

ROMAN BATH

It's an old dinosaur of a hotel, immense, with cramped labyrinthine halls going in surprising directions. Rossolino, narrow-faced, with downy feathers over his lip—the beginning of his moustache—shows Max and Tess to their room. Max and Tess are sweaty and exhausted, the way only road travel can leave you. When the three elbow their way out of the tiny ornate cage the hotel uses for an elevator, Rossolino leads the way, his head perched soberly on a long neck, a flag of red hair flying back from his forehead.

For Rossolino, this is home; he conducts them confidently through each turn, leading them down halls carpeted with rugs of diminishing thickness and design, until the floors creak bare underfoot. They arrive at a small lobby, sparsely furnished with one beast of a chair, carved, clawed, a snarling grimace at its head and a table next to it looking as if it had been mauled by its neighbor. The bowl of vegetation sitting on the table has lost all memory of photosynthesis.

Max and Tess follow Rossolino obediently, juggling awkwardly the assortment of odd plastic bags and overflowing totes that all travelers acquire on long drives, while the young bird of a porter carries their bulky suitcases with ease.

It's six. Max and Tess have been driving since noon, when they'd left Assisi. Max had wept as they came up the stairs from

the lower church. "I may never come back. Who knows? These paintings, this civilization, it's . . ." but he hadn't been able to finish.

"But we're going to Rome," Tess reminded him.

Max looked startled, shocked. "You never mentioned *Rooma*." Her recently acquired husband is one for song, soliloquy, schtick.

Though still in the flush of recently assembled devotion, Tess has already stopped trying to attend every performance of Max's constant theater. "You asked for a room with a bath?"

"Would I fail you my Queen?" He bowed, opened the rental car door. "Never."

They had picnicked at the side of the road on newly baked bread, cheeses that surrendered their flavors softly from the heat, tomatoes that burst at the point of the knife, but by the time they were on the outskirts of Rome they had evolved into creatures with sickening membranes of inevitably acquired sweat and dust of the journey. Minuscule Fiats flew by honking, their horns sounding like screaming geese. Tess's dirty hair flapped in her face no matter how tightly she pinned it up—tiny whips of hair lashing small, mean strokes, stinging the skin around her eyes.

"Maaax, get me to the hotel," her words, like a file on metal, grated—even on her. "I'd do anything for a bath."

Max flung back his head and let his laughter trickle down his throat. Tess's irrationality pleases Max. She's requesting magic. He's the man for the job.

"Hey, maybe we could *bagna insieme*, if the tub is one of the big ones?" His eyes rolled wildly, his tongue wagged from side to side in his mouth. He's easily roused, easily launched. He thinks this gesture is seductive.

"Hmmm," Tess turned her head to watch the untreelike cypress slip by.

Inspired, Max leaned out and shouted at the small cars passing them at high speeds, "*Papagallo!*" Mimicking a young Italian guy he had heard fighting with another *vitellone* at one of their road stops.

The fact that now he was calling someone a parrot who hadn't even spoken to him didn't matter to Max. He liked the sound of it. "*Papagallo!*" he shouted again, shaking his fist at the cars passing him.

When they entered Rome, Tess was navigating, something she did well. Tess knew where they were going—*on the map*. But every time she made a decision about which street to take, it was invariably a *senso unico*, a one way, the wrong way.

“It’s all right; I’ll just keep driving around this piazza until you figure out which street we take.” Max had all the confidence in the world in his Tess.

The tiny cars had come from everywhere, their shrill horns screaming, men leaning out of windows to yell, particularly at them. The foul chemistry of exhausted diesel filled their car. When they went around the piazza a second time, the front end of a small blue Fiat cut in front of them, then screeched to a halt. Max slammed his brakes, jerking them forward, one small suitcase swinging into Tess’s neck. There had been more yelling, curses Tess couldn’t translate, but little movement toward the mark Tess had so carefully made on the map before they left Assisi. As they moved out of that piazza, Tess, peering down at the map, then up at the street sign, realized that they had just driven past a street that held the possibility of leading to their hotel.

“Just tell me which way to go, just tell me.” Max’s voice pitched up like Tess. He has his own need for sorcery.

“Just tell you? The problem is I *just* don’t know!” Tess was furious that she didn’t.

“All right.” Max pulled over, disgusted. “Let me see the map.” They’d pulled up to the hotel in silence.

Now Rossolino places the bags neatly to the side of the door to their room and waits for Tess and Max to reach him. He opens what had once been a solid, if modest, wooden door, but now looks as if it couldn’t hold much out. It’s not of concern. They want in. A shaft of cool light directs them from the dark hallway into their room. A large, somber chamber waits inside the door. Tess follows the light; Max follows Tess; Rossolino gathers up the bags, guiding them in from behind.

Cool Roman air fills the high, vaulted ceiling, gently coats the walls, and settles quietly on the stone floor. An older world, large, shabby, and calm is laid out before them. The bed’s expanse is framed in the mirror that hangs on the opposite wall. Below

the mirror is an old porcelain sink, a bidet set in a wooden stand. Under the stand on a shelf sits a white china pitcher. Rossolino deposits the bags near the foot of the bed.

Tess can hear Max searching his pockets for lire. Max is no doubt giving Rossolino something excessive, a habit Tess normally approves of, but now is only cause for further irritation. He is probably raising his wild eyebrows in a vaudeville expression that says, "I know you are an exceptional young duck, and I appreciate your new moustache."

"*Grazie infinita*," Tess hears Max say. Only infinite thanks will do. Everyone has to love Max, Tess thinks, annoyed that everyone always does, especially since at this moment she doesn't. When Tess opens her eyes, Rossolino's long arm wings the door closed.

Max is standing by the bags. Sweat has glued his shirt to him.

"What do you think?" he asks Tess. "Are you okay about the bath?" as he begins to pull his shirt away from his skin. Max's back is usually a sanctuary in Tess's private country. But as she notices the hair on his back matted to his body she particularly loathes the broad sweaty terrain she sees.

"It's fine," she says breezily. It had been her decision, too, but she's too miserable to be fair.

When they had arrived at the desk downstairs the hotel clerk told them that their original reservation for a room with a bath had been given away. There hadn't been a confirmation. They could either go back to the wilderness of an unknown city or take the room without one.

Max had asked, "What do you want to do?" so ready to be obliging, "Stay or go? Whatever you want." Tess had no choice but to be reasonable. She held that against him.

"We'll stay," Tess had nodded angrily at the desk. As if there had been a choice, she thinks now.

Off to one side of the room is a large armchair with a rounded back and plump arms, fitted with a faded cloth cover. Tess lets herself sink into it, rests her head against the high back and closes her eyes. She feels as if she's being held by a grave parent. Dust particles fill the air between Max and her.

He's taking off all his clothes, all, except for his briefs. He

bunches up his pants and shirt carefully over the back of a chair. Small sighs escape from him, bubbles of misery.

“You hungry? There’s some bread and cheese left I think.”

“Nah,” Tess says without opening her eyes. “You?” She asks not to be outdone. “I’ll put something together for you.”

Nobody wants anything.

Tess walks over to the bed, pulls her dress up over her head, and throws it down. The synthetic fabric lands in a limp heap against the dull luster of the floor. She lays back, her lower legs hanging over the side of the bed. She slips off her sandals, and her dirty feet find the cold, polished stone. In a minute, she thinks, I’ll take a birdbath. Each hot muscle relaxes against the rough cotton pattern. She’s trying to remember how to bathe in a sink.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. You?” Tess drags her words and breathes out together.

“Yeah.”

She just wants to lie there.

Max’s bare feet pad the floor. A hollow creak breaks the hush of the room. He is standing in front of the massive wooden wardrobe lodged off to one side. Its chipped veneer matches the bed. Two or three hangers wait crookedly on the pole. The stale smell of old dust, long enclosed, emerges from the wardrobe. Max lines his shoes up at the bottom and covers the hangers with his things. Another creak. Then the water splashing.

“*Tesoro Tessina*,” Max sing songs, leaning over Tess when he has finished washing up. He wants this fight over. He didn’t care who began, who joined in.

But Tess rolls away, across the bed, then stands up efficiently. She’s ready to bathe. She peels away her slip, the rest, tossing them onto the floor. Then she reaches up, pulling the stringy tangles of her hair back and pins them up again.

Max sits on the bed and sinks his head into his chest. He breathes in deeply then lets the air out through his teeth, making his lips flap. His back rounds over even further. This is to let Tess know he’s descending into one of his deepest darks. The pact is sealed; they’re sworn to this stunned, swollen silence.

Max picks up his paper on the bed and lies back, blocking

her out. Tess goes to the sink and begins by rinsing her face. Just the dust comes off. A film of oil still covers her skin. She soaps it and then rinses it clean. Tess tips her head back, eyes closed, the water dripping down onto her torso. Her face feels made of one piece again. She can almost recognize herself. She bends and puts her elbows into a well of cool water in the sink. Her soapy hands slip up over the round of her shoulder, down to the outside, then reach to soap the tender underside of her arm. She pours water over her shoulder, drawing the cool, white china pitcher along her arm. The water falls into streams over her fingers, the sound of liquid breaking as it hits her skin, the sink and the floor.

A breeze blows in through the windows, billowing the curtains up. The air dries her skin, leaving small maps of moisture evaporating on her body.

When she looks up again at the mirror she sees that Max has closed his eyes. The pages of the *Trib*, anchored by one hand flung across the bed, flutter in the air, waving the words held prisoner in the fields of white. In a dream the small black letters would float off the pages into the air. His body is traveling toward sleep. His lips twitch slightly. "I can't . . ." something, something, "Who are you guys . . .?" he asks tensely falling off the rocks of consciousness.

I should cover him, runs through Tess's mind. Instead she leans over the rounded porcelain edge of the sink.

She hears the squawk of rusted metal behind her as Max turns in the bed. When she looks up into the mirror she sees that the sound isn't from the bedsprings, but comes from the hinge and pivot pin scraping as the door opens.

Rossolino, his hand on the doorknob, stands, held by the sight of Tess's back. He is holding a small bag Tess had left at the desk. Tess knows the bag is hers, but just now what is in it is a mystery to her.

"Max," Tess whispers urgently into the glass. The words float up to the high ceiling. Max lifts his head to see what Tess is looking at in the mirror, his eyes reluctant from sleep ruined.

Tess looks down to the sink, then back up to the mirror, searching for protection. The large white towel is back on the bed. She sees that Max and Rossolino's eyes have met now in the

mirror, eyes round, bright, fixed for a second in a languageless stare that Tess both knows and understands she can't interpret. Rossolino's eyes flick to meet Tess's. Her gaze swings to Max. A current flows through them in the glass. Then Rossolino lowers his eyes, places the bag just inside, and pulls the door closed. The question of maps, of lines of demarcation, of how you get where you're going has given way as Tess and Max hold their gaze in the mirror.

