to go. "Can you...get off me?"

"Don't move, guys. Let us do that."

"I'm sorry!" Romeo said. "I can't move. They'll get you out soon. Are you all right?" Candy. He'd only given Julian two pieces. Was that enough? Just because he was coherent now--Romeo tried to remember where he'd put the bag when he put Julian in the car. "Julian, how much candy should you have?"

"...shit. I flaked out on you, didn't I?"

"It's not your fault. I--"

"I walked away without my candy and I didn't notice I was losing it and you had to come find me, right?" Julian shifted again; Romeo couldn't tell what he was doing or trying to do. "And now we're trapped in a car and--oh."

"What?"

"Romeo...oh, that's a lot of blood."

"Who's bleeding, Julian?" Zeta asked.

"Where?" Romeo groped, touched Julian's face and found no wound, his hair and found no blood. "Where are you hurt?"

"Your leg. Dear God, can't you feel it? There's a thing sticking through your leg!"



"Be right back, guys."

"I...don't feel it. It's just stuck."

"Oh my God." Julian thrashed, or tried. "Can't get my shirt off. Give me something to wrap it."

"Zeta said don't move!"

"Now, Romeo! Find something! Your shirt. My shirt. Do it!"

Romeo tried, but one wriggle and the pain hit and he clung to Julian's shoulder gasping. Blessed Virgin--

"Your tie! Give me your tie."

"Julian--"

"Don't you flake on me, Romeo Balducci! That is a hell of a lot of blood and you are *<i>not</i>* leaving me now get your damned tie off and give it to me!"

His tie. Romeo tugged it off and put it in the grasping hand he could barely see in the dimness. Julian moved and a wave of pain crashed through Romeo. He bit his lip, please don't let him throw up on Julian when--

"That--that's helping." Julian patted Romeo's hand on his shoulder. His hand was sticky with Romeo's blood. "Romeo, I'm so sorry. I'm such a blasted idiot."

"I'm the one who turned in front of a damned truck."

"Why is it taking so long? I can't even hear anything anymore."

"I don't know." Romeo had been trying not to put his weight on Julian, but he didn't have a lot of choice. And Julian was warm. He wondered if the heater would still work.

"Romeo," Julian squeezed his hand. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," Romeo lied because his head was spinning. "I think...I'm sure they'll get us out soon."

"Romeo, my parents died in a car accident."

"I'm sorry."

"Nonna is all the family I have. When we found out she's dying...I felt like I was dying too."

"Julian..." Romeo wanted to hold him. The best he could do was to rub his back.

"You changed that. Donata was sure she'd find me dead when she came--she didn't know until the day before that Aunt Arenza and Uncle Guiseppe didn't send anyone to look after me, and she came straight out but she was sure she'd find me dead. But you fed me."

"I just entertained you. Without me--"

"Romeo, half the time I can't be arsed to save my own life. I get to working, or moping, and I forget to eat and then wonder why I'm dizzy and falling down stairs. I have candy on me *<i>all the time</i>* and I still get to that point."

"If you're trying to convince me to never let you out of my sight again, you're doing a fine job."

"Yes." Julian squeezed his hand again. "That's just what I'm doing. Romeo, I'm an idiot and I don't know why the hell you'd care, but if you still want me..."

"God yes!" Romeo tried to move and couldn't and slapped the roof of the car in frustration.

"Don't move!" Julian snapped.

"Damn it! I so want to kiss you right now!"

"You'll get your chance." Julian's hand moved, holding Romeo's wrist. "But you listen to me--my parents died. Nonna is dying. If you even think about leaving me, I will never forgive you."

"Julian, I'd never--"

"I think you can do anything you decide you want to," Julian interrupted. "You are so amazing. So I'm making sure you're determined, Romeo. I won't live without you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Romeo said, laying his spinning head on Julian's back and closing his eyes. That was better. "You'll never be rid of me now."

"Good. I'd probably fall down a well."

"...I won't let you..."

"Romeo?" Zeta asked. "Julian?"

"Get us out!" Julian shouted. "He's dying!"

Dying?

"We're working on it. That's a gas truck sitting on you, so we have to be careful."

"You have to hurry! I put a tourniquet on but he's still losing blood. His pulse is weak and he's losing consciousness get *<i>in</i>* here, damn it!"

"We're not losing either of you, Julian. Without moving more than an arm, can you get a hand out the window?"

"Here!" Julian moved and it set off shooting pains in Romeo's side and leg. He bit his lip on a curse.

"I...love you, Julian," Romeo said instead.

"Remember that," Julian ordered.

"Now listen," Zeta said. "I want you to wrap his leg, Julian. Use the whole roll, tight but not as tight as the tourniquet. Wrap it up good and then tell me."

"All right." Julian touched Romeo's leg. Romeo tried not to clutch at him, but the pain shot up in stabbing bursts and made him gasp and shudder.

"Talk to me, Romeo," Julian said. "I know it hurts. Talk to me."

"I don't...fuck!...don't know, can't think--"

"I'm sorry. I hate to hurt you but I'm not losing you. We haven't even had sex yet!"

Romeo laughed, a short sharp bark of pain and humor. "I don't want to die a virgin..."

"Right then," Zeta said. "Separate rooms for you two when we get you out. Don't want anyone pulling stitches."

"Oh my God..." Romeo groaned.

"So you know, anything that you guys say now goes with me to my grave. It's kind of a sacred trust. Like being a priest, without the chastity."

"You're not funny..."

"I'm told I'm good at this. Julian, that's your grandmother bossing my boss around?"

"Nonna?" Romeo jerked as Julian's hand fumbled. "I'm sorry! Zeta, tell them--"

"There's no telling them anything, Julian; no one can get a word in. She already threatened to beat me with her IV stand and told my boss she's 'seventy-three and if you touch me I'll shatter now if you want me back in bed get my grandson out of there!'"

"Julian...love your grandmother..."

"So do I," Zeta and Julian said together. Zeta went on. "She's pretty damn smart, too. She came up with a plan that we think will work; we just have to get a few things here. We'll have you guys out soon."

"...starting to like it..." Romeo said, rubbing his cheek on Julian's back.

"Romeo Balducci, don't you go to sleep!" Julian jerked as he talked and the wave of pain sent Romeo tumbling into blackness.

Romeo couldn't move. And Julian wouldn't answer him. The car pressed on him smaller and smaller and he couldn't move and Julian didn't answer.

"Juliaaaannnn!"

"Romeo! It's all right!"

"Juliaaaannnn!"

"Stop thrashing, you'll hurt--"

"It's the anesthetic. Get a doctor."

Momma. Poppa. Not Julian. Julian didn't answer.

"Juliaaaannnn!"

"Hell with that." Marcellus. "Ariana, get Julian."

Hands grabbed him. Momma talked, pleading and comforting, but Julian--

"Romeo!"

"Julian!" He couldn't see, but--

"One wrong word from any of you and I break your arm," Donata said. Romeo's eyes focused on Julian. Wheelchair, white room--Julian. Not trapped in the dark.

"Julian."

He smiled. "I'm here, crazy man."

"Julian..." He could move one arm. Romeo reached for Julian. Momma and Poppa stepped back; Donata pushed Julian's chair forward and he took Romeo's hand.

"*Bello*..." Romeo said, and closed his eyes.

"Romeo?"

"He's all right now," Marcellus said. "It's better if he sleeps, what with the blood loss and the drugs and all."

"I'll be right here, Romeo."

Over a dream of flying, voices intruded. Romeo knew them, but they were far away and he was flying.

"I can't...it's not that easy, Lavinia." Poppa.

"Easy? Our son nearly *died*, Silvano. Because we were stupid and hateful. It's time for it to end."

"I...you're right. I know you're right. It's just...very hard."

"In the morning," Momma said, "call Marino. He's dying to be here. Let him come."

Uncle Marino drifted through Romeo's thoughts. He'd like Julian--

"Julian!" Romeo jolted awake.

"Like a broken record." Momma smiled at him. Poppa sat in a chair with his face in his hands.

"Julian?"

"It's the middle of the night, Romeo," Momma said. "Julian is sleeping. You don't want me to wake him, do you?"

"No..."

"Go back to sleep, *bambino*." She smoothed his hair back and sang softly. Romeo closed his eyes and drifted away on the lullaby.

"No, it's a good sign," Marcellus was saying. "When Gastone puts him in a headlock, we'll know he's accepted things."

"If Gastone wants more kids ever," Donata growled, "he better wait till Julian's healed to put him in a headlock."

"Julian!" Romeo jerked fully awake. It hurt. He groaned.

"For God's sake," Donata growled. "Julian's fine, Romeo. Nonna made him take her to eat. If Gastone tries anything, she'll rip his arm off and beat him with it."

"Big brother," Marcellus said with a grin, "you have got it *bad*."

"Do you want anything?" Donata stood and grabbed the cup with the straw from the bed-table. "Thirsty?"

"Julian..."

"Yeah, I knew that," she grumbled. "Have a drink. He'll be back in a few minutes. Dragging Nonna if she doesn't walk fast enough, probably."

Where Romeo couldn't see, the door opened. Donata smiled. "Like I said."

"He's awake? Romeo?" Julian. In a moment he came around the bed, walking slowly. Romeo reached; Julian caught his hand. "Hey," Julian said, and all the world but him went away.

"Hey," Romeo answered.

"All right, out of the way." Julian was shoved aside and the world came back in the form of a tiny old woman who stared at Romeo. The formidable Nonna. Romeo nodded respect, the best he could do.

"Nonna!" Julian yelped. "You shouldn't be out of your chair!"

"Bah." She waved the hand not attached to an IV. "Yesterday was invigorating! Might just live to a hundred after all."

"You <i>fraud,</i>" Donata said. "You were faking it!"

"I thought he was just scared to ask you," Julian's grandmother said. "The tumor was real."

Julian choked. His Nonna didn't notice; her eyes were on Romeo.

"If I could stand," he told her, "I'd show proper respect, ma'am."

"If you could stand," she said, "I'd make sure of that!" She cackled and prodded Julian farther aside. Donata moved the chair after her, since her IV hung from it. She paid it no mind as she leaned over and kissed Romeo's cheek. "Call me Nonna," she ordered. "Donata, help me."

"Yes, Nonna." Donata set her coffee down and left with Nonna. Julian stared after her. Romeo pressed Julian's hand to his cheek and drifted back to sleep.

Someone was crying. Romeo tried to move but he drifted instead.

"I meant to protect you," a woman said. "I thought if he flirted back, that would prove...well. It got out of hand. I'm sorry."

"Arenza," Momma said slowly, "I love the life I have. I love Silvano. And I never would have looked good in Versace."

The other woman laughed softly. "Versace makes anyone look good, Lavinia. That's why we loved him. Will you forgive me?"

"Because of you my family didn't disown me and I've spent thirty years married to a man who loves me more than Guiseppe ever did. I think I can forgive that."

"I'm grateful. I've missed you so. And Julian's like a son to me."

Julian. Romeo jerked awake. "Julian?"

"I'll get him," Arenza Vocelli said, standing with a smile. Her eyes were wet. Momma sniffled and smiled at him too. Julian came and Romeo pressed Julian's hand to his face and drifted back to sleep.

Romeo drifted, contented at first, but awareness grew and with it pain. He couldn't tell if it was his arm or his leg or even his body at all, he just knew it hurt. He groaned and something touched him, a hand on his forehead.

"Julian," he croaked.

"No, I made him wait outside." The voice was female, perky, and amused. "It took two orderlies and a pry-bar, but we got it done." The hand lifted from his face; he heard her moving to his right. It occurred to him to open his eyes and he tried. Like his throat, they rasped.

His head was turned to the left; all he saw at first were bandages. Shoulder. Damn.

"Give me a moment," the woman said from the other side, "and I'll get you a drink."

Hospital. The car. The truck. "Julian."

"Is fine." Romeo turned his head. She was tall. She wore a lab coat. "Or as fine as he can be," she went on, "seeing how some fool drove a truck over him. He *will* be fine. And so will you." She held out a plastic cup with a straw through the lid. There was a chair behind her, and blank wall. "Now did you want a drink? I could also wash your face if you like before I let him back in here."

"...make him eat..."

"His sister and grandmother are taking care of that, believe me. I don't think he'd dare to ever forget again." She held the straw to his lips. "Little bit at a time, now. How do you feel?"

The pain was easing, flowing away as it had flowed in. "Can't...feel anything."

"You're on some pretty good drugs."

"Julian..."

"Anyone ever tell you you're like a skipping CD?" She grinned. "Five minutes and I'll let him in here. I'm Dr. de Santo. Before the drugs hit you again we need to talk."

"...uh oh."

"Well, it's in how you look at it," the doctor said. "Yes, you're beat up pretty badly and some of your injuries won't heal as well or as quickly as you might hope. On the other hand, you're alive and Julian is alive."

"Noted," Romeo said. "Go ahead."

"You have glass cuts to your back. Those should heal just fine." She dropped her eyes to a clipboard. "The accident dislocated your shoulder again. Not as bad as it seems you did last time, and it will heal, but the repeat trauma makes it less likely you'll get full use of it back. Part of the engine penetrated your lower leg. It was, of course, filthy, and all your writhing around in the car didn't help. Surgery can only repair so much." She raised her head to meet his eyes. "I can't foresee any doctor clearing you to play professionally again. I'm sorry."

Romeo took a deep breath and cursed his own stupidity and the trucker's.

"For what it's worth," Dr. de Santo said, "you succeeded in shielding Julian. He's bruised, but that's it."

"That...is worth a lot."

"So then." She squeezed his good shoulder. "Do you still want Julian, or someone else, or some time alone?"

"Julian." Romeo let his head fall back and closed his eyes. "Julian. Please."

"All right." She walked away, around the foot of the bed and off to his left where Romeo couldn't seem to turn his head that far. A pillow blocked him, or something else firm but padded. From the corner of his eye he could see his arm, wrapped to his knuckles and tied to his side...and his leg. His leg lay on top of the covers, thickly bandaged from above his knee down to some very bruised toes.

"It's about time you woke up for real." Julian. Julian was smiling at him over the pillow and something inside Romeo unclenched and relaxed.

"Go sit down," another voice said, and Donata tossed Romeo a smile then helped Julian walk. He moved like an old man as he shuffled around the foot of the bed.

"...you're hurt?"

"Just sore."

"Romeo, do you want something not water?" Donata asked as she helped Julian sit in the chair. "I'm going down to the cafeteria."

"No. Thank you." Romeo couldn't take his eyes off Julian. Not that he wanted to, especially with Julian staring back. Donata snorted softly and walked away. When he heard the door close Romeo reached out and Julian caught his hand.

"Hey," Julian said softly.

"Hey," Romeo said back. "You look fantastic."

"I look like hell, Romeo, and so do you." He squeezed Romeo's hand. "Listen. The doctor said you might not remember things. In the car--"

"I remember everything." He'd changed his mind. Blessed Virgin--

"I meant what I said in the car. I told my grandmother." He chuckled. "Well, Donata told my grandmother. I just confirmed it."

"How did she know?" It wasn't a dream. Nonna had come to him, and she wasn't angry at them...

"Please," Julian said. "Every time someone drags me out of the room you wake up yelling for me and I nearly run her down to get back to you."

"Oh." A smile spread across Romeo's face despite how it hurt. "So..." he ran out of words, cleared his throat. It didn't help. All the passion and poetry in his heart whirled and he couldn't use any of it. "Mine?" was all he could manage. Julian smiled and kissed his hand.



"Mine," he said.

"I want to kiss you..."

Julian let go of Romeo's hand to push himself out of the chair. He took one step and clung to the edge of the bed and leaned to kiss Romeo and nearly landed on him. "Damn it..."

"Here." Romeo patted the bed. "There's room."

"God, Romeo, I'm almost afraid to touch you as it is!"

"Don't be afraid. I'm not."

"Crazy man," Julian muttered, but he sat carefully and turned and lay in the narrow space beside Romeo. "Do *<i>not</i>* move that shoulder," Julian ordered, and took Romeo's face in his hands and kissed him.

It started tender. It escalated. Romeo devoted all his being to kissing the man he loved and Julian gave it all right back and when they broke apart both were gasping for more than air.

"We should probably..."

"...maybe..."

"Oh, don't stop on my account!" Donata walked back around the bed, a lidded cup that smelled of coffee in hand. "I mean, unless you mind that if you keep it up I'll be selling some really hot porn on the internet."

Romeo groaned. Donata grinned.

"Hurt/comfort," she said. "It's a thing."

"Don't you have somewhere else to be?" Julian demanded. Donata shrugged and sat in the chair.

"It's my turn to watch you. Nonna and I aren't letting you out of our sight until you learn to take care of yourself. Call it a punishment." She winked. "That's really big on the internet too."

"Donata--" Julian growled, but Romeo couldn't care if she was there. Julian lay against him, his arm across Romeo's waist, his head on Romeo's shoulder, and this time Romeo was sure he heard an angel-choir. Unless it was the very good drugs. He wriggled just a little to rest his cheek on Julian's head. A far-off ripple of almost-pain told him yes, he did indeed have an arm inside the bandages and it wasn't very happy with him. The side pressed against Julian, though, was very happy.

"What in--?" Poppa said and Julian jerked away. Romeo held onto him and he didn't go farther. Momma and Poppa came around the foot of the bed.

"Romeo." Momma stepped to the bed and kissed his cheek. She kissed Julian's forehead before she stepped back. "You really scared us, my son."

"I'm sorry, Momma," Romeo said, sending silent thanks to the Madonna that he hadn't just imagined his mother's support. "I'm glad you're here," he told her.

"Mrs. Balducci, take the chair," Donata said, getting up. Momma shook her head.

"Save it for your mother. I'm used to standing all day."

Donata's parents? Romeo wondered if he could plead exhaustion to avoid that, but then Julian would go too and he wasn't letting go of Julian ever again. Romeo's arm tightened around the body next to him and Julian winced. Romeo let go. Julian caught his hand.

"Seatbelt bruise," he said, putting Romeo's arm across his chest.

"You're lucky to be alive," Momma said. "We're so grateful." She looked up at Poppa and he looked away. They were standing close and it was subtle, but Romeo saw her elbow him. He'd never seen her do that before. Poppa cleared his throat.

"Your mother and I have agreed," he said, his eyes above Romeo's head, "that you put in too much work to only get room and board until we pass on. We...we'll have papers drawn up to make you part-owner of the inn." His eyes dropped to Romeo, skimmed Julian's head and shot to the ceiling. "So you, umm...if you should be...wanting a home of your own, you...have some security."

Security. His father knew what he made playing.

"Dr. de Santo told you."

"Yes." Momma teared up. "*Bambino*, I'm so sorry." Poppa put his arm around her.

"We're grateful you're alive," he said. "And we want you at the inn."

"Don't commit yet, young man!" Donata's parents appeared at the foot of the bed. Donata's mother was smiling. Her father was too, but he looked as strained as Romeo's father had. Mrs. Vocelli went on. "Because Donata has told me some incredible things, and if you're half the cook she says you are—"

"Don't think you're going to lure my son away, Arenza Vocelli," Momma said. "If you—"

"Think of the opportunities, Lavinia! Perhaps we should prepare job offers and let him choose."

"Perhaps you should just get back on your jet--"

"Girls, go pull each other's hair outside." Nonna was back.

"Nonna Maria, we're not fighting."

"Of course not!" Momma said, reaching a hand to Mrs. Vocelli. She took it, and pulled Donata into the conversation. Beyond them Mr. Vocelli said something to Poppa that made him laugh.

"It's like a horror movie," Julian whispered. "Stepford Wives or something. When you were in surgery everyone was blaming everyone else, but then...it changed. One by one, they all got...nice."

"It's family." Romeo squeezed Julian. "That's how it goes."

"It's...terrifying."

"Let's leave them to it." Romeo planted a kiss in Julian's hair. "You've got a room, right? I bet we could sneak off without them noticing."

"Right." Julian snorted. "I'll wheel the IV and monitors, you row the bed."

"And then we'll take care of that virgin thing," Romeo suggested. Julian turned his head, laughed into Romeo's side.

"Yes, crazy man, that would be so sexy," he said when he lifted his face, eyes dancing. "Foreplay would be an hour of me figuring out where I could even touch you!"

He was so beautiful when he laughed. Romeo lifted his hand to brush Julian's cheek. "You're so amazing. You've changed my entire world and I've known you a <i>week</i>."

"Romeo," Julian said, taking his face in his hands, "you've known me fifteen years."

##

KD Sarge writes SF, fantasy, steampunk, GLBT, and erotica. She's usually writing two or more of those at once, sometimes in the same story. She can be found at [Escapist Literature](#), or on [Twitter](#). Read three chapters of her first novel, **Knight Errant**, [here](#) on Turtleduck Press. Her second novel, **His Faithful Squire**, is also available through [Turtleduck Press](#).