

Four

I left for Rome the day after the funeral. My husband had been encouraging me for years to take the solo trip, my lifelong dream, and I knew it was the right time. I wanted to span the ocean and put my life behind me. Anyone could have accused me of escaping; they would have been right.

I had spent my life running away, searching for something different. Something that was real and tangible. I had always wanted dreams, mere wisps of possibility. Rome was my salvation; the place where I could be whoever I wanted to be for four long days. Days filled with artwork and gelato and window shopping.

I checked into my hotel, a quaint place called the Hotel Parlamento. My room was off the upstairs terrace with its terra cotta tile and flower baskets perfectly accenting the view from my windows. The narrow street below was lined with Vespas and Smart Cars, their small bodies compacted on the roadway. A bright green neon Rolex sign hung from the outside of the shop next door, glaringly advertising its wares. The whole scene was inviting and new, nothing like my suburban town of cookie-cutter houses.

Once I had unpacked my suitcase, I put on a pair of comfortable shoes, consulted my travel guide and headed out for dinner. The heat was diminishing with the setting sun, but I could still feel traces of it lingering on my skin. I found myself feeling in better health and spirits than ever. Maybe I didn't bother worrying about the little things so much anymore, or maybe I just didn't notice them. Either way, I relished it as my feet traversed the cobblestone side streets.

One glass of red wine and a bowl of spaghetti carbonara later, I was still sitting at the restaurant, picking at my tiramisu and sipping limoncello. People-watching had always been one of my favorite pastimes, but doing it in a country where everyone spoke a different language was something else entirely. The flow of the beautiful dialect filled my ears but I didn't understand a word of it. I made up my own stories instead. That couple was breaking up, they

were on a first date, those two were old friends. And then without warning, he entered my thoughts.

I had always believed in love. Even though I hated it above all other things, from a young age I'd believed it was possible to find the one person who would perfectly complement me; who would put up with my flaws, be strong where I was weak, and above all else, who would constantly challenge me in every way.

I had never looked for simplicity. It was the gut-wrenching, self-hating, breath-constricting kind of love that enticed me. The love and the hate unavoidably joined was what I was searching for. I had wanted to hate myself for loving so much, more deeply than I had ever loved somebody before. These things I had kept inside, knowing it wasn't normal to want a love so difficult, so volatile and passionate. They stayed there, festering to a boiling point until the day it finally came my way.

Cooper.

One word, one name that could evoke emotions in me I had only ever dreamt of, and the second they entered my life, I wished I could take it all back. My love of Cooper didn't start the day we met. The attraction was there, but not the aching need. That came later.

Our first meeting was brief, but lasting. I would never forget the first time I spoke his name aloud. It felt like a pitch perfect melodic line as it passed my lips, as if I was destined to say his name. I knew there was something there from that first day, though I wasn't yet sure what it was. Something in Cooper ignited something within me; a stubborn, unrelenting fire that nothing could quench.

I left twenty euro on the table and walked away, leaving the couples behind. I felt very alone there in the ancient city. The echoes of the past surrounded me, making me feel smaller than I ever had before. The streets all started to blend and merge and look the same, but after what felt like hours of walking, I somehow found my way back to the hotel. Thankful for the

traditions of the culture, I bought a bottle of wine from the front desk and climbed the stone stairs to my room.

I opened the windows wide, letting the sounds of the city fill my room and lost myself in water glasses full of maroon liquid and thoughts of Cooper. They came back vividly though I wanted to do anything but think of him. Unfortunately, in a huge foreign city at ten in the evening when I didn't know another soul except Giuseppe at the front desk, all I could do was remember.

Four years of festering feelings had finally culminated the night before graduation. It was the night I'd decided that I was finally going to tell Cooper how I felt about him. The night when everything would finally be on the table, no matter the outcome. An almost crippling fear of rejection had kept me from telling him for so long, but I couldn't graduate and potentially lose him from my life for forever without saying the words that were so important to utter.

Cooper, I love you.

That was all I needed to say. Four simple sounding words that carried an astounding weight were all that stood between me and a significantly eased conscience.

For the last several years I'd felt like a fraud, spending so much time with Cooper and never letting him know. I had never exactly lied to him, but I hadn't been forthright either, something I considered a worse offense than lying to his face. He'd been within my grasp and I'd had so many opportunities, but I'd left it until the last possible moment and there I stood, staring him down across the dingy run-down college rental living room.

He had been talking to a girl two years younger than us, a flippant brunette with a look of mild interest on her face. He wanted her and she wanted a free drink, but neither party would be giving in. Once she'd managed to get away from him, he happened to turn and look my way, his shaggy blonde hair and freckles illuminated in the room's hazy glow. On more than one inappropriate occasion, I'd found myself wondering where else on his body those small, smooth patches of darkened skin might be found.

He smiled in my direction and started toward me as I nervously sipped my drink, my third of the evening if I was keeping correct count. It was time for me to do drunk what I had always failed to do sober. We exchanged the typical pleasantries followed by a stream of our ever-present banter, my absolute favorite part of my relationship with him.

His words had a way of heating me throughout, making me angry or blissfully happy, but always some kind of severe, unavoidable emotion. I asked if he wanted to go upstairs to talk where it was quieter and he agreed without question. Both of us knew that after tomorrow, we wouldn't be seeing much of each other. Close friends though we were, we both seemed to know that we wouldn't be making the long trips to visit each other. Our time was numbered, so upstairs we went to spend a few fleeting moments together.

He initiated the conversation once we were upstairs and seated on the floor of the hallway, nursing our drinks. Could I believe we were actually graduating tomorrow, he asked me. I told him that no, it seemed impossible, and then we lapsed into a somewhat uncomfortable silence. Both of us seemed to have something to say, glancing at each other occasionally.

As my heart thudded almost painfully in my chest, I turned so I was facing him on the stained carpeting that likely hadn't seen the use of a vacuum in months and took a deep hitching breath before starting in. I hoped my speech didn't sound too rehearsed though I'd practiced it in my head an almost infinite amount of times. It all came out; how I'd been wanting to say this for a long time, how I felt badly that I hadn't said it sooner, and then, in one final blurting sentence, that I'd been in love with him for years.

He looked at me with wide eyes, a stare I'd taken as only the worst of all possible options, and with one finally apology, I stood clumsily, legs stupid from alcohol and panic, and made my way down the stairs. I was blind from the tears that had started to fall as I shoved my way out of the crowd and into the night air.

I wiped a tear from my cheek and pushed the bottle of wine away from me across the small bedside table as a loud car horn outside shook me from my reverie. My room was suffocating, so I pulled on my shoes and grabbed my purse. The street became a distraction. Anything that could pull my thoughts away from Cooper was welcomed.

After wandering aimlessly, just drinking in the intoxicating atmosphere around me, I found myself staring at Trevi fountain. It was beautiful and not what I expected, taking up the entire side of a building and filling almost the entire piazza. The crowd surrounding it was huge and ever-swelling. Everyone was watching as the lights cut through the night, illuminating the stone images that had been carved to look both like natural and weathered rock and the traditional sculptures of the 18th century. It was a contradiction in itself, the old and new joined. Most of the occupants of its edge had bottles of wine and beer in their hands as they enjoyed the view and the company.

I smiled in their direction, happy for their ability to enjoy the city so effortlessly. A sign advertising gelato caught my eye and minutes later I was leaning against the cool brick of one of the closed shops enjoying the smooth raspberry concoction as it slid across my tongue. Ice cream back home would never be the same.

The entire moment felt so wonderful, so isolated, so perfectly Italian that I felt my anxiety slip away. In silence, I watched the college students, other Americans like myself, have too many swigs from the wine bottle and try to mask their drunkenness from the police who roamed through the crowd. Part of me ached to join them, to just go over and grab the bottle.

For the most part the sounds blended together. A mixture of languages and ages and volumes creating a delicious buzz that was nearly impenetrable.

Nearly.

A man called out to a beautiful and buxom woman named Gia who was storming away from him. Tears streaked her cheeks as she waked, clutching her purse in one hand and holding the other to her heaving breasts. Now, he was chasing her. It seemed familiar, and then

it came back, the second overwhelming memory of the evening. I made my way out of the piazza and found a quiet side street. My feet kept walking to an unknown destination in the foreign city and I remembered graduation day.

Cooper had chased me across the quad, screaming my name. He had been oblivious to the stares of people around us as he desperately tried to gain my attention. I was walking away from him, tears threatening to spill down my cheeks and my mortarboard clutched tightly against my chest. He had been following me ever since our eyes locked across the gym floor and even though we were separated by hundreds of our classmates and their families, we had somehow found each other. After hugging my parents, I practically ran from the crowded room under the pretense that I would meet them back at my place where we could talk and take pictures in a calmer environment.

He shouted my name again, a hint of desperation plaguing his voice and finally, my willpower shattered. I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk but didn't turn to face him. Cooper rounded me and grabbed my shoulders in his hands, shaking me slightly as he did so. I asked him what he was doing and he demanded to know the same of me. I wanted to rip myself from his grasp and walk away, but the confusion and frustration in his eyes kept me rooted to the path. He wanted to know why I had poured out four years of feelings the night before graduation. Why I had never told him before.

I immediately missed the presence of his hands as they dropped from my shoulders when I shrugged in response, unable to come up with a reason he would understand. I wanted to tell him that I had never shared how I felt because I had been so petrified of the possibility of his rejection. I had known that if I told him and he didn't feel the same way, that I probably would have lost him completely. Having Cooper in my life however I got to have him was more important than living with a clean conscious, or at least that was the lie I had repeated to myself over the last several years like some sort of self-destructive mantra.

I had felt defeated, staring at him, trying to search his eyes for any sign of true emotion, but found none. He really just wanted to know why I had chosen such a late moment to tell him, not because he wanted me to repeat the sentiment so he could know that we felt the same way about each other. His face was that of a confused little boy as we stood there looking at one another. Unable to take the silence anymore as it surrounded us amidst the chaos all around, I told him that I needed to go.

With a voice that hesitated and cracked just a bit, he asked me why it felt like we were saying goodbye for forever. I told him it was because we were. Because we had to. Being friends had been too hard, and now that I knew it was all we would ever be, I had to end us completely. I waited for him to disagree, to tell me that giving up a four-year friendship was absurd, but he just gaped back at me, selectively mute from my declaration.

My entire world crashing down on me, I mustered up some courage and stepped forward to wrap my arms tight around him, feeling the entire length of his body pressed into mine. I hadn't expected it, but I felt his arms return the gesture, almost crushing me as we held each other. I would have stood there all day in his arms. It was such a rare moment of tenderness between the two of us, the friends who had been so painfully platonic.

If my cell phone hadn't started ringing in my purse, who knows how long we would have stood there, prolonging the moment that could possibly be our last together. Unable to look at him again, I yanked myself from his embrace and turned away, answering my parents' call as my body chilled from the lack of contact against his own. I heard him call out to me again, saying goodbye, but I went on pretending as if I hadn't heard. Maybe I had even imagined it happening altogether.

I found myself standing at the Capitoline Museum by the statue of Marcus Aurelius. He sat there frozen, riding that horse for all time. After only a bit of digging, I found my street map of

Rome buried in my purse. It took a few minutes to gain my bearings but finally I was able to decipher the Italian text enough to find my position as well as my final destination.

Religion wasn't something that played what I would have called a particularly large role in my life, but I felt drawn to Vatican City. Almost all of the buildings were closed and gated due to the late hour, doubly warding off any potential offenders. Some stores had small display cases placed within their outside walls. I distracted myself by window shopping, mentally dog-eared the places I wanted to visit during business hours.

It was far colder than I had imagined it would be in Rome, even at night. The chilled air nipped at my exposed skin and I pulled my jacket tighter around my shoulders. Back at home, I might have felt uncomfortable or nervous walking the streets at night by myself, but the anonymity seemed to suit me. Though I looked nothing like a local, I also knew that I didn't look enough like a tourist to draw any significant attention to myself. The roads I traveled were main ones and there were several other people out taking in the city's night life.

When I passed a loud bar, I hesitated for a moment at the open door. It was a young crowd inside and I watched as they mingled. Some seemed to be friends and some new acquaintances. The whole scene took me back five years after graduation, to the next time I saw Cooper.

It was Homecoming weekend, the first one I'd been able to attend due to the rigors of grad school and of the job I had started once I had obtained my Master's degree. Being back around my old classmates felt strange. While it was good to see everyone, and I had already talked to almost every person I would have listed off as a good friend from that part of my life, my eyes wouldn't stop scanning the crowd.

My boyfriend, David, stood at my side the entire time. He was tall and dark, kind with an ever-present hint of seriousness surrounding him. We had been together for three years and we were happy. I was happy with David, the anti-Cooper.

And then I saw him, smiling at me from across the room. I hated the way my heart surged, the flicker of heat that flashed through my stomach, the clenching of my throat. He was walking toward me then, looking a little older, a little more mature, but still effortlessly, boyishly Cooper.

He greeted and hugged me and after a beat, after I had torn my gaze away from those blue eyes that never failed to reduce me to mush, I introduced him to David. They were cordial. David was sweet and Cooper was funny, and we chatted for close to a half hour. It might as well have been ten seconds.

Five years apart didn't matter. For those few fleeting minutes, we were Ellie and Cooper again. But then we were saying goodbye. He wanted to say more. I could see it in his eyes. But then his gaze flicked over to David and he just left instead, out the door and out of my life once again. The hole in my gut that had filled in with time and distance was empty once more, leaving me hollow and tired.

I finally found my way to the Tiber River and stood on the Walk of Angels, breathing in the night air. Cooper was gone, both from the world and from me. His funeral had been large, the room filled with people who loved him. It had been a nice funeral, but not an appropriate enough ending me. There had been pictures of a man that I had both known at first sight but also had a difficult time recognizing at the same time. So many years had passed apart, so many important life events had been spent without each other.

He hadn't even been a part of my life for a tenth of my existence. I hadn't seen him since that night at the bar, but his presence was constantly heavy in my chest, aching the way it always had. As I had made my way around the room, taking in the entire life Cooper had lived without me, I reached a journal that he had started when the doctor diagnosed him with the pancreatic cancer that had fast taken his life. It was open to a page about his first date with his

wife, the night he had realized that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. It had only taken one date for him to know that she was the one.

As I stood on the bridge, I pulled an envelope from my pocket, one that had been given to me by Cooper's wife the day before. My name was written on the front in a handwriting I no longer recognized. His wife's suspicious and confused eyes told me she didn't know what the letter said and that she'd never heard my name before Cooper had handed her the envelope to give me just in case I came.

I knew what the envelope contained. It was his final goodbye to me, the words he had been unable to say out loud back then, but I didn't need to read it. None of it mattered anymore. I had come to Rome to forget Cooper, to finally put him behind me. With the slightest of hesitations, I dropped the letter into the river and watched as the lazily flowing waters carried it away.

It was midnight in Rome making it seven in the morning back at home. I wasn't surprised as my phone rang. I answered it and said hello to my husband, told him that I was in my room getting ready for bed. I had never mentioned Cooper to David after that night in the bar. David didn't know that I still thought about him, that at times I wondered how my life could have been different if Cooper would have said that he loved me back. It wasn't until I saw his wife and children at the funeral that it had all become clear.

It had never been me. I had been dreaming for decades about something that had never really existed, holding on to four years that had happened so long ago.

I walked to the other side of the bridge, but couldn't see the letter anymore. I told David that Rome was beautiful and that I missed him.

And I did.