

## **An Angel from Rome**

I remember the first time I met him. It was back in the summer of '98. I had arrived at Rome's Fiumicino International Airport in the early morning of the 10<sup>th</sup>. Boarding the shuttle bus, I began the long journey south to Sorrento and the magnificent Amalfi coast. The afternoon sun was at it's finest by the time our rugged ride had pulled into the parking area of 'Hotel Valoria'.

It had to be hitting the high thirties outside, but thankfully it was so much cooler inside the white- marble foyer as all twelve of us gathered together at the desk; waiting for our room keys. I had to rest my feet and decided to sit down on a sofa; it's coffin-black lacquer and sweaty arm rests gave it a rather displeasing look. Soon afterwards, I was escorted by one of the hotel's 'bellboys' to my room on the fifth floor. As he deposited my bags on the bedroom floor I tapped his shoulder and slipped him a suitable gratuity. He smiled and exited, closing the room door behind.

After a much needed shower and change of clothes, I made my way down to the reception and followed the signs for the pool and gardens. I entered the pool area from the garden terrace at the back of the hotel. I didn't wish to enter entirely; merely to observe and take note. There were several families bathing at the poolside whilst children splashed about in the warm waters. I continued my trek on foot along the pink blossoming avenue bordered on either side by guest houses and bazaars. The hotel was one of the largest and busiest of the beach front establishments. There were ample amount of eateries within walking distance of the hotel.

The hotel, in the evenings, offered an outdoor bar service in it's beautiful garden settings; lit by candles and soft harmonious music playing for the pleasure of it's guests. Very romantic I thought. I was here in Italy alone, as part of a two week study course in Italian Art History. My programme would take me from the south, in Sorrento, to Rome where I would complete the course exams at 'La Sapienza'; Rome's oldest public university.

The first evening of my arrival was spent lounging in the garden terrace, enjoying a few glasses of wine and watching the other guests mingle in social awkwardness. I retired to bed early with the air conditioning on full blast. It was a restless and sticky night which gave me little hope of a good nights sleep. I would get up periodically, and sit at the open window, watching the early morning sunrise; rays of crimson light that would fall across the gentle rolling waves of the sea. There was an air of silence and solitude; a smell of fragrant blossoms that blew into the room.

I decided it was time to remove my nakedness from the window and prepare myself for the day ahead. The thought of visiting the beach excited me somewhat, even though my plans were to visit some local churches and an art museum. Later, I thought quietly. The morning went by pleasantly and swiftly. I grabbed lunch at a quint café near the beach before dropping my study materials back at the room.

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The heat that afternoon was unbelievable. A sign at the entrance to the public beach read 37c. I paid a young lad for a deck chair and canopy, and he ushered me to a nice quiet spot on the burning sands. It was half-way between the promenade wall and the water. Under the silvery quivering blue of the ocean; the blazing sun from high above, I stretched out on my chair; lathering sun-cream onto my neck and arms. From the monotonous haze of the desolate emptiness of the beach, I needed to rest; to escape from the demanding complexity of my life.

The horizontal line of the sea-shore was suddenly intersected by a human figure. The form shimmered from the heat, but I could make out it was a young man. He was coming closer towards my direction. I sat upright to get a clearer view of him. It was a spectacle of pure beauty. I was startled by the god-like features of this youngster. A head like that of Eros.

He walked with an extraordinary grace, turning his head towards me, he raised and lowered his eyes as he passed. His delicate shape with an air of richness and indulgence and relaxed dignity. His slender legs naked to above the knees, his bare feet soaking up the golden sand. Our eyes met only briefly but it felt like a never-ending stare. My heart skipped a beat as a wave of forbidden lust washed over me. Those eyes! So seductive, but cautionary. I tried not to stare but it was becoming an overstimulated curiosity. The youngster sprawled out on a beach towel next to what I believed was his parents; just a few feet from where I sat.

I overheard the woman speaking his name. Mikel. They were Italians, but I knew that already going by his jet-black hair and smooth, olive skin. They spoke to one another in their native tongue; however I did get a feeling that the boy was in trouble for something. His mother sounded rather annoyed at him. I couldn't make out a word they were saying, but when he spoke; Mikel, the hairs on my neck burst into excitement. His voice was like that of an angel. It was liquid melody to my ears. His voice brought me closer to an exalted climax.

I carefully turned my head to watch him, avoiding the risk of being caught. I saw him with astonished admiration as he stood up, slipping off his wet shirt and outstretching his thin arms. He had the most divine sculptured body I've ever seen, and he knew it. My heart was hammering wildly inside of me. The young man whom I guessed was around eighteen or so, had the most enchanting way of turning and twisting his body for the pleasure of watching eyes. His youthfully perfect physique was intoxicating and painful to watch. I had to stop; take my eyes away. I got up and slowly waded into the warm, clear waters. I had to do something to cool of my excitement.

By the time I exited the waters the family had gone. Feeling disappointed, I hastily gathered my belongings and took off back to the hotel. I showered; suddenly letting out a blood curdling scream as the powerful jet of water hit my sun-burnt skin. The evening was exquisite with the nocturnal plants in the garden giving off their balmy, sweet fragrance, whilst a soft audible moan from the evening ocean; it's gentle waves lapping against the

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rocky shore. The unseen crickets made their music as a beautiful, operatic score played softly from the bar DJ.

I took a seat on my own, away from the families and the drunkards. A waiter took my order for a bottle of white wine as I sat back comfortably in my wicker chair. I watched with a smile as other guests filed into the seating area; many of whom were unacquainted with one another. This place bewitched me; relaxed my mind and gave me an overpowering feeling of happiness.

I had just consumed my second glass when my eyes caught sight of him. It was Mikel, walking in with his parents. They sat down and placed their order with the waiter. I could see the boy was not amused. He sat cross-legged, looking in every direction but his parents. Then he noticed me staring at him. I looked away quickly but that didn't last long. My eyes darted back towards him; taking note of what he was wearing. He had on a skin-tight black shirt and white trousers. A pair of laced, leather sandals. His hair was combed back; thick, wavy blackness, that glinted in the moon's rays. I observed a little closer at his features. He had a straight nose; typical of Romans, and an enchanting mouth with thin, rosy lips.

I smiled back at him hoping he might reciprocate the gesture.

Oh my god! He smiled back at me, giving me the most sensual, provocative smirk. Was I seeing things I thought to myself. The most beautiful boy in the world just smiled at me! I adjusted myself in the chair as I felt slightly nervous. What do I do? Do I just sit here and watch him? My questions were soon answered. I saw his parents get up and his mother kiss him on the head before the elders took their leave; Mikel remained sitting, alone.

I swallowed the remainder of my wine and kept my eyes glued on the youngster. Mikel stood up, pushing his chair under the table. He began walking away; towards the gardens, that's when he turned his eyes towards me. He tilted his head as if to beckon me to follow him. He didn't have to do it twice. I quickly followed suite, catching up with him on the grassy path leading to a small water fountain. We were out of sight from prying eyes.

I swear on my life, my heart was thudding so hard I thought Mikel could hear it. I kept thinking; why would someone so beautiful want to speak to me? I was a slim, eighteen-year-old university student from the UK. I had blond, curly hair and a skin tone as pale as a corpse. What was he thinking?

He turned around when I was close enough to touch him.

"Hi" he spoke softly.

"Hey" I answered mechanically, my voice trembling.

"I'm Mikel."

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“I know.”

“You know?.” The lad asked curiously.

“Yeah, I overheard your mum saying your name at the beach today.”

Mikel gave a little giggle at my remark.

“Yes, she tends to get a bit loud at times.”

“Your English is very good?” I asked.

“University. We learn it in school, it’s compulsory now.”

“Oh, right.”

“I like you.” The boy suddenly said.

“What?” I heard him alright, but I didn’t trust my ears. My hands were shaking so badly with nerves I honestly thought I was going to drop dead there and then.

“Unfortunately, we are leaving tomorrow. Going back home.”

I think I did die on that spot. To hear that he was going was like a knife being suddenly wedged right in my back. Mikel could see my reaction and I think he knew I was upset. That was when I felt him touch me, holding my hands in his. He looked at me with that ethereal smile and smiled.

“We live in Rome. Why don’t you come with us? If you want to?” he asked pleasantly.

“Sure! I would love to.” My heart was quickly filled with a new sensation of hope and joy.

“Good. I would like that.” The boy gripped my hands tighter and pulled me into him. His head leaned towards me and before I could breath, he had his lips on mine. He kissed me like I’ve never experienced. This was beyond exalted climax, this was pure ecstasy that I welcomed without hesitancy. We eventually parted ways as Mikel had to be back in his room before eleven. I slept fleetingly that night; the day of delightful circumstances that filled me with such contentment and satisfaction.

I met Mikel and his parents the next morning in the foyer just after breakfast. He translated for me what his folks were saying but they seemed genuinely happy for me to travel with them in their crammed little car. Mikel and I sat in the back seats all the way to Rome. We chatted about studying, and modern music. Discreetly, he held my hand beneath a cover, which I kept a firm grip on. I was in heaven! There were times when Mikel fell asleep; his head resting on my shoulder. When I could, I inhaled his scent, the sweetness of his aroma. It sent shivers of adrenaline rippling through my young body. I stared out of the window watching the ocean disappear and the scenery finally turning to buildings and monuments.

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We arrived in the city around mid-day and it was stiflingly hot outside. Hotter than in Sorrento. Mikel's parents said goodbye and left their son with me. He took me to a little café he regularly frequented. We had coffee and chatted for a while before he took me on another stroll through the Roman streets. There was an unpleasant sultriness that pervaded the narrow streets; the air heavy from smoke and oil and the smell of perfumes.

Eventually we stopped outside a tall building that had numerous international flags adorning its windows. I looked at Mikel with confusion.

"It's a hostel, but it's clean and cheap." Mikel said.

"Thanks. I was worried about where to stay."

"Will you meet me later tonight? Say seven, at the Piazza del Campidoglio?"

"Where's that?"

"Ask the reception staff for a mini-map. You'll find it okay."

"Sure, look forward to it."

I barely finished my sentence when the lad took hold of my arms and tugged me closer to him; his hands now on my waist, his sweet lips made contact and we kissed passionately for the longest time ever. I was falling in love with this boy and I knew it deep down. Can someone have such luck as I was having? That's all I could think after he left me, standing at the door of the hostel, my heart racing and legs turning to jelly.

The Piazza was a haven of tourists and locals alike. I arrived early taking a seat on the ledge of a fountain. I watched the dense crowds of visitors moving about; visiting food stalls and street traders, whilst some took photos at the delicate marble balconies flanked with carved figures. There he was; coming through the clusters of people towards me. He was wearing a pale-blue satin shirt and black jeans. He embraced me like Italians do, and I caught the scent of his masculine perfume which was sweet and floral. We walked and talked and I found out he was a student, studying Fine Art at the La Sapienza university.

I noticed many faces turn in his direction as we walked closer across the busy square, no doubt admiring his beauty and body. We dined at a lovely restaurant away from the hustle of the tourists. I tried a dish of 'Gnocchi di Semolino', whilst Mikel had 'Carciof alla giudia' whatever the hell that was? A few glasses of red wine later, we left quietly and made our way down a narrow path leading to a beautiful, white bridge. We stopped half-way across it and I smiled at him; absorbing the magnificent view of the city at night.

"Ponte Sant'Angelo." Mikel remarked.

"What?"

"The Bridge of Angels."

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“Nice.”

Before I could say another word, Mikel had spun me into him and we engaged in romantic kissing that didn't go unnoticed by a passer-by. Who cares what people thought?. I didn't and I doubt Mikel did. The moon was shining brightly that night; our first proper evening together. The dark and starry sky winking down on us, and the soft, classical music from a nearby house, drifted across the rose gardens and over the bridge.

If this was heaven I was in it, and never wanted it to end. Mikel and I ended up going back to the hostel which thankfully, I had a private room and not a shared dormitory. We spent the remainder of the darkest hours engaged in romantic love-making. This was special; he had seduced me somehow, and it was working.

The morning sun had risen and I sat up in bed with bleary eyes, my curly hair stuck to my face like plaster. I looked over at the naked, sleeping body of Mikel. To rest in the arms of perfection; the splendour of utter beauty and the painful awareness that words can not match the sensuous beauty of man. I dared not to awaken him from his dreams and thus decided to leave a note on my pillow for his awakening. I had to catch up on studies for my essays. Rome had plenty of places to visit; museums and galleries. I would hopefully catch up with him later that day.

Mikel and I spent the rest of my two week stay together when I wasn't visiting art studios and galleries to study the works of artists such as; Bernini, Cortona or Caravaggio. We visited places such as the Pantheon, the Trevi Fountain, where we dipped our feet in its waters, and to the Colosseum where we played hide and seek. Life was wonderful with him.

The last day in Rome before my afternoon flight back to the UK was dedicated entirely to Mikel. We met for breakfast outside the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, and then onto a few historical sites he wanted me to see. The Arch of Constantine, the Mausoleum of Augustus and the Baths of Caracalla. After lunch at a seafood restaurant near the Castel Sant'Angelo, we headed on foot to the Vatican itself.

I spent some time kneeling before a statue of Our Lady; praying for my family and friends, while Mikel stood silently behind me; his hand touching my shoulder. Leaving the eternal city behind, we found a little café next to the taxi bay where we sat in peace and enjoyment, taking in the views and smells. Freshly brewed coffee beans and toasted almond cake drifted out from the counter. A church bell rang in the distance mixed with the horns of impatient drivers fleeing by. Rome.

Suddenly, Mikel handed me a small box. He looked into my eyes with those piercing hazel-green orbs, smiling.

“Open it.” He said.

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“What is it?” I asked curiously, fumbling to open the lid. Inside, was a gold ring, a diamond angel in the centre. I felt tears welling up and had a strong guess to what he wanted.

“Say yes.” Mikel proposed. “Please?”

“Yes!” I cried in joy, hugging him tightly, I was weeping like a little child.

I didn’t want to leave him, not now, but my taxi had arrived and I had to load up my luggage in the boot. We kissed one final time, and as the car sped off to the airport I waved to Mikel from the rear window. I returned home delighted but disappointed. We kept in touch everyday by phone, sometimes spending many hours talking at a time.

Eight long months later in the spring of ’99, Mikel had completed his degree and with the help of his parents, he immigrated to the UK to live with me. We saved money together and received monetary gifts from friends and family to get married. We married in Venice, Italy in July of ’99. We both held good jobs and enjoyed a great social life. We were living a happy, married life until one fateful day in October of 2018.

I was visiting friends in the United States when I got the phone call.

My mother informed me that Mikel had been found dead at our home. Some of his friends had become worried as he had not been returning calls or text. Police were called and had forced the front door in, discovering Mikel’s body on the bathroom floor. A later inquest had indicated that he had suffered a major heart attack. He was only 38.

Words can not even begin to describe how I felt. Stuck in a country thousands of miles away and unable to get a quicker flight home, I kept visualizing Mikel, laying on a cold mortuary table; unable to be there with him. Mikel’s parents flew in from Naples to be with my parents until I arrived home. They discussed initially the idea of repatriation, but it was decided to be too costly and complex. Mikel’s mother wanted him to be near me.

He was buried in an unmarked grave; a simplistic service attended by few. Both families had exhausted their savings to pay for the funeral, so no-one could afford a gravestone at the time. For months following his death, I fell into deep depression and grief. Several panic attacks at work eventually put me off sick. My mental health as well as physical health were deteriorating quickly. I made myself a recluse; a hermit living behind locked doors. I lost a lot of body weight through neglect and spent all day crying.

One day, there was a knocking at the front door. It was Mikel’s parents. I broke down in hysterics, crying and wailing. Mikel’s dad held me in his arms and hugged me.

“You’ll be okay son.”

Three years have passed since Mikel’s death. I miss him so much.

My name is James. I am Mikel’s husband.

