Love My Way

by Eva Marlowe

Summary

Here we go!

Elio and Oliver go back to Crema in the summer of 1987. There will be happiness, but as usual with these two, there will be also a bit of angst.

We start with a short trip down memory lane, since this is all from Oliver's POV and we need to know what he was thinking/feeling back in 1983.

Enjoy

Edit: work completed on 20th February 2018

Notes

The usual warning applies: please do not repost my work anywhere without my explicit permission.

The characters own me, I don't own them, alas :)

A Chinese translation of my fic can be found here
http://archiveofourown.org/works/13219824/chapters/30238977
See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue

"Don’t start rubbing your thigh against his, don’t go playing Footsy under the table, keep smooth from rough."

*Ovid, Amores, Book 1*

It was all coming back to me, like the memory of a half-forgotten nightmare.

Milan Linate was the airport from which I had flown back to New York on that terrible day in August 1983. It had been a dusty, hazy and very hot day and the taxi had driven through half-deserted streets: everybody was *in vacanza*, on holiday.

Everything had hit me in the solar plexus, as soon as I’d emerged from the car and walked to the Departures area: the beggars lazily extending their upturned palms, the stench of smoke and exhaust fumes, the pellets of discarded chewing-gum dotting the concrete; all of it had seemed to increase the desperation and the sense of emptiness which had clawed at my chest.

I had not even been allowed the blessing of blue skies and sunshine to alleviate the pain.

*Einai gar kai entautha theous*, recited one of Heraclitus' fragments: the gods are here also.

There didn’t seem to be any deity able to solve my problem because my illness only had one cure, even though I had not been ready to admit it yet: going back to Elio.

I had arrived in Crema from Sicily travelling by train: the trip had been long and exhausting, but also exciting and filled with promise. But even then there had been a sort of restlessness, a disquiet which I had tried to conceal even from myself.

In Agrigento, where I had visited the Valley of the Temples, I had been deeply stirred by a surfeit of emotion which couldn’t be simply explained away by the magnificence of the landscape.

The solution to my riddle should have become immediately clear once I arrived in Crema, entered the Perlmanns’ mansion and met the dark-haired, skinny boy who was to change my life forever.

I ignored the signs and did my best to ignore him too, used as I was to bluffing, at poker and at life. I could pretend to be indifferent, even distant and arrogant: cold stares and stony heart; I made friends, went out with girls, teased and avoided him, all the while knowing that one word from him, one tender gesture, and I would be lost.

Elio and his music, his books, his way of delving into his imaginary world as if it were a fresh pool in a desert: I had liked him from the moment I had set eyes on him.

But the worst had come when we’d sunbathed outside in the garden for the first time, just the two of
us, down to our swimming trunks only. The agitation I had felt since Sicily had coalesced into a very sharp, all-consuming torment, which was at once erotic and emotional: I had realised that I wanted to share my heart and my body with another man.

Initially, I had told myself that it was only a generic sort of longing; we were in heaven during a sun-soaked Italian summer: youth, good health, plenty of free time, great music, exquisite food and company; there were all the requisite ingredients for sensuality and romance, so why shouldn’t I feel like any other young man would have felt?

This was the reason I had given myself for touching him that first time, with the silly pretence of initiating a massage.

He must have seen right through me, I’d thought, and been utterly repulsed. While I had guessed that he had been curious about me, and maybe attracted too, I would never have taken that as permission to take things further.

I had kept my distance, but had been thoroughly smitten.

When I’d reflected about it in the years to come, I’d often wondered whether I had been unnecessarily cruel with him: throwing my ‘laters’ at him like knives, being often absent at breakfast and dinner, dancing and flirting with Chiara, making him believe that I was sleeping around, that I was this here-today-gone-tomorrow, devil-may-care American, la muvi star, like his mother liked to call me.

Maybe I had pushed things too far, but I had been scared; so frightened that at times I could barely breathe for the fear that one night I would just break into his room and get into bed with him. I had taken to smoking, which I had quit years before, hoping to calm by nerves. As if that could have worked.

My daydreams had been extremely vivid: I could almost feel the touch of his skin against mine, the warmth of his lips, the sweetness of his breath, the silk of his hair; I had to stay away or risk the unthinkable.

The one time I lapsed made me aware of the depths I was capable of sinking to: profiting of his absence, I had gone into his room and searched for traces of his scent inside his swimsuit; the danger and sheer madness of my actions had revealed a part of me which I had never seen or even glimpsed at before.

The disgust that had followed had been so intense that I’d redoubled my efforts to stay away, to reduce our talk to chit-chat, to try and avoid going anywhere alone with him.

Naturally, it had not worked: Elio had made sure of that.

Years and years may and will elapse but nothing could erase the memory of that day: the War memorial, the blazing sun, his face as he’d told me the only thing that mattered to me, to us.

“We can’t speak of such things,” I’d told him, but my war had already been lost.

One kiss, and I had tasted it in my mouth for hours to come; it had only been chased away by the many more which came after that.
From that moment on everything between us unraveled, opened up, bloomed and exploded with such speed and violence that I would not, could not stay away from him.

We spent days and nights together, separating only for a handful of hours. I couldn’t sleep if he wasn’t in bed with me, I couldn’t breathe if I didn’t know where he was.

I had never felt like that before, didn’t know what to do with all that passion which I didn’t want to call love, with that emotion which I refused to call adoration.

And stupidly, I believed I could go back to my previous life as if nothing had changed.

I was convinced that what had worked in the past – my ability to turn the pages of my life without regret or remorse – would serve me well again: back in the States, I would work and love and live as if Elio had been only a footnote instead of the entire book.

What I had not seen coming, the one thing which nearly made me board the first flight back to Italy as soon as I touched down in New York, was the revelation of my own jealousy.

The agony of our separation had left little room for thought, but when I’d allowed my imagination to roam, I had seen Elio falling into Marzia’s arms and after that, perhaps, into those of another as yet unnamed man. They would share a bed, I’d thought, and the idea of Elio sleeping close to someone who wasn’t me almost made me groan aloud.

I must have known it in my heart, even though it took me a few days to verbalise it, that I could never allow that to happen, certainly not without a fight.

A fight I had very much intended to win.

“What are you thinking of?” he asked, turning the full force of his bright gaze on me.

“Guess.”

He frowned and his lips tightened: he’d understood.

“Was it very bad?”

“How was it for you?”

“Like having a shard of ice in my lungs, being unable to breathe properly.”

I wanted to hold him and kiss him, but we were on a plane full of people, many of whom wouldn’t relish the sight of two men embracing. Luckily, the aisle seat next to me was empty, and that was enough for Elio.

“If you turn towards me, your back will shield me from view. Pretend that you are looking outside the window,” he said, throwing me a wicked smile.

Naturally, I did as told and at once he took my face in his hands and put his lips on mine. The touch of his tongue, into my mouth, stroking my tongue, went straight to my groin, made me hard in a second.

When will this ever stop, I wondered?

It was almost like having no sensory memory, like being unable to predict how intensely pleasurable
every part of him was to me.

“We have to stop or I will not be accountable for my actions.”

“Why, what will you do?” he murmured, hot breath against my lips. I felt his hand on my thigh, dangerously close to my crotch; he started stroking, up and down, gazing at my eyes and down, at my lips, then up again. I wanted to grab him by the hair and eat him alive, and his little smirk told me he wanted it too.

But with one of those sudden, unpredictable switches that so often happened in our lovemaking, his expression softened and his hand sought mine.

“I’m so happy, Oliver,” he said, kissing me on the cheek.

“Yes, very happy,” I replied, gathering him to my chest and enveloping him in my arms.

A few minutes later, we were told to fasten our seatbelts as we were approaching Linate.

Four years later, I couldn’t imagine my life without Elio.
Amoureux Solitaires

Chapter Summary

Our boys are back in Crema!!!! Yay!!!!

Chapter Notes

Amoureux Solitaires is a 1980's song by Belgian singer Lio. Its very addictive; google it if you don't believe me and imagine Elio singing along. I have and it's cute ha ha.
Sottaceti = pickles

I had started taking photographs of our life together when I’d realised I had none of the summer and winter of 1983. During that short Christmas holiday, we had been too immersed in one another to think about collecting evidence of our transient happiness.

A group photo had been taken at Elio’s birthday: he was flushed and happy, his eyes half-closed. I was next to him, one arm curled around his waist and a silly grin on my lips. We’d just come down from the attic, where we’d sucked each other off: when I had looked at the picture days later, I had felt the ghost of his taste on my tongue.

A couple of our friends had taken up photography as a hobby and I dabbled with black and white for a while; eventually, I decided that I hadn’t the patience for setting up shots, so I had bought a good quality camera and took decent photos of the people and places I wanted to remember.

With his love of immediacy, Elio had preferred a Polaroid camera and he frequently used it to ambush-snap me while I was under the shower or when I was writing.

We had taken several polaroids of us together and I loved them, even if the quality was poor and our faces had the distorted appearance of fish in a bowl.

That late afternoon, on the train which travelled from Milan to Crema, I gazed out of the window and wanted to photograph every single portion of the landscape; it was running away from us and, like time, I wished I could stop it.

It was a regional train, so there were no separate compartments, but only rows of two adjoining seats with a corridor in the middle; it was full and noisy: I had forgotten how loud it was here compared to London; there was music too, from a radio or a portable stereo, I couldn’t tell. It was playing a French song of a few summers ago, and Elio started to sing along, bobbing his head up and down.

_Eh toi, dis-moi que tu m'aimes_
_Même si c'est un mensonge_
_Et qu'on n'a pas une chance_

“Give me your camera,” I said, and without waiting for his reply, I opened his Invicta backpack and found what I was looking for.
He turned to face at me, and kept singing and moving his head in time with the rather repetitive melody. I wished I could record him, but I would have to make do with a photo of his childlike joy, of the smile in his eyes and the way his lips pouted when he spoke French.

“It’s a terrible song, but it reminds me of you.”

I showed him the picture and he let his head fall on my shoulder. We were so used to these public displays of affection, they were after all so minimal, that I was not prepared for the glare thrown our way by the ticket inspector, who muttered something under his breath which Elio surely heard but pretended not to.

I decided to ignore the incident, because I knew how things stood here in Italy, outside the comfort zone of the Perlman household. And even there, I wasn’t sure how their friends and relatives would react when they saw us together, when the full extent of our commitment was made apparent.

A summer fling, even an unorthodox one such as ours, was perhaps acceptable, but what about a serious relationship which could, as we hoped, last a lifetime? That may be treated differently and I was ready for it, but I didn’t want Elio to be offended or even shunned by people he’d known all his life.

His head stayed on my shoulder and I asked him about the song.

“Why does it remind you of me?”

“You remember that day when I came with you to that bar where you played cards? This song came on the jukebox when you won the first game. Every time you slammed down your cards, your shirt opened a little bit more.”

“You were ogling me from behind your sunglasses.”

“Just admiring the view.”

If we had been at home, I would have taken his hand or caressed his thigh. In a way, I enjoyed the restrictions placed on my desire; postponing pleasure was not a bad thing, I could learn to relish it, provided the delay wasn’t too long. We could always count on the night-time, the privacy of our bedroom, the solitude of the fields and the orchards, the banks of the river and the myriad secluded spots which could be reached by bike.

“Why did you tell my father we would get a taxi?”

“I’m sure you can guess.”

A short silence followed. We liked to read each other’s minds and we were becoming increasingly good at it.

He kissed my neck, softly.

“Very romantic,” he whispered.

“What is?”

“You want to arrive the same way as back then, only this time we’ll be together.”

“One of us is even wearing the same shirt and it’s not me.”

“Billowy is mine now.”
The fact that he’d named my shirt always made me smile, but also hurt a little. For years it had been
the only tangible link between us, like a relic kept under glass in a museum, testament of a past
which could never return. But ours was returning, merged as it was with the present and the future.

“Maybe you could let me wear it in bed tonight, while it still smells of you.”

He laughed.

“You’re just as sick as me.”

“I always was.”

I had not met Elio’s father since the winter of 1984, but we had talked on the phone and kept up a
desultory but friendly correspondence. I couldn’t call him Pro any longer and he’d asked me to call
him Sammy, which I still found quite hard to do.

The Perlman’s relationship was the polar opposite of my parents’ marriage: where the former was
open, warm and loving, the latter had been frigid and characterised by lack of communication and
true understanding. They may have loved each other in a way, but I had never witnessed any sign of
tenderness between them nor had I ever heard them conversing about books or other interests they
may have had in common.

Being in the company of Samuel and Annella Perlman had been almost as important to me as
meeting their son: they had welcomed me into their home like a friend and when I had left, they’d
embraced me as they would have one of their own.

“Our home is your home,” they’d said on the first day and they’d never recanted it.

I still regretted that at times I had treated them less than kindly in order to stay away from Elio: what
their son called dinner drudgery had been quite pleasant to me and I was sorry to have given the
appearance of arrogance and disdain.

As the car approached the familiar landscape of Elio’s home, we rolled down the taxi windows and
inhaled the fragrance of the unspoilt countryside; we passed by fields blanketed with sunflowers,
masses of them, dazzling yellow in the twilight.

“We should stop and take a picture,” Elio said, “At this time of day, they are even more striking.”

“I don’t want to be late for dinner. We can come back tomorrow or another evening. There’s plenty
of time.”

What marvellous words: plenty of time. I couldn’t wait to be in our room and just be there with him
without having the hands of the clock constantly mocking us; ten nights, nine, eight, seven: stupid,
useless countdown.

Elio stretched like a cat and sighed loudly.

“Tomorrow let’s sleep until noon,” he said.

“I was thinking of waking up at dawn and going for a swim.”

He turned towards me and narrowed his eyes.
“We’ll see,” he replied and, while he shifted his backpack on my lap, he slid his hand underneath it and pressed it against my groin. It was only a fleeting touch, but it was more than enough.

“Yes, we’ll see.”

I removed my espadrille and placed my foot on his.

Well, if he wasn’t going to play fair, why should I?

“My boys, here at last!”

Mr Perlman rushed to greet us and his wife was just behind him, cigarette in hand and a contented smile on her lips.

Elio embraced his father first then kissed his mother on both cheeks; she took his face in her hands and gazed into his eyes.

I extended my hand toward Mr Perlman, but he hugged me and patted my back and I gladly reciprocated. I was determined to ignore the lump in my throat, so I asked him what sort of company we should expect at dinner.

“Only the four of us tonight,” he replied, as we walked up to the house, “Family only.”

That only made the lump situation worse, but Annella came to my rescue.

“Our muvi star has lost weight, so no third degree tonight. Just food, wine and gossip,” she said, squeezing my hand.

“Yes, yes, all right. We are dining outside, but I’m sure you’ll want to go up to your room first,” her husband replied, taking her by the hand.

Your room. Singular.

Elio looked at me and nodded, but I was dumbstruck.

Thankfully, Mafalda chose that moment to come out the front door and Elio ran into her arms, so I had time to recover.

“We’ll just wash our hands, we don’t want to be late for dinner and upset Mafalda,” I replied. She heard her name, so I repeated what I’d just said and she laughed.

All in all, it had been a perfect homecoming.

Elio’s room, our room, had been untouched by the march of time: same posters on the walls, same books on the shelves, same smell of lavender, citronella and wood polish. The only scent that was missing from it was the one we were about to bring.

We stepped into the bathroom and washed our hands, side by side.

“I badly need a shower,” I said, looking down at my crumpled shirt.

“Not yet,” he replied, nuzzling the side of my neck.
“Stop sniffing me.”

“Says the man who wants to wear my dirty shirt in bed.”

“That’s different.”

“So you won’t touch me unless I shower?”

“You know it’s not true. Wait, why are you really doing this?”

He smiled and kissed me on the cheek.

“I think you should relax more,” he replied, pretending to massage my shoulders.

We laughed about that old joke, but I knew what he meant and he was right, of course. This place, its people, Elio’s parents and their house had acquired an almost mythical status in my memory and in my heart, and because I felt so deeply about them, I was too steeped in nostalgia to truly appreciate the present.

“A few glasses of wine should do the trick.”

“Not too many or you’ll fall asleep on me.”

“Look who’s talking.”

It wasn’t until we sat down at the table that I realised how hungry and thirsty I was. Mafalda had prepared prawn cocktails and after that we had melon with pastrami, green salad and a selection of cheeses. For dessert, there was semifreddo, which was Elio’s favourite and mine too.

“You remember our rosatello,” Annella said, pouring said wine into my glass.

“The first time I had two glasses at lunch I could barely keep my eyes open to work on my book. That’s a mistake I never made again.”

She laughed.

“Elio used to sleep until dinner time if he had just one glass. Does he still have nosebleeds? He says he doesn’t.”

“That’s because I don’t.”

“It’s only happened once, but we took care of it,” I said.

“You both look very well: happy, serene, don’t they, tesoro?” Mr Perlman intervened, tousling Elio’s hair.

His wife nodded, beaming at the two of us, while Mafalda brought us a jar of sottaceti to eat with the cheese. She looked at me, mutely asking whether I’d enjoyed the food. “Tutto squisito,” I said, everything’s delicious, and her eyes lit up at the compliment.

“How’s London? I have heard that Jack’s having too much fun.”

Mr Perlman had always been in favour of youth galloping, but within limits, and rightly so.
We explained what had happened, but said nothing about Akiko; after all, Jack's private life wasn’t our business.

Annella lighted a cigarette and pushed her plate away.

“He was always a peculiar boy, intelligent but very secretive. A little bit like Elio, but not as affectionate.”

They must have worried too, I thought, seeing how much time their son had spent with his music, his books and his lonely bike-rides.

“I like Jack,” I said, smiling at Elio, who was devouring his second bowl of *semifreddo*, “With most people, you know what sort of life they will have, but not Jack. He could win the Nobel Prize one day or invent a new religion: it’s really hard to say.”

“What about you, my dear?” Samuel Perlman asked his son, but was immediately overruled by his wife. “Not tonight, my love; no third degree, remember?”

Elio had finished his dessert and was licking the spoon clean; he wasn’t even trying to be subtle. His mother threw me an amused glance and poured me another glass of wine.

The evening was finally turning into night, but we could still hear the cicadas sing. It was hot and humid, but with a light breeze which carried the scent of rosemary and jasmine. The air was clean and pure and as I watched Elio and his father talk, while his mother looked on, gazing at me from time to time, I felt such perfect contentment I would have loved to distil it, bottle it and keep it with me forever.
“This is almost like walking in a dream,” I said, as we strolled among the pomegranate trees. There was only a sliver of moon that night, so it felt like being shrouded by a mantle of darkness shot through with stars.

I had suggested we should take a walk because I was filled with a sort of anxious energy and I wanted to feel the breath of nature on my skin, inside my lungs, under the soles of my feet.

Elio was smoking a cigarette and gazing up at the sky.

“I wonder why most people have this dream. There must be a really cheap Freudian explanation for it, like fear of the unknown or of sexual desire,” he said.

“In my dream I’m never afraid; excited and curious, yes, but not afraid.”

“The silence has a different quality here. There’s a peace you can never really find in London.”

I moved closer to him, took the cigarette from his lips and brought it to my mouth.

“Do you ever think about coming back to stay?”

“Here? No, I don’t think so. Maybe try somewhere we’ve never been before.”

I thought about this possibility for a moment and it did have its merits.

“That sounds like an adventure.”

He pouted to indicate he wanted his cigarette back, but I gave him a kiss instead.

“And you wouldn’t mind leaving London one day,” he asked.

“No.”

There must be something behind these questions, I thought, but didn’t press him for an explanation, didn’t try to read his mind.

I finally gave him back what remained of his cigarette and he sucked on it, hollowing his cheeks. As I gazed at him, I was startled by how much he’d grown since I’d met him. What an absurd realisation, one would think, considering we were always together. But maybe the comparison was only possible when made against the same backdrop, like one those idiotic ‘spot the difference’ newspaper quizzes.

He smiled a slow, lazy, knowing grin and once again it dawned on me that he owned me, not only in the sense that I belonged to him, but also on a more basic, cellular level.

“I would like to go to bed now,” he whispered, stroking my lips with his thumb.
I swallowed those words in my mouth, felt him give in to me, his fingers in my hair, his pulse accelerating underneath the palm of my hands.

This is what I had feared when I had touched him for the first time: that he would be familiar to me, like the forest of the dream: wholly new and yet as old as the sands of time. And if desire might wane, although it seemed impossible, what could never cease to be was this certainty of recognition, a magnetic attraction which was blood-deep and defied logic.

“Shall I carry you?” I joked, echoing what I had asked him on the winter of four years ago.

He smiled and bit down on my lower lip.

“Just hold me,” he replied, so we walked back to the house, entwined.

“I swear these sheets smell of sunshine.”

I sat on the bed and brought a pillow to my nose.

“Vanilla, camomile and all things wholesome and good.” Elio recited, as he stood in front of me unbuttoning his shirt. Once he was done, he helped me slide into it, while I kissed down his chest.

“Hmm... sweet and sour.”

“Sweat and semifreddo.”

I licked him to make sure.

“Lemony. By the way, what was that thing you did with the spoon? Your mother was practically winking at me.”

He stroked my hair, combed his fingers through it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replied, silently shaking with laughter.

I pulled him down on the bed, rolled him over so that he was lying on his back.

“Did you mind?” he asked, looking at me with that expectant, child-like expression which always got me.

“It was a perfect evening, spoon-licking and all.”

I lay down next to him and caressed his thigh.

We were both half hard already, but the mood, enhanced by the soft Oxford night-light, had turned languorous rather than urgent.

I kept stroking his body and he shut his eyes and let it happen. I thought he’d dozed off when he said:

“One night, I remember wishing so much you’d come into my room. I told myself that if you didn’t want to touch me, you could at least read me something, and we could snuggle up with a book and just be together.”

More of a wintery thing, under heaps of blankets and with spicy hot wine, but yes, I could certainly
work with that.

“And what did you wish me to read you?”

“At the time, I thought of Gogol or Chekhov, something like that, but...”

“But now you’d prefer poetry.”

“There should be one among that pile on my desk.”

He was purposefully vague, in order to test me. It wasn’t even a serious challenge, since among the Montale, Calvino and Larkin was Celan’s collection, Die Niemandsrose. It was a first edition and the pages were starting to yellow.

Elio shifted up on the bed and rested his back against the pillows.

“It belongs to my father. He and mum were in Paris at the time when Celan had just thrown himself into the Seine to die.”

When I returned to bed, Elio laid his head on my chest and toyed with the collar of my shirt, which of course was his shirt now.

“Guess which is my favourite and read it to me.”

“What if I read you my favourite instead?”

“Maybe it’s the same.”

“Okay, I’ll count to three then we’ll both say the opening verse. Ready?”

“Yes, no, wait, yes, all right.”

“One, two, three... Ein Wort, an das ich dich gerne verlor,”

“Ein Wort, an das ich dich gerne verlor,” we quoted, smiling at what we knew was no coincidence.

“Flimmerbaum is such a great word, glimmer-tree. I wish I could invent words.”

“You do that with music.”

He tilted his head up and I kissed him on the lips.

“Back then when you told me you loved Celan, I thought of this poem.”

“Even before we had...”

“Even then.”

I kissed him again and read the poem out loud.

The ending always moved me to tears:

*Open you lay before my wayfaring soul.*

We stayed silent for a long while, a wordless conversation unspooling between us.
I had suspected the opening verse would apply to the two of us even before we had so much as embraced. It had scared me so intensely that I had sneered at Elio’s love for Celan in front of Chiara:

*One word to which I did not mind losing you: the word never.*

We swam, the poet said. And we slept, which in a way amounted to the same thing.

At dawn, I got up to relieve myself. Warm air was coming in from the bathroom window and the cloudless sky promised a scorching-hot day.

Elio was sprawled face down on his side of the bed, but with one outstretched arm resting on my pillow.

I brushed my teeth, and by the time I was done and I lay down next to Elio, another part of me was very alert too; maybe I would have ignored it and gone back to sleep if he hadn’t called my name.

“Oliver, Oliver.”


“I need to piss,” he said, and yawned.

“You don’t need to tell me.”

He stumbled out of bed and when he came back I had drifted off a little, not enough to ignore his naked body so close to mine. Without ceremony, he put his hand between my legs and fondled my balls. I knew what he wanted, what he was about to say. The way he’d moved had made that apparent.

“I really want to fuck you,” he said, his hand closing around my cock.

“Do you really?”

“Yes, and I want to look at your face when I shoot my load inside you.”

I was so hard it hurt.

He did that sometimes, but I couldn’t always predict when, which made it even more exciting. He’d wake up feeling savage and wanting to show it to me, in all its rawness. I let him prepare me, only concentrating in trying not to come too soon. When he finally slid in, we were both mad with want and the shirt I was still wearing was drenched with sweat.

His eyes never left mine and with every snap of hips he’d groan and hiss obscenities, which I repeated, and pulled him closer, deeper. I was desperate to kiss him and he teased me, slowly licking his lips and moaning, until I did what he’d wanted all along and grabbed him by the hair, forcing his head down. It was a wet devouring kiss which went straight to my cock. Soon I was coming and tightening around him, and he kept pleading: “Look at me, look at me,” his nostrils flared and eyes large and black. His orgasm left him shaky and helpless and I was in no better state.

“Don’t use billowy to clean us up,” he mumbled, already half-asleep.

“Why not, it’s tradition.”

After I was done, I threw the shirt on the floor, pressed my chest to his back and passed out.
Next time I opened my eyes, it was to the sound of a voice calling me.

It was a girl’s voice and it came from the garden.

“It’s Vimini,” Elio shouted from the bathroom where, judging by the noise, he was taking a shower.

I got up, put a bathrobe on and splashed water on my face and hair then opened the bedroom window and looked down at my minute friend. When she saw me, she smiled and waved her hand.

“Are you coming down or not?”

“Give us ten minutes.”

“I’m having breakfast with you, I’ve invited myself.”

“Don’t eat all the eggs.”

“I won’t and I will help you with yours, if you want.”

“Okay, see you in a moment.”

“Tell Elio I said hello.”

As predicted, the day was blazing hot with not a hint of breeze.

We went down to a very late breakfast in swimming shorts and t-shirts, finding no one downstairs but Mafalda. Mr Perlman was in his study and his wife had gone to Crema to do some shopping with one of her friends.

Outside, Vimini was drinking orange juice from a tall glass, but she left it as soon as she saw us.

We had been writing to each other and she’d also sent me a couple of photos, but it was still a mild shock to see her after such a long time. Her illness had stunted her growth, but she looked healthier now that the new course of treatment she’d embarked on had started to work.

She ran towards us and allowed us to hug her, trying to hide how happy she was.

We sat down at the table and Mafalda brought us coffee and soft boiled eggs in a pan of cold water.

“Can I cut the top of your egg off?” Vimini asked me. She smiled at Elio who eyed her with his usual perplexity. It amused me to see how puzzled he always was at my friendship with his old friend. I suspected he thought I was harbouring a suppressed paternal instinct, but it was never the case. She was a like a sister to me and I loved her clever, unfiltered, untainted perspective on things.

“Are you coming for a swim later or do you have to work?”

“No work for me this time, unless Elio’s father needs my help.”

“I doubt he would dare ask,” said Elio, who was devouring bread and nutella and had chocolate all over his lips. “Mum wants Oliver to put on weight.”

Vimini looked me over and frowned.
“He seems all right to me. So are you coming?”

“I can’t wait,” I replied, as I poured coffee in two cups.

“Do you know who has come back home too? You’ll never guess,” she asked Elio, with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

He said a few names, some of which I had never heard before, but she shook her head. In the end, she got tired of the guessing game.

“Riccardo Malaspina,” she announced, with dramatic flair.

The Malaspinas owned a villa close by and Riccardo was their eldest son who’d been away on a prolonged gap year.

“He’s not as good looking as you, but he’s very handsome. Chiara says he looks like Alain Delon, but I don’t see it. Anyway, he wants to go to the States next and he’s looking forward to meeting you and asking you for advice.”

She smiled at me and then at Elio, the very picture of untarnished innocence.
“I love this, what is it?”

We were in heaven, in what could have been a superimposed snapshot of the past: I, lying on the grass with a book and a glass of icy lemonade and he, strumming his guitar. The difference was that the thread between us had become an unbreakable bond, and that we could stare and smile at one another without having to dissect reasons and motives.

“This was written the year I was born. It’s Luciano Berio’s Wasserklavier.”

“Water-piano: another great word.”

“I can play it to you the way it was intended.”

“Later,” I replied, and that made us both chuckle.

“What are you reading?”

“I don’t know if you can call it reading, considering I have been listening to you and staring into space.”

He stood up, set the guitar down on the bench and came to sit next to me. He touched my nose with the tip of his fingers.

“Sun screen,” he said, and without further ado he squirted a dollop of lotion on to his palm and started applying it first to my face then my neck, shoulders and chest.

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

“You can do it to me in a moment.”

“That’s an even worse idea.”

I smeared his cheeks and forehead with the liquid so that he resembled the parody of an American Indian. When I kissed his skin, it tasted of coconut and sunshine, or was it my taste that I was bringing to him, like an imprint of my desire to be one and the same with him? Like the time I had worn his suit to show him that being with him, inside of him, had changed me, initiating a
metamorphosis which might take a lifetime to complete. I loved that we couldn’t be naked here, because imagining was half the pleasure and waiting was an intoxicating aphrodisiac. Being with other people, playing volleyball or tennis with them, taking photos, going fishing, biking, swimming, meant placing obstacles between us and the moment when could share the memories of our day and weave them into the tapestry of our life together.

He asked me again about the book, even though it was now within his reach.

“It’s a collection of Proust’s early writings.”

“The Juvenilia,” he said, because of course he knew all about it. Another man my age may have been upset at being so frequently outsmarted by someone younger, but I’d always admired and been proud of him. Where does this pride come from, I had wondered at the start, so angry with myself that I had glared at him. That pride had been another sign of love which I had naturally chosen to strangle at birth.

“My favourite is Glaukos, the blue-eyed one. When I first read it, I tried to imagine what he would look like, since Proust did not describe him, aside from calling him charming.”

“And?”

“Well, he’s you, isn’t he? He has blue eyes, many male friends who discuss Aristotle’s philosophy and Euripides’ poems with him, he’s nearly naked to show off his beauty, smiling as the sun warms him.”

I shook my head and found myself strangely embarrassed.

“I don’t show off. And I don’t sit on my friends’ knees like Glaukos.”

He placed a hand on my sternum.

“Oh, so why do you always have your shirts open down to here?”

Wait, did it bother him?

“I have been in some sort of uniform all my life, dressing to appear serious, professional, dependable.”

“And here you want to feel free, I know.”

He’d put his sunglasses on and I couldn’t read his expression.

“Everybody looks at you, they all love you,” he added, his fingernails scratching my chest, lightly, insistently.

Maybe it did bother him.

“They can look but they can’t touch,” I joked, testing the waters.

“Chiara did more than that,” he replied, with an impish smile. “And you invited my aunt for a midnight gita, at least that’s what you called it.”

“Wait a minute, what about you and Marzia?”

He appeared to ponder my rebuttal, but I noticed a muscle twitching in his jaw.
“Stop messing with me or-”

“Or what?” he removed his sunglasses and biting his lips, stared into my eyes, his face inches from mine.

His expression was defiant, as if to say: “And now what will you do?”

What could I do, with the house so close and people coming and going announced? He knew I wouldn’t do anything which could compromise him, but there were many other possibilities to explore.

Before he had time to react, I picked him up and threw him, kicking and screaming, into the pool.

“Traitor, traitor!” he emerged from it yelling, water coming out of his nose and mouth, curls plastered to his forehead.

“You needed to cool down.”

“Are you just going to sit there and watch?”

I took a long sip of lemonade and went back to reading my book, or at least pretending to.

It was about five in the afternoon and even though it was as hot as noon, people were slowly emerging from their afternoon siesta.

The first to arrive was Anchise, who started to water the flowers and the plants. I said hello and he waved back. He had asked us to go fishing with him in the boat and Elio had been eager to say yes to make up for his past unkindness.

Next came Annella with two friends; they sat at the table under the linden tree and played ramino while eating diced watermelon.

“Where’s Elio?” she asked, and I pointed at the pool, where her son had given up swimming in favour of floating.

“Are you doing anything later?”

“A bike ride, maybe an aperitivo at Momo’s. We’ll be back for dinner.”

Momo Moreschi had invited us for drinks, but dinners at their house were always such crowded affairs we’d agreed to avoid staying on if we could.

Three days into our holiday, we’d only met a handful of Elio’s friends. Marzia had not arrived yet; she was still InterRailing around Europe and was due back at the end of July. Chiara and her sister had gone to Rimini for a week with some university friends.

Initially, we had wondered what to say to Momo, Mario and the others about us, but they were so happy to see us again that we never broached the subject, while at the same time we avoided behaving like a couple, even though it was obvious if one chose to see it. There was also Vimini to consider: she wouldn’t think twice about stating what to her was as plain as the nose on her face, and why shouldn’t she, after all?

Those were still the times when being called frocio, fag, was the worst thing that could happen to an Italian man; better a thief than a fag, anything but that. I knew that four years ago Elio had feared the whispers and the sneers, and that despite having come a long way since then, he was still vulnerable.
to this kind of insults. I’m not saying that I wasn’t, but this was his home, not mine, and besides he was used to being popular and at the centre of attention for the ‘right’ reasons: his music, his cleverness, his ability to make girls want to take care of him.

And yet he had imagined Mafalda would leave the house once she found out, while she’d taken it in her stride; perhaps for her it meant having to deny the sexual portion of our relationship, but we all have different coping mechanisms whose inner workings should never be questioned too closely.

One person who was already there but we had yet to meet was Riccardo Malaspina. After Vimini had announced his return, Elio had told me about him.

He, Jack and Elio were the brightest of their set and Riccardo, who was now twenty-four, was the eldest. He had graduated with honours, but had decided to go travelling around the world: he wanted to live while he was still young enough to enjoy it, he’d declared. The reason I had not met him the previous time was that he’d been studying in Milan and, being very popular, he would never return home before late August. I had been long gone by then.

“Were you good friends with him?” I asked Elio one night; we were smoking on the balcony, sharing the same cigarette.

“Not really, no. Two years is a big gap when you are a kid. We weren’t interested in the same things.”

“Doesn’t he like music and books?”

“Not in the way you and I like them. They were more of a means to an end to him. As if he was always asking: where can I go next, who can I be, what can I do: jumping from one thing to the other as quickly as possible.”

“The magpie approach to life. These types always burn out when they are still young. I bet he’s done a lot of drugs, and not as methodically as Jack either.”

“Probably,” Elio wasn’t giving much away, but I sensed his dislike.

“You’re not looking forward to meeting him.”

“He’ll be busy visiting people in the region; we may never see him.”

“Did anything happen between you two?”

His silence did nothing to convince me of the opposite.

“There was a girl once, nothing serious; we were just starting to date. One evening, we’d agreed to go to the cinema and to meet there. I waited for her then thought she’d forgotten about it, so I left. Later I found out that he’d invited her to dinner at a fancy restaurant. I was only fifteen and the girl was his age, seventeen.”

I nudged him in the ribs.

“It is a thing then, older people. Was she a blonde?”

He threw away the cigarette and slipped a hand inside my shirt.

“She may have been; why, do you have a problem with that?”
His fingers were rubbing my nipples, back and forth from one to the other.

“Blonde or not, she was an idiot,” I said, taking his face in my hands and tracing the contour of his lips with my thumbs.

“You don’t know him,” he whispered, and I couldn’t reply because I was too busy trying to stick my tongue down his throat.

Momo’s younger sister Lavinia was the same age as Vimini and that seemed the only thing they had in common. From what I’d seen of her, she wasn’t interested in much except for the clothes she was wearing or the ones she saw in the fashion magazines.

That evening when we set foot in the Moreschis’ sumptuous garden, it was her high-pitched laughter which greeted us. She was talking to a very slender man with longish black hair of that shade which is seldom found in Caucasian people and which seems almost blue.

“E’ arrivato Oliver,” she announced, Oliver’s here, and the man turned toward us.

I could see why Chiara thought he looked like Alain Delon, especially around the cheekbones and mouth, but his eyes were green not blue and he didn’t have any of the languorous sensuality of the French actor. His was a kind of nervy, highly-strung handsomeness, angular and fierce.

He was holding a drink in his hand, which he gave to Elio without even looking at him, then he took my hand and shook it firmly.

“It’s so great to meet you. Momo tells me you mix splendid cocktails and I’m dying for an American Martini,” he exclaimed, and when he smiled the years dropped away from him, revealing a wide-eyed street urchin underneath the cultivated exterior.

“Okay, why not, and what would you like?” I asked Elio, who was now chatting with Lavinia.

“That thing with the lemon granita,” he replied, but did not follow us inside.

“What else did Momo tell you about me?”

The last thing I wanted was to be ambushed by this unnerving boy-man.

“Oh, not much: you were here four years ago, you live in London and are very good friends with Elio.”

Not a hint of sarcasm there, but that didn’t mean anything.

“You didn’t even say hello to him.”

“We never do; that way the conversation can flow more naturally, as if you suddenly slipped imperceptibly into it, almost by chance.”

I had heard that before and was about to say it when he added.

“Foucault, I’m a great fan.”

We had reached the French windows which led into the large salon where we had partied on Elio’s birthday.
Momo saw us and came to say hello.

“I’ve asked Oliver to prepare the drinks,” Riccardo said, with another dazzling smile.

“Great,” our host replied, but he seemed less than thrilled.

I wasn’t too happy either, but I was saving my objections for later, certain that I would need to make use of them. And I was right, although not in the way I had anticipated that evening.
“I won’t keep you long or my wife will kill me. But first of all, I must beg you to stop calling me Mr Perlman; it makes me feel ancient. Perhaps Sammy is too chummy... will Samuel do?”

“I will try, but I can’t promise anything,” I replied, smiling.

We were in Mr Perlman’s studio, where he’d summoned me in order to help him sort out some notes for a paper he was writing. That was the official reason, but I suspected he wanted to talk to me in private about something, quite possibly my relationship with his son.

“I’m sure you must have guessed that I wanted to talk to you. First of all, you must know how happy we are that things are going so well between the two of you. We were hoping you would meet again and find a way back to one another.”

As usual, in Samuel’s presence I became slightly tongue-tied because of the kindness and true affection he was always showing me. I had not been used to it within my family and it invariably moved me.

“You sent him to London on purpose. I will never thank you enough for doing that.”

He leafed through a book and adjusted his glasses.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way. You just needed a little push in the right direction.”

“How could you be sure that it was the right direction?”

And then I realised that the book he was perusing was my birthday present, which we had taken to Italy to show them. Elio had preceded me, knowing I would otherwise hesitate, for fear of seeming immodest.

“This speaks volumes,” he replied, pointing at the photo on the inside of the dust jacket. I loved that snapshot of us, so I could only stare at it and smile.
“And this is my son all right,” he chortled, as he read the Blake quote on the flyleaf.

“Yes, he really believes in it wholeheartedly.”

I couldn’t look him in the eyes, because I didn’t want him to see the tears in mine. I knew they were there, because nothing made me love Elio more than talking of him with the man who, alone in the world, was aware of what I had been through.

“After you left that summer, I advised him he should never snuff out the flame or try and smother the pain. Life is not worth living without either of them.”

Luckily, Mafalda had provided us with a jug of apricot juice, so I poured myself a glass and took a sip, hoping my emotions would simmer down.

“Am I being too intrusive?” he asked, because of course he’d sensed my discomfort. I shook my head.

“No, it’s just that I’m not used to this sort of conversation. My father was very different from you.”

“I’m very sorry about his passing. I said it already at the time and I repeat it now: you are like a son to me, to us. But let’s not dwell on this or you’ll end up drinking the entire jug and getting sick.”

He winked at me and I burst out laughing.

“There is another reason for this tête-à-tête: your mother called and spoke to Annella. She hinted that she would not be averse to accepting our invitation.”

I snorted.

“That sounds very enthusiastic. When I last talked to her, she didn’t even want to say Elio’s name and I won’t have her insult any of you. The point of the invitation was to introduce her to the person I want to spend my life with and to his family, but if her only aim is to cause disruption-”

“My suggestion is to take things one step at a time: let’s have her here, so she can see you with her own eyes. If she still doesn’t accept your relationship then at least you will have tried.”

“I don’t know. This is such an idyllic place for me; like the Garden of Eden without the snake. I’d hate to be the one who lets the reptile in.”

He sat down next to me and patted my hand.

“She only wants what she thinks is best for you: a traditional family with a wife and children.”

Elio too was an only child, I thought, and perhaps he and Annella also had secret misgivings at being deprived of grandchildren.

“Do you-”

“No, we only want Elio to be happy and fulfilled. It’s always been up to him to decide how. We are here to guide him and help him not to demand things from him. But it doesn’t mean we don’t understand your mother’s preoccupations.”

“I don’t need her approval nor do I seek it. If I had to choose between her and Elio, I wouldn’t hesitate for a second.”
My fervour gave him pause: he looked at me more intently, with the same focus his son directed at me at times and that never failed to make me feel naked and vulnerable.

“Is anything worrying you, aside from your mother?”

Should I say anything or was it a mistake? I’d never had a father figure to talk to, aside from the rabbi back home when I was little more than a kid, and I was deeply compelled to. He guessed my indecision and changed the subject. For a while we spoke of the articles contained in the book; he praised our work, but was especially complimentary of the way I had involved Elio in order to get him back into my life.

“I have always admired him, right from the start.”

“Yes, and it was always mutual.”

“You saw right through us both.”

He smiled and placed the book on the desk, with infinite care.

“You were quite transparent, once I solved the riddle of your brusque choice of greeting.”

“I’m sorry. I had decided to keep my distance.”

“It was the right thing to do. Both of you needed time.”

I sighed, thinking of the years we’d spent apart.

“More time than I’d anticipated.”

“In the end, it was all for the best.”

There was a moment of silence; not uncomfortable, but expectant. He was waiting for me to speak, sensing that I’d kept something back.

“Do you believe it was enough?”

“What’s your reason for asking?”

There was no real reason, but being here where everything had started, and sleeping in the same bed where we’d made love the first time had brought back the ghosts of old fears I thought we’d buried for good.

“Seeing him among his friends... they are all so young and inexperienced.”

“Not all of them. Elio told me that you’ve met Riccardo.”

Trust him to have his finger on the pulse.

“Yeah.”

I didn’t know what else to add, whether to openly admit that our encounter at the Moreschis had left me unsettled, sort of itchy, as if something were askew and I didn’t know how to put it straight. It was all too vague to be articulated.

“How well do you know Catullus?”
As was often the case, Samuel was taking the scenic route and I was curious to find out where it would lead.

“Try me.”

“Hunc unum excipio, ut puto, pudenter.”

“This one boy I would have you spare: a modest request, I believe. It’s poem number fourteen, no, wait, fifteen.”

“Quindici,” he agreed.

What was he trying to tell me? Fifteen is about Catullus entreating Aurelius to keep away from this one boy or incur the poet’s ire and vengeance. Was that what I had truly feared: that contrary to all appearances, Riccardo wasn’t flirting with me, but trying to get at Elio? It must be so, since Mr Perlman had guessed as much and he hadn’t even been present.

“Has he done anything like that already?”

Samuel heaved a deep sigh which ended in a chuckle.

“If Jack was here, he would surely come out with a trenchant epigram about his friend. I’d rather not say anything unkind, because I believe there’s no real malice involved. Why did Jack take those pills?”

“He was testing the boundaries of his body, he said.”

“Some do it with drugs, others need additional stimulants.”

“I see.”

“Don’t let it spoil your holiday. As for your mother, let’s see what happens, okay?”

He hugged me and, in all honesty, I was really glad he did.

That same afternoon, a group of us went down to the river for a swim.

Chiara and her sister - a curvy brunette called Viola - had returned from the Adriatic Riviera and were full of stories about the discos in Rimini and the beaches in Milano Marittima.

“She was sleeping with this German boy and because she was wearing a red dress, he asked the DJ to play Lady in Red,” Viola recounted, while Chiara pinched her arm, trying to shut her up. They were both laughing, clearly enjoying the anecdote.

“Chris de Burgh?” Elio shuddered.

“I know, right?”

Vimini, who’d been sauntering ahead of us, started singing the song in question, and we all joined in.

“Marzia told me all about her visit to London,” Chiara said. We were undressing along the river bank and she had taken me aside. “She said you are very happy, together.”

I threw a glance at Elio, who was chatting and laughing with Mario and Viola.
“Who else did she tell?”

“No one and I didn’t say a word, not even to my sister. But you came back that Christmas and nobody’s blind.”

She stripped off her short summer dress to reveal a microscopic bikini. She was already evenly tanned and had a lightly muscled, stunning body. It left me utterly cold, while even just a casual peek at the swell of Elio’s buttocks underneath his tight-fitting suit provoked a number of lewd thoughts.

“I’m sorry about the way I treated you back then. At least, I should have said goodbye properly.”

She smacked my ass playfully.

“You’re forgiven. And don’t worry about the others. As long as you don’t make out in front of them, they won’t care.”

“What about Malaspina?”

Chiara did something I hadn’t expected: she blushed.

“Riccardo? Why, what’s he said?”

She said his name with the same pretend nonchalance I had once used to speak of Elio with Tim; when I couldn’t touch his name, because it hurt too much.

I wanted to ask her questions, but I didn’t want to spoil the joyous mood of the day.

“Nothing, I was just wondering.”

“He’s alright,” she said, but was clearly flustered.

“Come on you two!” screamed Viola.

When we got into the water, I searched for Elio, but couldn’t see him.

Vimini was playing with the low-hanging branches of a tree, trying to assess whether she could climb it without risking falling head-first into the river.

“Maybe not,” I said, and she frowned.

“He’s gone that way, beyond that clump of trees. He likes that spot because no one can see you, if you swim behind the willows. I won’t tell the others,” she said, and mimed zipping her mouth shut.

Of course she was right.

“Why are you hiding?”

“Where were you earlier?”

His eyes were serious and flecked with gold.

“I was talking to your father about my mother: nothing important, I can tell you later.”

“Later,” he repeated, and swam closer. “Which later is it? This later,” he caressed my face, “or this later,” that same hand trailed down my chest and found the waistband of my suit.

He bit down on his lower lip, which was as juicy and red as the inside of a fresh fig.
We stood one in front of the other, the water up to Elio’s chest; his nipples were barely visible above the line; they were dusky and pebbled.

“This later,” I replied, pinching one bud between my fingers; his eyelids fluttered and his lips parted. I did the same to the other, then both together and he let out a hoarse moan. He threw back his head, his throat in full display. In the meantime, his hand had slipped inside my suit and was stroking me, slowly.

“Later, later, later,” I whispered against his wet skin, as I licked the length of his neck and sucked on his Adam’s apple. He lost his balance then and I wrapped my arms around him.

“Now, now, now,” he murmured in reply.

I kissed him silent, tasting earth and salt on his lips, chasing his tongue and teasing it with mine.

“This time I’m going to carry you,” I said, mouthing at his jaw, grazing it a little with my teeth. He smiled and removed his hand from my cock.

Because I could no longer wait, I lifted him up and carried him to a grass patch underneath a gigantic willow tree. No one could see us there, but we could hear the splashes, chatter and laughter of our friends, as they enjoyed that momentary respite from the relentless July heat.

“I thought you weren’t interested,” I joked, as I laid him down on a bed of damp greenery. He was a heart-stopping vision of wet curls and rosy skin, and I was almost too awe-struck to do anything more than stare at him.

“The longer I pretend to be only your friend, the more I wish to do this,” and he pulled my suit down to my thighs, freeing my erection and almost immediately bringing his mouth to it; his lips closed around the head and sucked, hard. My hands sought his face, the underside of his jaw. I felt at one with him, but I craved to submit to him too.

“Wait, wait.”

My voice was reedy, so I kissed his mouth again, deep and filthy.

“Together,” he whispered. I nodded, and removed his trunks and mine.

We didn’t do this very often, but every time was as intense as the first: my cock in his mouth, his in mine; the very measure of infinity.

The obscene noises we made, the slurping and groaning and sucking, became part of nature’s soundscape, as if we were mating with the earth, with life itself.

I was the first to come, and he let it paint his lips and trickle down his chin, but when he spent, I couldn’t let one drop go to waste.

“I love the way you smell between your legs,” he panted, his peachy complexion smeared with my cream. God, I wanted him so much still, so soon after coming.

“I love the way you smell everywhere.”

And as I pressed my flesh to his, I thought of Catullus and his quindici, and felt as fiercely protective of Elio as the poet of his boy.
Soon after I moved in with Elio, I tried to deconstruct my desire for him.

Out of necessity, in order to protect myself from a recurrence of the pain I’d suffered when he left me, I decided to tackle the issue with cold rationality.

I opened him up, took him apart, looked inside him and saw a young man no different from many others: yes, he was perhaps older than his years, but hardly a prodigy. He was handsome, but not in the canonical way. He was smart and talented, but not as bright as his cousin, for instance. I recognised that something in him deeply affected me, but if I could only find out what it was, I could control my reaction to it: that was my delusion. Years of philosophy had taught me everything and nothing, but at least, I thought, they had provided me with the necessary tools for this kind of analysis.

I decided to test my theories by making love to him while forcing myself to watch the proceedings from a safe distance, like a ghost floating above our bed.

Every part of him was assessed dispassionately: the way his hard, wet cock slapped his flat belly, the flush on his neck when he was aroused, the shell of his ear framed by untidy curls, the tremor in his thighs when he splayed them open to let me in: all were itemised like objets d’art at an auction.

It worked, or at least that’s what I chose to believe: this man, this boy, was flesh and bone, hairs and freckles, like so many before and after him. Maybe I would wake up one day and wonder: why him? And I would not be able to come up with an answer.

Everything was under control, I concluded.

Then one night I woke up and found him with his back leaning against the headboard, holding a glass of water. His hand was shaking a little.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you; only a nightmare, go back to sleep.”

“Was it so bad?”

He shook his head, swallowed a mouthful of water, didn’t say a word.

“It was about us, wasn’t it?”

Elio nodded fervidly, still in silence. Then he turned and looked at me.

My theories were smashed to pieces and lay on the floor, like a heap of dust.

The eyes which stared at me were my eyes: that fear was my fear, and if he’d cried, his tears would
have been mine too.

“The way you looked at me,” he murmured, “Almost like you hated me.”

Was it still the nightmare he was referring to?

I made love to him again that night: my lips touched every part of his body and he was so pliant and tender, so sensual and unguarded, I almost told him of my stupid experiment.

We had agreed that we would share everything, but wouldn’t he take this as an attempt at rejecting him? I decided to say nothing.

Months had gone by and I had come to fully understand that he was the entity Aristophanes had described to Plato: the other half of myself. Saying it out loud would be like reading one of the quotes found inside the wrapping of a Bacio Perugina chocolate, yet it was the truth and I could no more deny it than alter the structure of my DNA. There, inscribed in what had given me shape and purpose, was Elio’s fingerprint, unique and unclassifiable, the way Socrates had been described. Atopos, or the ceaselessly unforeseen originality.

Music had always been an important presence in our relationship, from Elio’s brilliant transcriptions of classic pieces to the pop trash being played on the radios and juke boxes around Crema; the songs we had danced to, cried and made love to, were part of the story of us; after our separation, I could not listen to Haydn without wondering how Elio would have reworked it. The melody of Mike Oldfield’s Moonlight Shadow would always remind me of the birthday party at the Moreschis, because it had been the last song that was played when most of the guests were either gone or sleeping; we’d left by the French doors when dawn was approaching and the lyrics had underscored the moment to perfection:

Four A.M. in the morning
Carried away by a moonlight shadow
I watched your vision forming
Carried away by a moonlight shadow

Elio had been dead on his feet, but giggly and affectionate, and it had taken us double the usual time to walk back to the Perlmans’ because we’d kept stopping in order to kiss or laugh like idiots at some silly anecdote. That song I had blacklisted, like many others, until the day Elio walked back into my life.

See the stone set in your eyes
See the thorn twist in your side
I wait for you
Sleight of hand and twist of fate

Friday night at Le Danzing was as crowded as it had been back then. The decor had changed and so had the DJ, but the atmosphere of unsophisticated fun has stayed the same. A group of us had been hard at it for a while then the new U2 song came up. Couples stayed on the dance floor, while the rest milled about or went to buy drinks.

Elio asked me to light him a cigarette so that he would have an excuse to cover my hand with his.

“This song could have been written for us,” he said, swaying to the music.
That didn’t sound like a compliment.

“Your glares, the scrape on your hip, me waiting for you every night, you making things so difficult,” he joked, blowing rings of smoke into the night air.

“You’ll never let me forget that.”

He laughed and passed me the cigarette.

“I watched you dance that night and really wanted you, for the first time. But now I get to look at you and take you home.”

“Aren’t you lucky.”

“I know.”

I was about to drag him to the dark alcove behind the bar for an impromptu make-out session when a silky voice intervened.

“Come dance with me,” said Riccardo Malaspina, taking Elio by the hand.

Same sex couples had never been seen at Le Danzing, certainly not entwined on the dance-floor. Besides, where was he coming from? He’d not been around since that evening at Momo’s and rumour had it that he’d been spending the rest of the month on Lake Como in the villa of a wealthy, well-known family.

Yet here he was, tugging at my boyfriend’s hand as if I wasn’t there.

“Let go of me!”

Elio shouted and pushed him away.

I had never seen him become so angry so quickly. I didn’t want to cause a scene or to behave like an over-protective partner, but I moved a step closer to Riccardo and stared him in the eye. I could tell that he was high on something, but not how far gone he was. Depending on what he’d taken, he could be only jesting or spoiling for a fight. It turned out that he was in a provoking mood.

“Why, are you afraid of showing them who you really are?”

He was still ignoring me, but at least he was keeping his voice down.

“I don’t want to dance with you,” Elio hissed.

“You used to, once.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, come on, it was at Mario's birthday party and the song was by Chicago.”

“I meant I didn’t want to.”

Malaspina threw me a complicit smile which was surprisingly childish.

“He’s ashamed of having to admit that he liked it.”

“Maybe he really didn’t like it,” I said, and watched Elio join Viola and two other girls, who were
happily bouncing up and down to the notes of Level 42’s Lessons in Love.

_If we lose the time before us_
_The future will ignore us_

“I’ve known him longer than you. He lies a lot, especially to himself,” Riccardo said, still smiling.

“What did you take?”

“A couple of pills, nothing interesting really; I wish I could be more like Jack these days. It’s all gone dreadfully black and white.”

I took my eyes off Elio for a moment and looked at Malaspina more closely. He was tanned and well dressed, but underneath that olive skin and fine bones were nerves stretched tight enough to snap.

“Jack was in hospital last time I saw him.”

_Corpore non sano._

“Drugs do that to you.”

“Limit-experiences,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“Foucault ended up a lot worse than Jack,” I replied, but he’d already disappeared into the night.

When Le Danzing kicked us out, some went home and some, including us, went down to the river for a late night swim. Darkness and slight inebriation gave us licence to be more open than usual, so I curled my arm around his waist as we walked.

I wanted to ask him about the scene with Riccardo, but didn’t want to ruin the moment. He was leaning against me, his cheek brushing my shoulder as we walked; his hair smelled of smoke and Johnson’s Baby shampoo. If it hadn’t been for Malaspina, it would have been the most perfect of nights.

“Isn’t it strange that he appeared just when that song was playing?”

I wondered what he was driving at, but a moment later I got it: Malaspina was Italian for, literally, bad thorn.

_See the thorn twist in your side_, went U2’s With Or Without You.

I held him tighter.

“Did he force himself on you back then?”

And would he try again, was the unspoken question. I’d never experienced such a blend of ferocity and distaste before.

He was silent for a bit.

“Not physically, no. I don’t know what to call it. It was years ago. Eight, nine, maybe.”
“Did you know by then that you liked boys as well as girls?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And he made you realise that.”

We had reached the riverbank. Viola and her date, a half-French boy named Lucien, were making out on the grass and we narrowly avoided stumbling over them.

“He laughed at me. Not in a nasty way, but like he couldn’t believe that I hadn’t figured things out before, that I was too stupid or too cowardly or both.”

Arrogant little shit, I thought.

“Afterward I ate half a ciambellone, drank a litre of Fanta and was sick all night because I couldn’t throw up.”

“Someone should have made you.”

“You weren’t there.”

“I’m a terrible boyfriend.”

"The worst,” he said, and his smile glinted in the semi-darkness.

We sat down by an olive tree, where the ground was still warm and fragrant. Around us was the murmur of lovers and the chatter and laughter of friends. Someone I couldn’t identify was undressing and heading for the water.

I took Elio in my arms and he nuzzled my throat; his hands were already underneath my shirt and he was humming.

“What’s the song?”

He told me.

“That was playing when we met again, at the Blitz.”

I felt him go still; he was surprised.

“You remember?”

“Are you kidding? First those lyrics then I looked up and suddenly you were there. It was like being in a film.”

“That’s what I thought, but I didn’t imagine-”

“You didn’t imagine I would feel the same as you.”

“But you did.”

I nodded and kissed his forehead.

“But I did.”

Even though we were part of each other, there was still so much which was unknown.
Our lips and tongues and breaths joined, but we didn’t want to take it further. I only wanted to swallow his songs and devour his memories, so they would become mine too.
Sleep and rain.
We have reached the timeline of the epilogue of Daring to Desire You. Yay!

Thanks to all of you reading and commenting, because without your support it wouldn't be the same. Peace and love xxx

We had fallen asleep close to a strawberry field. Their season was nearly over, but what was left of the crop was yielding an intense fruity scent, scolded as it was by the violent sun.

Sleeping with Elio was the one thing I’d never give up; I would rather go without sex than be deprived of his soft snores and sprawling limbs.

In time, I told myself, I would grow accustomed to his presence in my bed, it would become easy to be separated for a few days if I had to travel for work; reality was another matter though, because after seven months together I felt exactly as I had on that first night in January. Perhaps my joy had been so overwhelming then because of the turmoil which had preceded it, but waking up next to him, his bare legs so enticing I could not stop staring at them, had been the most serene moment of my life. He’d been asleep and that was the best part, because for once I could be awake and not be dreading the minutes until our separation, like I had done in Rome.

We could take our time, because time was no longer our enemy. Of course I knew that he wasn’t our friend either; he was the supreme deceiver, because he let us believe we had a modicum of control when in fact, he, time, held all the cards.

But in this brief interlude between one life and the next, we had gone to photograph the sunflowers and on our way back, sweaty and tired, we had lain down in the shade. He’d closed his eyes and fallen asleep before me, and I had watched him as I had done so many times during that first summer, when I had wondered whether I should walk away and concluded that I couldn’t; that it was already too late; that it had always been too late.

I woke up with a feeling of something cold and slimy on my arm: it was a snail.

“Her name is Jennifer,” Vimini said, and for a moment I felt like I’d just stepped into a fairy-tale, but maybe I was only dreaming.

The noise of the cicadas was the only discernible sound and Vimini was whispering in order to not wake Elio.

She was sitting down on the grass with a tiny cage lined with leaves by her side and a book on her lap. It was a novella in German.
“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be at home, napping?”

Even though her new cure was working wonders, I knew she had been ordered to rest as often as possible, especially at that time of day.

“I was, but then I started reading this story and I thought of you. Annella told me where you’d gone, so I thought I might find you here. Elio used to bring me here to pick strawberries. Shall I go and pick some for us?”

I looked at her and she returned my gaze without the least trace of shyness or artifice.

“I’m not sure there’s any left. Anyway, it’s too hot. Stay here and tell me about the book.”

“I started reading it because I liked the title: Immensee. But then I liked the characters too, even though she’s a little annoying. He goes away to school for years and she doesn’t even try to run away and go to him.”

I had never read the novella and didn’t know its writer, but I suspected Elio did.

“Why did it remind you of me?” I asked, removing the snail from my shoulder and handing it to Vimini, who placed it inside the cage.

“Because Reinhard, that’s the main character, is more in love with Elisabeth – that’s the annoying girl – than the other way round. In his absence, she marries somebody else.”

I had not intended to discuss my personal life with her, but it seemed I had no choice.

“You know that Elio and I live together and you know that we can’t get married to one another, but that doesn’t mean-”

She glared at me.

“I know that! But what I mean is you always knew it was him, but he didn’t. I saw him with Marzia once. I like Elio, but he’s like this Elisabeth girl: in his head, he wants things, but when it comes to having them, he lets the other person do all the work.”

Even for her high standards, this was awfully perceptive, and it stung. What could I reply without telling the whole story, which wasn’t meant for her ears or anybody else’s? She didn’t give me time to think of a suitable answer.

“I know that you are happy and he’s happy, but you went to London, he didn’t come to America. And he had not even understood you’d done it for him. I’m sorry Oliver, but he’s not very clever,” she said, scrunching her nose.

I laughed and she had the good grace to do the same.

“Why a snail, what happened to the chameleon?”

“Nothing, but I only take short-time pets. I don’t want to get too attached, just in case. And who would get attached to a snail?”

“Mafalda may find it and cook it for dinner.”

“Mr Perlman doesn’t eat snails. I made sure, before I adopted Jennifer. I will set her free soon though. It’s bad enough that I have to obey so many rules, why imprison her too?”
“Speaking of which, you should go back before your mother calls the carabinieri.”

“They won’t come anyway. They’ll be asleep or playing briscola at the bar tabaccheria.”

She was probably right.

“I’ll wake Elio and we’ll give you a lift. You can sit on top of the handlebars of my bike and he’ll carry your cage.”

“Okay, but first, can you take a picture of Jennifer?”

I grabbed Elio’s Invicta and took out my camera, but Vimini insisted she wanted a Polaroid snapshot instead; she didn’t care about the quality of the photo, but wanted it straight away. I did as told and, after taking the picture, I handed it to her, so she could watch it develop.

“You should ask your parents to buy you one. I’m surprised you haven’t got one already.”

She made a face.

“They’ve photographed and filmed me non-stop since they found out I was ill.”

“You can always borrow ours.”

“Borrow what?” mumbled Elio, stretching his arms above his head.

“Vimini likes your camera.”

“What’s that cage for?”

She explained and he was unfazed: he knew her too well to be surprised by any of her quirks. He saw the book too, and picked it up only to bury his face inside it.

“I love the smell too,” she agreed. “I told Oliver the story reminded me of him.”

Like I had predicted, he knew the novella. Is there anything you don’t know? I thought back to that day and smiled.

“I’m nothing like Elisabeth,” he said, caressing the cover of the book, which depicted an idyllic rural landscape not dissimilar to the one we inhabited.

“You so are.”

He looked at me, his gaze veering between amused and concerned.

“Later,” I mouthed, and he nodded.

We weren’t too far from Vimini’s villa, so before long we were in Elio’s garden, drinking mixed fruit frullati and waiting for afternoon to grow older and for the heat to loosen its stranglehold. Even swimming was too strenuous an exercise, so we sat at the edge of the pool, our feet touching underwater.

“Do you think I’m like Elisabeth?” he asked, administering soft, wet kiss-bites to my arm and shoulder.

“Vimini may be a genius, but she’s still a kid. She knows some of the facts, but there’s more to us than who did what and when.”
“It’s just that I... I thought you must have moved on, that it was my fault and how could I come to you after that? And I didn’t know, I wasn’t able to-”

He was flustered, which I found unbearably sweet.

“It doesn’t matter, it truly doesn’t. You are still so young and I knew right from the start what sort of risk I was taking. When I said I didn’t want either of us to pay for it, I already knew I would have to and it’s fine. We are where we should be, in the right place at the right time.”

I brushed his curls away from his cheek, tucked a few strands behind his ear, and kissed his neck. His heart was beating fast and he was biting his lips.

“I’ve never proved myself,” he said, after a brief silence.

“What are you talking about?” I said, stroking the arch of his foot with my toes. “You’re giving me everything I need.”

“Everything?” he sounded sceptical.

“I can’t believe you still don’t know it! Yes, everything. All of it, 100%, tutto.”

“It’s the same for me, you know that right?”

He was so tense and serious that my first instinct was to kiss him senseless, but I wanted things to be lighter, more playful.

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t. You slept longer than I did, and I had to carry Vimini on my bicycle. Plus, I’m not as young as I used to be.”

He snorted, squeezing my thigh.

“Laugh all you want, but my back’s a bit sore and since you said you wanted to give me proof-”

He bumped his shoulder against my chest.

“Come up to the bedroom and I’ll massage you all right,” he whispered.

We’d done that before and it had always ended up the same way, although in varied configurations.

“No, no, no, I mean a professional massage.”

“Oh, professional, sure, okay, why not?”

We spent the next hour pretending not to be hard, which was easier for me, since I was lying face down on a beach towel while he rubbed my back. In the end, I took pity on him and suggested we took a swim in the pool.

When we finally emerged from the water, the sky had clouded over.

“Un bel temporale,” a good thunderstorm, announced Anchise, who had been fretting about the drought and its effects on his plants and flowers.

We had been meaning to go dancing again that night, but the sudden change of plan was not unwelcome. I relished the idea of being cooped up in the drawing room with the rain lashing down and Elio playing the piano and some trashy show on the TV.
Or we could watch a movie, the four of us on the sofa under a blanket, drinking brandy and feeling completely at ease with each other and the world.

Anella’s elder sister Marcella was staying with us, but she had been invited at a friend’s house in Crema and with the weather taking a turn for the worse, she’d phoned and let Mafalda know she was not returning until the following day.

July storms usually lasted no longer than a couple of hours, but this time it was more like a monsoon rain. Elio and I hurried upstairs to close all the shutters, but by the time we got to the balcony on the landing, it was pelting down and we got completely soaked. Elio’s desk was by the window and I was worried about his books, but luckily the shutters had been slammed shut by the warm wind which was blowing through the house like a genie just liberated from its bottle.

After dinner, which had seemed strangely cosy for being indoors for the first time since we’d arrived, Annella perused that week’s edition of *Telesette* and exclaimed:

“Look, Amadeus in on Rai 2 after the news. Shall we watch it? It will be dubbed obviously,” she said, throwing me an apologetic look.

“I don’t mind. Hulce’s performance is electric, no matter what language is coming out of his mouth.”

Thus, we spent a wonderful evening laughing at *The Magic Flute*, crying at the *Requiem* and being enchanted by the mastery of the mise-en-scene. Underneath the blanket, Elio and I held hands the entire time. Not that we couldn’t have done that in the open, but it was so much sweeter to share this secret which wasn’t really one. But the best thing of all was knowing that we all felt the same deep admiration for the artistry of Mozart and Forman and were like one heart beating in four different yet totally attuned bodies.
Poppies and Memory

Chapter Summary

Une partie de campagne...

“Your mother called last night around dinner time. She said she will phone again later today,” Annella said.

“I will ring her later.”

“Yes, later,” she echoed, throwing me one of her enigmatic smiles.

The three of us were having breakfast outside while Elio’s father had gone to visit a colleague in Clusone.

“What are you two doing today?”

She had informed us that a couple of friends were coming to collect her before lunch and that she would not be back until late that evening.

“Nothing much,” Elio replied, “There’s a tennis game at the Malaspinas, so we’ll do that, maybe.”

Riccardo’s younger brother Danilo was a keen tennis player and when he was at the villa, he loved nothing better than to invite the entire neighbourhood for day-long sessions, followed by al fresco dining with music and dancing well into the night.

During these occasions, his parents vacated the premises and went to stay at their apartment on Lake Garda. Compared to them and to the Moreschis, the Perlmans were of modest means; comfortably off, yes, but not wallowing in luxury.

“Oh yes, I forgot that Danilo was back. What about his brother, is he still here?”

Annella asked her son, but her gaze met mine. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

I wondered what she really thought of Elio’s idea of planning to move to Denmark in the future only so that he could ‘marry’ me. I was reeling from the shock of his proposal and couldn’t think about it without a frisson of something strong - almost violent - that was still too complex to decipher.

“J’sais pas,” he shrugged, with that Gallic pout I loved.

“He’s like a ghost, that one,” she said, lighting the first cigarette of the day. She puffed on it with relish.

“I think we should go. We haven’t played tennis in a while.”

Elio darted me a cryptic look but said nothing.

“Will any of the girls be there?”

I saw that he was about to utter another dismissive comment, so I answered:
“Chiara and Viola said they would go. Lavinia and Virginia will certainly come with Momo.”

Virginia was Momo’s other sister, a red-head who adored Boris Becker and had a giant poster of the German player with his Wimbledon trophy on her bedroom wall. Elio had told me when I had teased him about the drawing of the 1981 Roland Garros winner Bjorn Borg he kept in his bedroom.

Another tall blond, I’d said, as we lay across the bed one night. He’d been fifteen at the time and yes, he’d confessed, he’d imagined being in the arms of someone as statuary and golden-haired as Borg.

Tell me about it, I’d asked, and, blushing a little, he’d recounted his daydreams of that period. In time, and two years are a lifetime to a boy that age, that crush had been superseded by others, but he’d never recovered from the strong sensual impression it had left.

I’m only your rebound blond, I’d joked and he’d climbed on top of me and we’d wrestled until I’d pinned him down and let him have what he wanted.

Villa Malaspina was an imposing mansion with marble steps, French windows and a modern swimming pool, which was evidently a recent addition.

The tennis courts were at the back, together with a guest-house and a conservatory.

The oddest thing, Elio told me, was the field of poppies to the side of the house. In spring, when the flowers were in bloom, that sea of red was like the spread mantle of a medieval knight.

There were no poppies now, only immaculate lawns kept moist by sprinklers and manicured by a competent gardener.

Danilo was the shabby copy of his elder brother: dark hair, but not as inky, high cheekbones but less chiselled, and above all, a relaxed and friendly attitude with no concealed sting.

“Where’s Riccardo?” asked Lavinia, whose heavy make-up made her seem much older than her fifteen years and was extremely inappropriate in that weather.

“He’s driving back from Milan.”

“What’s he doing there?”

The boy signalled that he didn’t know, but his eyes told me that he did and wasn’t prepared to say it. I guessed that Riccardo had gone to visit his supplier, since that city was probably the only place where he could get his drugs over the summer months.

It was a lovely afternoon: we played doubles, swam in the pool and drank litres of icy lemonade and juices. Elio got tired after a while, so he sat under a tree reading and talking to Viola, who had brought a stack of fotoromanzi she wanted to show to Vimini just to hear her astringent comments on the silly stories.

Virginia and I played against Danilo and Momo and we didn’t do too badly, considering it was the first time we’d paired up.

Viola’s boyfriend Lucien arrived with a group of noisy boys; they monopolised the pool for a while then got tired and took off to go swim in the river.
Soon after that, I looked at the spot where Elio had been, but his book and Viola’s magazines were all that was left of them.

I thought that she must have gone after Lucien, but it was unlikely he would go without letting me know. Chiara had also been gone for a while; her beach towel was still were she’d left it, close to where Lavinia was sunbathing while listening to her Walkman. I was in the midst of a game and we were ahead, so I didn’t want to disappoint Virginia, who was evidently keen on defeating her brother.

It was dusk when we stopped playing and iced beers, bottles of white wine, Coke, orange juice and a jug of sangria had been lined up on one of the tables in the garden, while sandwiches, salads, cold meats, slices of cantaloupe and watermelon, bowls of fruit and platters of chips were laid out on the others.

We all swooped in like vultures, even the noisy group returning from the river, but still there was no sign of Elio. I suddenly worried about his nosebleeds, since it had been another scorching hot day.

I asked the others if they had seen him, asked Viola, who had returned, whether she knew where he and her sister had gone, but she didn’t know.

In the end it was Vimini, arrived in time for dinner and holding a plateful of melon and Parma ham, who gave me an indication of his whereabouts.

“They have a secret place beyond the willows. There’s a large pond, but you can’t see it because of the trees. They used to hide there, once.”

I thought of the spot where Elio had taken me the first time we’d kissed; his refuge, he’d said, where he went to read and be on his own.

She saw my confusion.

“This isn’t his place exactly, but I know they usually went there to smoke,” she explained, making it sound like a mysterious assignment.

“Oh, okay, so where do I go?”

The light was pink and golden that evening, one could almost imagine shimmery dust being sprinkled around by magic dragonflies. I felt that I should be naked and barefoot, celebrating the glory of nature in unabashed manner, but at the same time, unlike in my forest dream, I was afraid. I didn’t know what I feared, whether it was something tangible or simply the conviction that so much happiness couldn’t possibly last.

When I approached the willows, I was greeted by the sound of Arabic music. As I moved even closer, I smelled the unmistakable scent of hash.

Vimini had been right: the pond was hidden from view and I would never have found the way had she not given me directions.

I’m not sure what I had expected, but it wasn’t what I saw when I pushed my way through the green curtain of willows. The grass was lush and untended there and the water in the pond was as still as the surface of a mirror.

The music was coming from a portable stereo which had been placed on the only stone bench, which
was almost entirely upholstered with moss and nettles.

Dressed only in her strapless white swimsuit, Chiara was dancing with Riccardo Malaspina; they were entwined and she was gazing up into his eyes while he had both his hands pressed to the small of her back. Close to them, sitting on his discarded t-shirt, was Elio, in his swimming trunks, smoking a reefer and drinking Ceres beer from a bottle.

Although at first I had thought them silent and listening to the music, I realised they were conversing, in the manner of the drunk, the stoned and those who know each other so thoroughly they only need a few words to convey what they mean.

“Berber music, Tangier, everybody was there back then,” Malaspina said, and his dancing companion nodded and kissed him on the cheek.

He’d seen me, but pretended not to; I stood there, for some reason unwilling to make a move.

“They were not really happy though. Just read Bowles or Truman Capote,” Elio said. I could not see his expression, but I could tell that they’d already had this discussion before.

“The point is they were alive there and everything was possible. There are no more worlds left to conquer,” Riccardo replied then he finally decided to acknowledge my presence. “Maybe in America one could try to reinvent the Morocco of the past; what do you think?”

I ignored him and went to sit next to Elio, who gave me a beatific smile and offered me both drink and joint. “What’s up?” I asked, drinking the chilled beer but refusing to smoke. He shook his head and kissed me on the cheek, the way Chiara had kissed Riccardo. I had the uneasy sensation of witnessing, as an intruder, the repeat of some old ritual.

“Nothing, just shooting the breeze,” he replied, mimicking an American accent.

“Aren’t you all coming to dinner?” I raised my voice to include the other two in the conversation.

“Later, maybe,” Riccardo replied, and that made Chiara and Elio laugh.

I couldn’t say why, but it made me uncomfortable.

“Why did you leave?” I whispered, but got no reply. Elio seemed far away, and not only because of the hash.

“We gaze at each other, we whisper out darkness, we love one another like poppies and memory,” he recited out loud, with a touch of anger that could have been directed at the world, at Riccardo or at me.

Chiara had started to kiss her dance partner on the lips and he was letting her, but his eyes were open and he was staring at us.

“That’s Celan,” Elio said, before taking another swig from the bottle.

“Yes, I know, it’s from Corona.”

“Yes, Corona, and you know what Bachmann said about it?”

“She thought it was his best poem.”

“It is the most perfect anticipation of a moment where everything becomes marble and exists forever: that’s what she said,” Malaspina interjected; he lifted Chiara up and carried her to where we were
sitting; she was laughing when he put her down and when he sat down by her side. He took the joint from Elio’s fingers and pulled on it.

“You’ve only just met us, but we’ve known each other for years,” he said, gazing at Elio who was swaying to the music with his eyes shut.

“You should see the poppies in bloom.”

“Yes, the poppies,” Chiara agreed, with an oblique smile.

I didn’t know what to say, because they were speaking in a code which was alien to me; they wanted to keep me out of it, of that I was certain.

“I thought you never came down here in the spring,” I replied.

“They are late bloomers, my poppies, late, late bloomers, but when they do flower, they are the most stunning sight in the world. But wonders never last and they shouldn’t be wasted on careless onlookers.”

Elio threw his head back, humming along to the Arabic tune then he turned toward me and opened his eyes: the sight nearly undid me. There was hunger and love and sadness in them, and I had to find out why, but first of all I had to get him away from there.

“We should go. It’s getting dark and we should have something to eat.”

I expected Riccardo to object, but he didn’t say a word. Chiara moved closer to him and laid her head on his chest.

“Come on,” I told Elio, and helped him up. He put on his t-shirt, gave me his hand, and together we made our way back to the villa.

“I want you so much, you have no idea,” he whispered as we cut through the orchards; the sky was indigo and everything was bathed in violet light.

“The hash always makes you horny.” I tried to make fun of it, but I was as turned on as he was. And then I understood what that frisson had been: this boy had planned to spend the rest of his life with me, bound to me by something more than a silent promise. I looked at him and imagined him ten, twenty years older, and I realised I’d never truly believed it until now.

He slipped his hand down my shorts and we both moaned when he closed his hand around my cock. We kissed and kissed, open mouthed, wet, dirty, tongues flailing, licking and sucking. We didn’t want to finish, we teased one another to the very brink, only to stop at the very last moment.

“Let’s go dancing,” he gasped at some point, his fingers in my hair.

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to walk, let alone dance.”

“I want to dance among the poppies.”

“There are no poppies.”

He took my face in his hands and smiled.

“We don’t need them, the memory is enough,” he replied, and it was as if he’d let something go, for
good.
The following morning, I woke up early and decided to go jogging along the river.

I needed to clear my head of the cobwebs of the previous day and evening; that strange interlude among the willows, and what had occurred later, when the night had swallowed up every atom of light.

We had danced so many times before and it had always been a prelude to intimacy, but never had I, before the Malaspina’s party, felt as if I had been flayed, my flesh and my nerves exposed for Elio to do as he pleased with them. No one had disturbed us in the poppy field, and the music had been distant like an evocation. It had meant something to him, but he had not said what and I had not asked. When we had returned home, the house had been silent and dark.

We had left it that way, not wanting to break the spell. Once in our bedroom, I knew he’d want to lead the way and I desired to give in to him. He had me on his desk, among his books and his music scores, slamming it so hard against the wall that even the wooden shutters had rattled on their hinges. I could see the white of his eyes and of his teeth, as he’d grimaced and grunted. It had been intense, brutal and had given me such pleasure I’d remained half-hard after coming. I’d spent a second time after he’d peaked and we’d collapsed on to the bed, kissing languorously, hands all over each other.

I’d imagined that I would sleep until late, but there was an undercurrent of malaise which pushed me out of bed and into the arms of that pure morning.

Perhaps a part of me knew what it was looking for, an ingrained instinct, like picking at a scab or tormenting a sore tooth.

In truth, I was a bit sore elsewhere, but not enough to prevent me from running.

My feet took me where they’d been only recently and if it had been a detective story, it would have been termed the scene of the crime.
The garden and the pool had the ravaged appearance of a pillaged campsite but the china blue sky and the sweet air lent it some grace.

What was I hoping? That I would find Riccardo and he would tell me what he’d really meant when he’d talked about his poppies? That seemed absurd, because of course he would be in bed at that hour and even if we’d been alone, he might not have wanted to talk to me. Or perhaps he would have, but only in riddles.

I jogged among the apple trees and found the path that led to the willows, but nobody was there. I saw the leftovers of the previous night: the empty bottles, the cigarette butts, the spent matches, and for no reason they made me think of a wake.

I retraced my steps and this time really headed down to the river, cursing my silliness and sweating it out, along with my toxins.

The sun had gathered strength by the time I returned, short of breath and exhausted.

Annella had not come back, Samuel was expected after lunch-time, Mafalda told me, and the boys were having breakfast already.

“Boys?” I enquired, but I already knew the answer to that question.

I washed my face and hands at the kitchen sink and joined Elio and Riccardo, who were drinking coffee without talking to each other.

“Where were you?” Elio asked, evidently annoyed.

“Jogging,” I replied and said hello to our guest, who beamed at me but did not speak. He was wearing dark sunglasses, a white linen shirt and frayed blue denim shorts. Even in the full glare of the morning sun, his hair was resolutely black, shining and bluish like a beetle’s carapace. Next to his plate, on which were the remains of a pomegranate, was a packet of Philip Morris. He lighted one and pushed the packet in Elio’s direction.

I wanted to ask what he was doing there at this hour, but instead I poured myself a glass of apricot juice and drank it.

“I wished I had been here four years ago,” Riccardo said.

“Oh?”

No eggs for me this morning, I decided, and spread butter and home-made strawberry jam on a slice of toasted bread.

“We could have all met at the same time and who knows what might have happened?”

I looked at Elio, but he was intent in cutting the top off his egg.

“What do you think?” I asked Riccardo. He took a long drag on his cigarette.

“We could have tried a few things; we still could.”

“I’ve no interest in drugs, aside from the occasional joint.”

“I wasn’t talking about that.”

“What then?”
“Oh come on, I’m sure you could guess if you tried.”

“Why don’t you just shut up?” Elio intervened, glaring at his friend; the latter wasn’t offended; he laughed pleasantly, and I wished I could see his eyes.

“I better take off,” he said, and suddenly stood up to go. “I’m driving to Malcesine, but I’ll be back tomorrow.” He stared at me from behind his Ray-Bans, his unspoken words hanging in the air, solidifying between us. He went without saying goodbye and Elio didn’t look at him once.

“Why did you leave without waking me?” he said, with the same look on his face as that first morning when he’d said he just wanted the be with me.

“I didn’t want to disturb you. You seemed so peaceful.”

I kissed him on the cheek and he turned and pressed his lips on mine. They were hot and tasted of coffee.

“I wish he would leave us alone,” he sighed.

“Do you want me to tell him? He’s your friend, but if he’s bothering you-”

“He likes to play games. In a way, he’s like Jack, but my cousin’s schemes don’t involve other people.”

“Jack’s never devious. What is it that you are not telling me?”

All of a sudden, he became sarcastic.

“As opposed to you telling me everything?”

“Everything that matters,” I replied. I was getting annoyed too, because I wasn’t the one being pursued by another man who spoke in code.

“You never said why it took you so long to move your stuff into my flat; you never explained why, around the same time, you fucked me and barely even looked at me.”

“Why are we talking about this now? Is that because of him? What things could we still try?”

And then I understood, because it had always been there between us and now it was staring me in the face. That night in Rome, Elio had wanted to take someone home with us: a boy, a girl, it hadn’t mattered to him. He’d been drunk, but he’d meant it all the same. And when I’d returned to him, he’d assured me that he was done experimenting, but it might have been only wishful thinking.

Clearly Riccardo had known him for longer and that story of the girl they had both invited out took on a different complexion.

“That girl you told me about, he wanted you to share her, didn’t he?”

He shook his head.

“No, no, you don’t understand.”

“So tell me!”

“He’s always gone after what I wanted.”
“And you let him have it?”

“Rather than me.”

I felt ice run through my veins.

“When we were kids, he used to say the three of us were special and because of that we should try everything together.”

“And Jack was okay with that?”

“He preferred to go it alone.”

Smart boy, I thought.

“And you didn’t?”

Elio bit his lips and went to light a cigarette only to realise it was one of Riccardo’s; he threw the packet back on the table.

“He’s older; I admired him.”

“You never told me about him.”

“He was gone and everybody said he would never come back here.”

“But he’s here now.”

“He heard about you.”

“I’m not sleeping with him, if that’s what he was implying.”

“He’s your type,” he said, with a tight smile.

“And what type would that be?”

The annoyance had turned to fury at the flick of a switch.

“Dark haired, pretty, slim, up for anything.”

“Are these your words or his?”

I wasn’t going to wait for his reply: I took my cup of coffee with me and went upstairs to shower and change. Anchise had fixed my bicycle and I planned to spend the rest of the morning, and maybe the entire day, away from there. I needed to think and to put some distance between myself and this new version of Elio. Was everything we had the product of a childhood pact, a fantasy dreamed by somebody else? Did it matter, as long as it made us both happy? Was Elio really happy or was he just reducing his options in order to please me?

Under the cool jets of water, I examined the possibility of a threesome with another man or a woman: would I do it for Elio? I had tried in the past, but it had worked for me only when I had been drunk or high, and always when I didn’t care about either of the participants. I would do it for him, would do almost anything for him, but it would fracture something within me, perhaps even sever it. The idea of someone touching him in front of me, in bed with us; of watching him as he got hard for
another person; it made me feel sick, but would I be able to say no if he needed it?

I had thought that we were finally on solid ground: my past had been dealt with, our fears resolved and his volubility forgotten; I had never imagined the snake in the grass would not be my mother, but an old friend of Elio’s, whose existence had come as a total surprise to me. Of course I had heard about him back then, but only vaguely, as of somebody who was travelling and whose absence went largely unrecorded and unnoticed.

Now I understood why Elio had wanted to erase Riccardo: because for once he could go it alone too, like Jack had done.

No wonder Samuel and Annella had worried about their son becoming too attached to people, when he’d been so thoroughly inveigled by his long-time friend.

When I came out of the shower, I felt tired and ill; the thought of riding my bike all day was no longer appetising; I only wanted to sleep for the rest of the day; slide in between the freshly laundered sheets and slip into oblivion.

I drifted in and out of sleep until I smelled sunscreen lotion and sweat.

“I’m sorry,” Elio whispered, “Are you okay?”

He was close, but he didn’t touch me. I kept my eyes shut and nodded.

“Was I too rough last night? I didn’t hurt you did I?”

I did look at him then: he was flushed from staying too long in heaven; maybe he’d napped there.

“You were perfect.”

My voice sounded alien to my ears: too hoarse, unused.

“I don’t want him around; he makes everything grubby, he... tarnishes things. Everything is a game to him,” he said.

In this bed, our bed, it was only fitting that a line from Celan would come to me.

_Du hast ein Spiel ersonnen, das will vergessen sein._

“But I’m still myself,” he said, because of course he’d read my mind.

And who are you, I wanted to ask, but would I believe his answer?

He was fidgeting and I knew it was because he wished to get closer but was unsure of my reactions. I touched his cheek with my fingertips and he leaned into the palm of my hand. An instant later, he was in my arms, naked, warm and tense.

“When we were kids we used to come out here in early June. We played together, we challenged each other: climbing trees, swimming in the river at night, innocent stuff.”

“When you grew up.”

“I think that’s his problem: that he doesn’t want to.”
“And you?”
“I’m done with that part of my life.”

I traced the line of his cheekbone with my thumb.

“Are you still tempted?”

He turned and sucked my finger into his mouth; he licked it before setting it free again.

“All these emotions I used to have...I didn’t know what to do with them. I can still feel their reverberations, you see, but only if you are there with me. When you came to find me, I was trying... he was trying to take me back to those days.”

“The poppy days.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t work; it can’t work without you.”

I caressed his hair, his face, his beautiful long throat.

“Which is why he wanted to include me in his game,” I concluded.

“The game that longs to be forgot,” he quoted, with a little, impish smile.

I laughed and so did he, and I caught a glimpse of the child within the man I loved.
Chapter Summary

The boys go to the cinema, get drunk, horny and angsty.
Lots of hand holding.
Because there's no other way but their way.

Chapter Notes

Giulia e Giulia (or Julia and Julia) is a 1987 film by Peter del Monte with Gabriel Byrne, Kathleen Turner and Sting.
The plot is complicated but to simplify: married woman is widowed because of a car accident. Six years later, she "meets" her husband again and she starts living a parallel life with him and their son. In her other life she takes a lover, but when he becomes too possessive, she kills him. She is arrested for the murder and put in a mental hospital, but she still writes to her husband whom she believes to be out there waiting for her.

That evening we decided to go to the cinema. We asked Momo and the others if they wanted to tag along, but they weren’t interested in the film showing at the only screen of the only cinema in town.

Elio told me he had wanted to see Giulia e Giulia for a while and I was intrigued by what I had read about it.

It was a sultry evening after what had been a sweltering day and the cinema had no air conditioning, so the auditorium was almost empty.

As soon as the lights went off and the opening credits rolled, Elio took my hand in his and just held it, like a kid needing reassurance.

The story was entrancing and we soon became immersed in it, forgetting the world outside, except for the connection of our bodies, which could never be so easily discounted.

Afterwards, we went to buy our gelati from a small bar caffeetteria which home-produced only four flavours, and according to Elio they were the best in the world. I had panna and chocolate, while he chose the other two: stracciatella and pistachio. They were dense, almost solid, and tasted of fresh milk and wholesome ingredients. It was like taking a step back into a distant past, and that reflection triggered our discussion about the film.

“Do you think she was crazy?” he asked, as we sat on a stone bench under a gnarled oak tree.

“Maybe, but that photo she had at the end seemed to prove that she wasn’t. Either way, she was happier than before, when she thought her husband was dead.”
“But she has murdered a man.”

“He wouldn’t leave her alone. Not that’s it a good enough reason for killing somebody.”

He stared at me from above the small mound of his ice-cream and there was a sardonic smile in his eyes.

“What would you have done in her place?”

The idea of Elio being dead was as inconceivable as flying to the sun; it stirred a maelstrom of darkness inside of me, which I didn’t want to examine too closely.

“Gone mad, like she did, probably.”

“You would be all right. After a while; a long while.”

I shook my head.

“No, I wouldn’t be.”

“Would you take a lover like she did, just to deaden the pain?”

This was too close to the bone. I’d rather not dwell on that period where I had been reckless in order to stay sane.

“I’d try the Foucault way too: limit-experiences, live on the edge until you are either numb or scarred for the rest of your days. Or end up dead, like he did.”

I realised I had walked right into it. He didn’t say it, but I knew that he was thinking about Riccardo and his intention to imitate the dead philosopher.

“Is he suffering too, you think?” he asked.

“You know him better than I do.”

He licked the cream which had started to melt and spill over the rim of his cone. It was innocently done, but I had to look away all the same. How had he enslaved my libido so thoroughly I could almost feel the texture of his tongue as it devoured his gelato?

The restraint I had shown four years ago struck me as miraculous: that I could have gone a month without touching him while he was half naked and so close was unfathomable. Cold showers and self-pleasuring had been like plasters on a gaping wound, but they had worked, up to a point. I could never go back to that.

We both looked around: the place was deserted; we could hear the distant chatter of people in the piazzetta, but they were too far to bother us.

“Give me a kiss,” he whispered, and I did and got lost in it, in him, until I felt the cold sticky liquid trickle down my hand and forearm.

Without a word, he lapped it all up, smiling when he was done; his lips were smeared with chocolate and he had _panna_ on the tip of his nose.

“You’re such a mess,” I laughed, as he wiped his face on the back of his hand.

“It’s all your fault,” he countered.
We binned the remains of our cones and walked in the direction of the old water fountain which stood just outside the municipal building. We were taking turns at keeping the button pressed, when we heard a familiar voice.

“Are you taking a bath?” Chiara shouted. She had left her friends and was coming over to us.

“We had a close encounter with an ice-cream,” I replied, and she burst into laughter.

Her eyes were too shiny and she couldn’t walk a straight line: not drunk, maybe, but certainly tipsy.

“Viola said you were going to the cinema.”

“Yes, we went to see Giulia e Giulia,” replied Elio.

“Oh, Riccardo told me about it. He saw it in Milan and was raving about it. Didn't he tell you?”

Elio shook his head.

“Yes, he did. Last night at the pond, just before you two started talking of Morrocco,” she looked at me, frowning, “just before he turned up, you were talking about the director and how he’d copied that other one, David Something.”

“Lynch,” I suggested.

“Yes, that’s right, yes.”

Silence.

Chiara didn’t notice we weren’t speaking and she went on with her ramblings.

“He’s gone to Lake Garda, somewhere I can’t remember...”

“Malcesine,” I said.

“Yes, but he will be back tomorrow. We could organise something, the four of us; maybe a midnight picnic or a gita on the boat.”

I wondered what linked her to Malaspina and if most of it was only in her head, like she’d believed there was something between us when we’d only danced and kissed a couple of times. To be fair, I had contributed to her delusions, but only briefly and never seriously. Vimini had guessed I was interested in Elio and I had supposed the other girls had too, but maybe I had been wrong.

“Why not,” I answered, even though it was the last thing I intended to do.

Elio darted me a puzzled look which I ignored; time to dissolve that entanglement, I thought, once and for all.

While we walked her home, she talked about her sister and Lucien, about her holiday in Rimini, anything but Riccardo, for she must have sensed that there lay danger. On her doorstep, she kissed us on both cheeks and said _a domani_, to which we only replied with a loose ‘goodnight’.

Alone again, we drifted back into silence, which he was the first one to break.

“I wanted to see the film and when I spoke of it, he told me he’d seen it and loved it.”

“You wanted to make sure we went tonight when he’s not here, because otherwise he might have
wanted to join us.”

More silence.

Jealousy of the purest sort, like distilled poison: not derived from actions of betrayal, but from old affinities, forged before my time. I had no claims to stake on those days, on that Elio, but my heart did not care about logic and reason.

“I don’t feel like going home yet. Let’s have a drink,” I said, and it reminded me of Rome, of the desperate elation of that night. I had worried something might come between us and, in a way, it had.

We stopped at a vineria and shared a bottle of local wine. It was dry, icy and more alcoholic than the Perlmans’ rosatello. By the time we drained the last glass, we were both inebriated.

We had left our bikes outside the cinema and somehow we managed to pedal home and arrive in one piece.

All the while we had chit-chatted, but my chest ached as if some parasite had been gnawing at my heart and my insides. On top of it, I was angry with myself for being jealous and with him for being silent.

“What do you want?” he asked me, when we closed the door of our room, at last.

The wine spoke for me.

“Fuck you from behind, on the floor... I want to be balls-deep inside you.”

I said it to his face, my nostrils flaring with the pointless rage of it all.

He took his clothes off and kneeled down at my feet. One glance at his dishevelled hair and flushed face and I was there with him, holding him in my arms, wanting to crush him to my chest and afraid to squeeze too tightly.

“I’m sorry,” my voice cracked.

“You can have me any way you want me, Oliver,” he murmured, burying his face in my neck; hot, sweaty, delicate skin rubbing against my still-clothed chest.

I undressed in a blur of desire and tenderness, but when I joined him again on the floor, all my anger had evaporated.

“You, you,” I started, but got distracted by his parted lips and had to, just had to, kiss them. He tasted of milk and wine, of youth and salt, of yesterday and tomorrow.

He straddled my lap and pressed his groin to mine; we let out simultaneous moans and our kiss deepened, gathered urgency. His cock was hard and wet, mine was aching for his flesh. We took each other in hand and stroked roughly, locking eyes and arching our backs to get even closer.

This time, in lieu of obscenities, he kept repeating “I’m yours, I’m all yours, yours, yours, all yours,” and my fingers were wrapped around his throat and felt the vibration of the words as he spoke them. “Yes, yes,” I gasped, and he was shooting his release all over my stomach, my abdomen, my cock. I came with a pained groan, painting his chest, some of it catching his throat and chin.

Angel, I thought, as he clung to me, catching his breath and still twitching from his orgasm, and remembered that Tiepolo in that church in Bergamo; I had been right back then: like the angel in the
painting, Elio held my destiny in his hands.

“I think I know why Giulia killed her lover,” he said, later, in bed. We were holding hands, our fingers interlaced, my thumb stroking his palm.

That day had played out like a hallucination, from my exertions at dawn to the afternoon’s febrile lassitude and the evening’s moody, morbid sensuality.

I should have been exhausted, but I felt light and alert, probably due to the adrenaline still coursing through my bloodstream.

“It wasn’t because he was harassing her or refusing to leave her alone, but because he was living proof of her delusions. Until he was alive, she could still doubt her husband was dead. With him gone, she was no longer split in two.”

I brought his hand to my mouth and nibbled his fingertips.

“Or maybe it’s the other way round: she wanted to shatter her imaginary world and hasten a resolution.”

“It didn’t matter, because she still believed her husband was alive.”

“In some circumstances, the dream-world is more acceptable than the real one.”

He nodded, caressing my hair.

“I used to think that, back then when you were still ignoring me.”

“And what did I do in your dreams?”

He chuckled.

“You surrendered to me.”

“More of a premonition than a dream.”

“You have no idea how arousing that was.”

“Tell me,” I moved closer to him, enough to trace the pulse of electricity that went through him and made him shiver. Incredibly, he blushed.

“If was the first time I ever let myself believe I could be your top and you would beg me not to stop.”

“You had seen me.”

He stayed silent for a while, thinking.

“When I watched you sleep, that’s when it must have happened. You had fallen into bed fully clothed and looked so... vulnerable, so defenceless. I wanted to come into your room and get into bed with you and hold you.”

“That’s all you wanted to do?”

He nodded.
“Then do it.”

“You are naked and you’re not sleeping,” he joked, but pulled me into his arms, my cheek resting above his heart.

Tiredness had started to spread its tendrils or I would have been hard again.

Just before I closed my eyes, I placed a kiss on his nipple and he shuddered.

“You wouldn’t have murdered that Daniel guy, because Sting is definitely your type,” I said, stifling a yawn.

“If I’d thought he was keeping me from the man I loved, yes, I think I would have killed him.”

Sick and twisted, I thought, and grinned as I surrendered to sleep.
“Have you ever wished you could travel back in time?” asked Vimini, adjusting the brim of her straw hat so she could look at me.

We were lying down by the pool after an early breakfast. Elio’s cousin, – Jack’s sister and Vimini’s friend - Federica, or Fede as everybody called her, was coming for a short visit and was due to arrive before lunchtime.

“Everybody would like that,” Elio said.

“Why are you asking?” I enquired, noticing the book she was reading, Wharton’s The Age of Innocence.

“Only because I would never want to travel to 1870s New York,” she made a face. “They were all so unhappy. Imagine that the main character ends up marrying a woman he doesn’t love and having kids with her, even though he could be with the other if he really wanted to.”

“Their respective families would have cut them both off,” I said, “And he was happy, in a way. He loved his children and even his wife.”

She scrunched her nose and tilted her head to the side, sizing me up as if I were a pet she’d rescued but was not sure she wanted to keep.

“He lived the wrong life with the wrong person: how could he be happy?”

“It’s not as simple as that.”

“They had their children, they were a family,” said Elio, with an air of finality.

Vimini stood up and ambled towards the house.

“I’m going to talk to Mafalda,” she said, “Maybe she will understand me better than you two.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s nervous because she hasn’t seen Fede in a while. They are very close, but you know how it is when you lose touch with the people you care about,” Elio replied. He was spreading sun lotion on his legs and I lost focus: for a moment I could only stare at him. I loved his legs, his ankles, his feet; I
could happily spend hours fondling them.

“Like that book, even though it’s so sad. There’s one thing I always remember,” he said, squirting some of the lotion on my shoulders and rubbing it in, “When Archer and the countess have that conversation in the carriage and he says he’d almost forgotten her; she’s hurt, but then he explains that it’s because every time she happens to him all over again.”

“I can understand that.”

“Me too.”

We spent the next few hours in *heaven*, and it truly lived up to its name: we drank lemonade, ate watermelon slices, swam in the pool, talked about books, about fictional characters we identified with and those we couldn’t stand, kissed lazily, laughed at everything and nothing.

We heard the multilingual chit-chat coming from the other side of the garden: Samuel and Annella, Manfredi and Mafalda, other people we couldn’t identify.

Vimini had not returned; she was probably too restless to sit and wait for her friend to arrive and must have gone in search of something that would distract her.

“Oliver, phone call for you,” shouted Mafalda, and I knew who that would be.

“My mother,” I said, and Elio nodded.

I had managed to avoid speaking to her three times already and I knew I couldn’t always expect the Perlmsans to cover up for me. I didn’t want to be unpleasant and I was sure I could not avoid it if she’d said anything unkind about Elio and his family.

I kept the conversation short, but the gist of it was that she was coming in two weeks’ time and wished to see me alone first, so why didn’t I go and pick her up from the airport. It didn’t seem a bad idea so I agreed to it and took down her flight details. She didn’t ask me how I was, if I was happy, or anything at all about Elio, so I just said goodbye and put the receiver down.

“Two more weeks of peace and quiet,” I announced, when I went back to *heaven*.

“I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Don’t think she’ll change her mind because of your pretty face,” I joked.

“Is that what you think it is, pretty?”

The most startlingly beautiful face I’d ever set eyes upon; imprinted in my dreams, impossible to forget.

“Yeah, it’s not bad.”

“We can’t all be Greek gods like you.”

“Yes, I should be displayed in some museum in Athens.”

“Or at the V&A in London, so I could visit you every week-end.”

“Not every day?”
“It’s at the other side of town.”

“What’s eight tube stops when there’s a Greek god at the other end?”

“You’ve already counted the stops?”

“Yep, beauty AND brains.”

He nudged my shoulder with his and I pushed back, then we were rolling around in the grass until we were a sweaty mess and had to dip back into the water to wash away the grime.

I brushed his dripping curls from his eyes, touched the Star of David which had nestled in the hollow of his throat.

“I can’t understand why people don’t fall in love with you as soon as they see you.”

He grinned and with his hair plastered to his head he looked indecently young and elfish.

“She wanted you to marry and have a family.”

“Your father said the same thing.”

“And what did you say?”

“I wondered if that was a problem for them too.”

“I don’t care for children, but you-”

“I, what?”

He placed his hands on my chest.

“Maybe our age difference-” he started, without looking me in the eyes.

“You think there’s anything paternal in my feelings for you?”

I must have sounded as incredulous as I felt because his gaze immediately sought mine.

“There isn’t?”

“Not in the way you are suggesting.”

“In what way then?”

The harsh sunlight brought his freckles out and his eyes looked greenish yellow like a cat’s: strange, unreal creature.

“You tell me,” I said, because I was certain he felt the same.

He smoothed his hands down my shoulders to my upper arms, squeezing the muscles as he bit his lips.

“You are my friend, my lover, my brother, my son and my father,” he said.

“Yes, yes, yes and yes,” I replied, punctuating each affirmative with a kiss.

We spent endless minutes slowly licking into each other’s mouth, trying to keep our libido in check;
the sun, water and our nakedness weren’t helping, but we were at last interrupted by a voice which had a familiar ring to it.

“So you are Oliver,” the girl said.

Jack’s sister had a curious, birdlike face, short hair the colour of veined mahogany and almond-shaped brown eyes. She was very slim and dressed in a white t-shirt, blue Adidas shorts with white stripes at the sides; on her feet were a pair of red espadrilles so neat and clean it seemed impossible she’d walked anywhere in them.

“And you are Federica, Jack’s sister.”

“You can call me Fede. Hello Elio, what’s happened to my brother?”

We got out of the pool and went to sit at the small table, on which Mafalda had placed a fresh pitcher of icy lemonade.

“Haven’t you talked to him recently?” Elio asked; he was about to pour the drinks, but I anticipated him.

“No, nobody told me what had happened. I found out only because I eavesdropped.”

“Do you do that a lot?” I enquired.

She threw me a look which was a dead ringer for one of Jack’s perplexed-pitying glances; I smiled back at her and she blinked, uncomprehending.

“Of course I do, they are modern parents. Elio knows all about that, because his are the same. They talk and talk, except when bad stuff happens and then they are afraid of worrying me. I know that now he’s alright, but they won’t tell me what happened.”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

Another Jack-like glare.

“Have you met my brother? Anyway, will you tell me or not?”

Elio explained about the pills but tried to play down the reasons why he’d consumed them in the first place. She listened intently and at the end she concluded:

“He’s not very clever,” she said, sounding very much like Vimini. Seeing them together should be entertaining, I thought. “I’d have tested them on somebody else not on myself.”

“But then it wouldn’t have been your experience but theirs.”

“Maybe, but at least I wouldn’t have ended up in hospital.”

There was no arguing with that. At fourteen, she was eight years younger than her brother, but by no means less shrewd. Like him, she didn’t like dwelling on a subject once she’d passed judgment on it.

“I’d like to play tennis. Is Virginia around? And Danilo?”

“Vimini was waiting for you. I don’t know where she’s gone, but she was here earlier,” Elio said.

A cloud of wistfulness passed upon Fede’s otherwise imperturbable face.
“She wrote to me and said she was getting better.”

“Yes, she’s doing great. She has a pet snail now.”

“Her name’s Jennifer,” I added.

“Figures,” the girl said, smiling.

It was lunchtime and we could smell the pesto sauce from there.

“We’ll play tennis later,” Elio said.

“That’s his word, isn’t it? Vimini told me you always say that.”

She looked at me intently.

“I did, but not so much anymore.”

“Because you two live together now and he’s your boyfriend.”

That was no longer a secret for any member of the Perlman’s extended family, apparently. She didn’t seem concerned that we were both men or that I was older and I wondered whether she knew that her brother was also dating a boy.

Vimini arrived just in time for the melon sorbet. She’d been so agitated that she’d tired herself and she’d fallen asleep on the hammock in her veranda.

“I had linguine with mussels for lunch, but I didn’t drink white wine because I knew I’d fall asleep again,” she explained.

The two girls eyed each other with evident enthusiasm, even though they were playing it cool.

Samuel told me of some excavations taking place around Viterbo which had yielded some interesting finds and I informed him and his wife of my mother’s imminent arrival. They expressed their joy and Elio gazed at me with a wicked smile and fake-innocent eyes.

“Are you going to play tennis later?” Vimini asked her friend, as they attacked their second bowl of sorbet. The Perlman’s had gone upstairs for their afternoon nap and taken their cups of coffee with them.

“Only if Virginia or Danilo are up for it. The others are not good enough.”

“You could play with Oliver.”

Vimini cast me a sidelong glance which was easy to decode, at least for me. If I played with Fede, we could stay here and avoid going to the Malaspinas, which suited us both in this instance. What a pair of conspirators we were, and without having to say a word.

“Don’t you want to play?” Fede asked her cousin.

“I’m not good enough either. We’ll watch you play and read.”

“What are you reading?”
Vimini told her of her dismay at Newland Archer’s behaviour and Fede grimaced in sympathy.

“He’s almost as bad as Isabel Archer in Portrait of a Lady. They made me read it last year over the holidays; I hated it so much it took me nearly two weeks to finish it.”

“I know, right? I wanted to slip inside the book and give her a kicking.”

“I have a theory that Henry James didn’t understand women and Edith Wharton didn’t understand men. Maybe they should have swapped stories.”

That suggestion seemed to amuse Vimini no end: I had never seen her so carefree and happy.

“I’d love to play tennis. Maybe you two should catch up and we’ll see you here in a couple of hours?”

Fede nodded then proceeded to ignore us and dedicate all her attention to her friend.

“What is this? I know this.”

We were naked on our bed; I was lying down and Elio was sitting cross-legged, playing the guitar. The window shutters were ajar and we could hear the faint noises of crockery being washed in the kitchen and the ever-present song of the cicadas.

“Monteverdi’s Il Lamento della Ninfa. I transcribed it that afternoon you spent cooped up in the study with dad.”

“It’s beautiful.”

I sat up and leaned forward to kiss his neck and after that, down his spine, vertebra by vertebra. He first straightened then arched his back, but his fingers kept strumming the instrument’s chords.

“Are you sure you don’t mind playing tennis with Fede?”

“I need the exercise.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

I bit the tiny roll of skin at his waist and he whimpered.

“Not that sort of gymnastics, you little pervert.”

He licked his Star of David into his mouth, kept it trapped between his lips as he finished playing the piece.

“What do I have to do to graduate to full-scale pervert?” he asked, swirling his tongue over the Star’s points.

“Oh, I think you are doing great already.”

“Maybe I have to improve my verbal seduction skills. Learn to say the things I want, like you did last night.”

“I was drunk and angry.”
“It was very sexy.”

He released the Star and stared me in the eyes, his lips red and wet.

“Play that again,” I whispered, and slipped two fingers in his mouth.

He licked and sucked on them, but managed to play the Monteverdi from start to finish without a single false note.
Jouissance

Chapter Summary

Sexy interlude before the Big Party™

Oliver really wants to cover ALL the bases.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to all of you for being the best fandom in the universe.

“You don’t like Riccardo,” Fede said, as we were taking a pause from our second game. Despite her slim, lanky frame, she had unsuspected strength in her shoulders and arms and was lightning-fast on her feet. Naturally, I was the more powerful player, but she clearly had had a lot of practice.

Sometimes I let her win a point, but mostly when she did it was because she was faster and more skilled.

“Does anybody like him?” I asked, stealing a glance at Elio and Vimini, who were sitting under a tree with a pile of books and other paraphernalia to help them pass the time. His eyes met mine and a little smile curved his lips. I smiled back and, as ever, had to force myself to look away.

“Some girls and some boys,” she replied, “I don’t but I’m not sure about Elio. What do you think?”

“Childhood friendships are not always easy to shake off.”

Fede looked at her friend, who had two open books in her lap and was perusing both with the voraciousness of those who are always aware of being on borrowed time.

“You keep the good friends and discard the bad ones: what’s so difficult about it?”

“The definition of good and bad varies according to each person.”

“A friend who doesn’t care about your happiness is not a friend.”

Her simple way of itemising life, black-and-white and unproblematic, made me ache and long for my own ‘age of innocence’. I wanted to explain to her that people don’t always want happiness, that sometimes they don’t believe they deserve it; that some seek danger and excitement even if it comes in a damaged package and many - and maybe Elio was among them - yearn to be desired and can never truly be rid of those who’ve shown an interest in them, no matter how cruel or devious they might be.

I didn’t say any of it since it wasn’t my place to rob her of her youthful certainties, but also because I wasn’t sure she wasn’t right.
Late afternoon I was replaced by Virginia, who’d found out Fede had arrived and had promptly come over with her racket, eager to play with another girl on her same level. She’d brought a group of people with her, among them Chiara and Danilo.

I went to fetch something to drink and Vimini accompanied me.

When we returned with jugs of icy fruit juices and bottles of Coke, Elio was smoking a cigarette and talking to Danilo.

“Riccardo has come back from Malcesine with a girlfriend,” Vimini said, “Apparently she’s very beautiful and older than him.”

There would be a party at their villa on the following evening, strictly for the grown-ups, she said, crinkling her nose. Not that she minded, since she’d invited Fede for a sleep-over and anyway she wasn’t allowed to stay out late.

That evening, a few of us had pizza at Speranza and after-dinner drinks at a bar nearby; we sat outside, under trees festooned with citronella and fairy lights, and enjoyed the light breeze which had suddenly sprung upon us.

“What do you know about her?” Momo was asking Lucien, who had become close friends with Danilo.

“Elle s’appelle Lena and she’s part-Anglaise. They travelled together for a while in India, je crois. Elle est ravissante.”

He hadn’t seen her, but that’s what he’d heard from the younger Malaspina.

“I bet she’s on drugs too,” Elio whispered in my ear. It seemed plausible and anyway few people of that age went east and stayed clean.

Chiara was not with us; she’d become involved with one of Lucien’s friends and they had gone out for a night picnic on the river. I intended to have one of these with Elio soon, possibly in his secret place, the one where we’d first kissed.

I half-expected Riccardo to turn up with Lena, making a big entrance with his showy girl wrapped around him like a vine on a Doric column. It was naive of me - I realised afterwards - to think him so predictable and amateurish. If poison had to be administered, he would do it by stealth, not perform it like a circus act.

Once again, we ended up inebriated, but this time we were a bunch of happy drunks and sauntered along the cobbled streets singing songs in a mixture of Italian, English and French. A particularly rowdy rendition of The Final Countdown evinced shouts of “Go home “or “I’m ringing the police,” which had the only effect of starting us off on a medley of Police’s songs. Next to me, Elio was breathless from laughing and I was hoarse from screaming at the top of my lungs.

“I want to be in your bed,” I said, after we’d had a quick wash and brushed our teeth.

He gazed at my reflection in the mirror with puzzled eyes.
"The room next door, where you slept four years ago," I explained.

We were still tipsy and flushed lobster-red from a day of sunshine and an evening of beer and wine.

"It’s a single bed and the sheets haven’t been changed since June probably."

"I don’t care."

"Why?"

"Do I need to say it out loud?"

He stood on tiptoes and kissed the tip of my nose.

"No," he whispered.

In bed, I gathered him in so that our bodies touched from chest to groin, our legs tangled together. Our faces were so close I could see the flecks of gold in his irises.

I caressed his cheek and traced the shadows underneath his eyes.

"You nearly caught me with my hand down my pants once," he said, grinning, "You could have knocked."

"I wanted to catch you in the act."

"You told me you were trying to be good, to resist your impulses."

"I did, but I wasn’t very successful. I convinced myself I only wanted your friendship. That day I really believed we’d finally understood one another."

"How do you mean?"

"Come on, you had no allergies and neither did I. It was obvious I wanted to be with you and I thought you’d realised as much."

He licked his lips.

"I was so hard I couldn’t think."

"The smell of you... I had it in my nose and in my mouth for the entire day."

We were getting aroused but didn’t want to do anything about it yet.

"I caught a glimpse of your ass when you changed your shorts."

"I waited until you came out the door. I was hoping you’d be naked too."

His eyes widened until they could have swallowed the moon.

"I could hear you piss when you came back at night. It was very erotic."

The alcohol was plucking the words from his mouth.

"Tell me something you never told me."

I rubbed the faint stubble that lined his upper lip.
“One night I thought you’d come in here wearing only your bathrobe, your erect cock already pushing out of it.”

“You have no idea how many times I’d wanted to. Maybe it really happened in some other dimension. What would you have done?”

He didn’t hesitate.

“Taken it in my mouth and sucked it until you came.”

I couldn’t stay my hips then. He pushed back into me, hot and wet already.

“You’d never done it before.”

“And you had.”

“Only a handful of times and never with someone I cared about.”

He parted his lips and I had to slip the tip of my tongue between them, just to get a taste of him.

“That first night,” he moaned. “That first time you put your cock in me.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you. I tried to stop but I was too far gone.”

His tongue teased mine then, suddenly, he buried all ten fingers in my hair, pulled me close and kissed me with abandon. My body felt almost too alive, the skin sensitised and raw; I could feel his peaked nipples relish the friction provided by the hair on my chest; more than anything, I wanted him to be steeped in pleasure.

The French have a word for it which doesn’t really translate into English: jouissance.

I wished to give him that because he always overwhelmed me; he’d done that for me from the very start.

“You felt huge inside me,” he gasped, pressing his erection into my lower abdomen. “I couldn’t, hmm, couldn’t, oh god, couldn't breathe.”

My hands cupped his ass, encompassing it completely; he was disappearing inside me, limb by limb.

I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to pin him to the bed or have him on top of me, so we stayed in that land of equal possession, of confused identities; where I was him and he was me, and even time seemed to fold around us like the gown of a dervish.

We stared into each other’s eyes, trying to slow things down.

“Why come all over me?” he husked, his lips moving on my throat, his tongue sinuous and insistent.

“You know why.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“To make you mine and see the proof of it on your skin.”

“Romantic,” he said, nibbling along my collarbone.

“I’d never felt that need before, that sort of imperative.”
He raised his head to look me in the eyes again.

“Do you think you’ve fallen for parts of me? My youth or my French accent or the way I don’t chew my peas.”

I shook my head, brushed tumbling curls from his forehead.

“You know this answer too.”

He smiled against my skin, a little giddy.

“I really need to suck you off now,” he moaned, and swiftly moved down my body, leaving wet trails as he went.

A brief moment later, he was swallowing me down; hungry mouth, hot, pulsating, tight, perfect. The sounds from his throat, ecstatic and obscene, forced my fingers to grab his hair, pull them, maybe hurtful, but he ate even more of my cock like he couldn’t get enough of it. Here, on the bed of his solitary pleasures, he was giving me everything, no holds barred. When I came, hard and with a stifled scream, he kept me in his mouth, his eyes closed and the expression of a sated angel.

“I should have done that for you,” I said, later, when we’d returned to our bed to sleep. He was half-lidded already and trying not to yawn.

“I wanted to.”

“Did I make one of your old dreams come true?”

“Shut up,” he replied, giggling.

“I did, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling with his eyes shut.

Another chapter closed, I thought, and another night drifted towards dawn.
Since this is chapter 13, I decided to dedicate it to Elio's POV. You can skip it if you prefer to have 100% of Oliver's narrative. It won't affect your understanding of the next chapters. It's like a ghost chapter, hence the title. Enjoy (or maybe not, as you please).

I woke up early – it was six am when I checked the alarm clock – because I needed the toilet. I did what I had to do then glanced at myself in the mirror: violet shadows underneath my eyes, sunburn on my nose and a comma of dried semen on my chin. I still tasted it on my tongue, Oliver’s come. My throat was sore, from singing and taking him as far as possible inside my mouth.

This holiday was making me realise that I had only scratched the surface of my love for him, that there were still so many sides to him to discover and so much life and memories to build together. Like the countess to Newland Archer, he was happening to me all over again, every single time.

Being with him here, with my old friends and my family, was a singular experience: he was acquiring ownership of my past and I held the keys to his future, but the present was a permanent state of ecstasy.

Did he realise how madly in love and lust with him I was?

That afternoon, while he’d played tennis, I had stared at his back, his shoulders, his ass, and all of it had brought me back to our first summer. For a moment, I had been that same Elio: admiring him from afar, wanting him terribly and afraid I would never measure up to his lofty standards.

The recollection of those days was still vivid inside me, and with it the frustration and the myriad emotions that had filled me from noon to night.

Oliver, with his unclad sculpted body, his nonchalance, his blond hair getting blonder by the day, his bronzed skin, his almost indecent beauty: he was mine and I was his, and at times it seemed too magnificent to be true.

And yet last night... last night he’d shown me once again that he knew, oh how he knew, that the past still haunted me in some measure.

Since we’d been back, I had visited the adjoining room only once, brushing past the ghosts of teenage dissatisfaction and still breathing in the desperation of the days after Oliver had gone. Those end-of-summer days, with their dwindling light and fresh mornings, when I had awoken in our bed, alone, and the room in which I had slept before we’d become lovers stood empty and dusty, like a metaphor of my life to come.

He must have known that inside it there were ghosts to be exorcised and he’d done it without having to be asked.
There was only one thing which still troubled me and his name was Riccardo Malaspina.

I had known him long enough not to be fooled by his double bluff, but he knew me too and had the uncanny ability to prod me where it hurt.

We’d danced on the edge of that precipice before, always saved at the last minute by the bittersweet memories of childhood, the field of red poppies being our Proustian madeleine.

This time was different: this summer was to be the final goodbye to that era and the next time we’d meet, come what may, we’d be friendly, polite strangers.

Oliver disliked and distrusted him, but Riccardo had a talent for turning adverse feelings to his advantage; indifference he couldn’t deal with, anything else he took as a challenge.

My strategy was to let him believe he had me under his thumb again, only so that I could turn around and, at the very end, walk away.

I would win and he would lose, at last.

“Elio, where are you?” Oliver called out, his voice still thick with sleep.

“I just needed the bathroom,” I said, and lay down next to him.

He smelled of sex and looked undone; I nuzzled his neck and he smiled, eyes still shut.

“Want to go back to sleep?” he asked, gathering me in his arms.

“Maybe,” I replied, but let my hands travel down his back to his buttocks.

“Doesn’t feel like it.”

“Just touching your apricot.”

“My what?” he chuckled.

I told him about the time he’d helped Mafalda pick the ripest fruits from the trees, how those juicy apricots had reminded me of his ass.

“You and fruit, it really is a thing isn’t it?”

I bit the meat of his shoulder and he let out a full-throated laugh.

“I won’t tell you my thoughts on the etymology of the word apricot then,” I said, burrowing deeper into his embrace, pretending to be ashamed. He was kissing my hair, and I knew he was grinning.

“I can guess them.”

“Did you guess them at the time?”

“No, I thought you disliked me for being a know-it-all.”

“I’m not the only one who likes to brag.”

“You have your music; I have Philology 101.”
“It was very impressive, I have to admit.”

“I bet it was praecoquum that got you going.”

I looked up into his face.

“Say it again.”

He did, and licked his lips.

“Flirt,” I said, laughing and pushing him away so that he would recapture me and squeeze me even tighter.

“In conclusion: you wanted to bite into my ass but the apricot also reminded you of my cock. What a pervert!”

“Not a little pervert?”

“A gigantic one,” he replied, grabbing my chin to kiss me on the lips.

“At last!” I exclaimed, and tried to wriggle out of his grasp. He was shaking with laughter and doing his best to force me on my back while I feigned to struggle.

When he was on top of me, we were both breathing hard and the mood had turned sensual again.

“You can touch my apricot all you like,” he whispered into my mouth.

“And bite it too?”

“Hmm.”

My hands went to it immediately, fingers dipping in between its cheeks, stroking at the seam and circling the sensitive ring of flesh. I teased it, but what I really wanted was to be fucked by Oliver, deep and desperate like the first time.

“I want,” I started, but he silenced me with his tongue. When he came up for air, he murmured: “I won’t hurt you this time,” and reached for the bottle of lube on the bedside table. Soon, we were back in our mock-wrestling position of that night and he was entering me, huge, hard and wet: the very personification of pleasure, my own version of paradise.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop,” I kept repeating, as he slid in, slowly, slowly, until I felt the heavy slap of his balls. He stopped then and circled his hips to make me savour the heft of him inside me.

We locked eyes and mine must have told him that I wanted him to ruin me.

He ducked down to bite at my lips and I thrust my hips into him: the result was a sharp, intense jolt of pure bliss that had me grunting and moaning; he had hit my sweet spot and I kept him there, clutching his apricot’s cheeks and spurring him on.

“Oliver please fuck me, oh please, please,” I cried, and he slammed into me, hitting that same nerve again and again, his tongue hot on my skin, his hair in my fist, my teeth on his throat, sweat everywhere.

When I came, I smeared my come on his chest; the sight and feel of it drove him to his orgasm, which trembled and shook through him like a full-body convulsion.
“Elio,” he gasped, and I took him in my arms and held him, caressing the length of his back as he surrendered to his pleasure.

He stayed inside me for a while, and I let my hand drift to his ass. When I pinched it, he snorted: “You can’t get enough of it.”

“Can’t get enough of you,” I replied; he murmured sweet words but I was so lost I could only hear “I love you,” over and over again. Or maybe he said that and I told him I loved him too, but that’s our secret and nobody else needs to know.
We were alone again at the breakfast table that morning. It was pushing ten when we finally made it
downstairs; freshly showered, wet-haired and with matching cat-got-the-cream smirks on our lips, we
were greeted by a smiling Samuel, who was preparing to spend part of the day sorting through his
papers.

I felt a twinge of guilt at having neglected him and at the fact that our presence here had discounted
the possibility of inviting a guest to stay for the summer.

Like his son, he was skilled at reading minds, especially mine.

“Go enjoy the sunshine, boys,” he said, making shooing gestures with his hands, “Let us old people
toil in the shade,” he joked.

“Where’s mum?” asked Elio.

“She’s gone to Caravaggio with Simona.”

The latter was Annella’s sister and Fede’s mother. It must have been a surprise for him, I thought, to
have fathered a boy when his wife’s family was filled with women. For an instant, I wondered
whether I would have fallen in love with a female version of Elio and the answer was yes, probably.

“What for?”

“She’s been offered to participate in the creation of the Caravaggio Centre inside the church of San
Giovanni and your mother wanted to take a look.”

“And you didn’t?”

“You know how those two are: they’ll surely want to gossip and I’ll only be in the way. The four of
us can go another time; maybe have dinner in the area.”

“That would be great,” I said, and he patted my back, touched his son’s cheek and left.

Mafalda brought us the eggs and the coffee, muttering something about confusing breakfast with
lunch. When I apologised for our tardiness, she shook her head and smiled. “Ah, questa gioventù!”
she exclaimed. Elio kissed her on the cheek and she looked thoroughly pacified.

““You are really good at this,” I said, as I poured the hot, fragrant liquid in both our cups.

“What?”

He was spreading nutella on his bread.

“That,” I pointed at his face, which wore the most innocent of expressions.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he replied, trying, and failing, to contain a smile.

On the table was the usual array of books and newspapers; I grabbed the Herald Tribune while Elio went for the cultural insert of La Repubblica.

He was wearing a sleeveless top and as he got to grips with the newspaper, trying to fold it and prop it against the orange juice bottle, I noticed that I’d left a mark on the underside of his arm.

“I did manage to hurt you again,” I said, and he didn’t look surprised, which meant he’d seen it already.

“I loved everything we did; I always do.”

“Maybe I should be more careful.”

He touched my leg, gave it a playful squeeze.

“I was as rough as you. Would you like me to stop?” he asked.

What a question!

“You’d kill me if you did,” I replied, and it made us both laugh.

We spent the afternoon down at the river with the usual crowd. Riccardo wasn’t there, but I didn’t expect him to be. Of course he was playing the role of the reclusive celebrity who would not be enticed away from his luxurious lair. Let the little people come unto him and kneel down at his feet: I bet he would have loved that. And that woman of his, the ravissante Lena, which we’d discovered was short for Maddalena, was perfectly cast as the exotic temptress, a belle dame sans merci descended upon us to give us a tantalising glimpse of “the forbidden”.

Danilo was missing too: he’d probably been roped in to help with the preparations: he was an amateur deejay, so music selection was his province, if big brother allowed him.

I realised that my train of thoughts was veering into paranoia, but there was a sense of foreboding in the stifling afternoon air which I couldn’t quite discount.

Elio was as calm and docile as the river, but even that seemed part of the waiting game. Not that I suspected him of anything, but the atmosphere was charged with electricity yet he, who always picked up the minutest vibration, was oddly unaffected.

I knew he was inside his own head, even though he was outwardly pleasant: he joked with Lucien and Mario, splashed in the water with Fede and Vimini and even played Frisbee with Chiara and Viola. We swam – yes, dear Celan, we did swim – and because it was late afternoon, there was a shimmer among the leaves that made the trees glimmer like in the poem. I was pervaded then by a
sweet sadness, not for myself but for Elio, who had left all of this to come to the States. I shouldn’t have let him, I thought: all I had done is place the burden of our relationship on his shoulders, almost willing him to fail. I would never do that again nor would I let him go without speaking out.

When we got back to the house for dinner, the sun was kissing the horizon and Anchise was watering the tomatoes: poesy and prose, always so tightly entwined in the Italian landscape, which never could disengage itself from the combined legacies of beauty and decadence.

Annella and her sister were not back, but Samuel had invited to dinner a journalist from Il Corriere della Sera; a Jewish Frenchman in his forties named Mathieu, he was an old university friend of Elio’s father and they regaled us with funny anecdotes of their student days. He was an attractive man, funny but not in a coarse way, well-read but not overbearing.

When dinner was over, we left them to their reminiscences and their shots of grappa and went to shower and dress for the party.

“I’m going to learn French,” I said, watching Elio as he tried to untangle his curls.

“Oh, so you liked him that much uh?”

“He’s an interesting man, but not for me.”

“Too old?” he tousled my hair, which I had just combed.

“You know what I like.”

I pulled him down on my lap and tickled his sides. We ended up rolling around on the bed until we were breathless.

“Do you think Mathieu and my father were more than just friends?” he asked, as we lay across the bed, still in our underwear.

“Why would you think that?”

“When you left that summer, he told me things... he hinted at something like what you and I had, but said that he hadn’t seen it through.”

It didn’t come as a complete surprise, in truth.

“Does it bother you?”

He didn’t falter.

“It would if he wasn't happy, but I know he is.”

“Your mother is an amazing woman. No man married to her could be unhappy.”

“Don’t worry so much about yours,” he said, caressing my cheek, “We’ll survive. There’s nothing we can’t survive.”

“Even this party?”

“If you don’t want to go, we don’t have to.”

“And miss the mysterious Lena? I don’t think so.”
He threw me a cryptic glance and got off the bed.

“Shall I wear this?” he asked a moment later, holding my old shirt in his hands.

“As a talisman?”

“Instead of a ring.”

My heart thudded.

“Would you like one?”

He flushed and looked away.

“It’s silly, isn’t it?”

I went up to him and held his face in my hands. I tried to speak, but my mind was blank, so I kissed his lips instead. “No, not silly,” I managed to whisper after a while, and I’d never felt more inadequate than I did at that moment. Fortunately, he understood and let me off the hook.

“Later,” he joked, pushing me away, “Now it’s party time.”

I had imagined the villa to be as sparkly and gaudy as a Christmas tree, but once again I had not taken into account Malaspina’s innate elegance.

A trail of blue fairy lights illuminated the path up to the front garden, snaking around the pool like the curve of a question mark. There were candles and citronella-scented tea-lights dotted all over, and a single glitter-ball had been attached to a branch of a majestic oak tree. The music was a low throb that could be perceived from a distance, but devoid of the tinny echoes produced by cheap equipment.

When we got close enough to the house, the first lyrics we could discern made Elio laugh, as he sang along to them:

You’re so gorgeous I’ll do anything
I’ll kiss you from your feet to where your head begins
You’re so perfect You’re so right as rain
You make me
Make me, make me, make me hungry again

“This could be our song,” he said, taking my hand, “I wanted so much to be you, back then.”

“What’s so special about me? I don’t even speak French.”

“I could teach you.”

“That’d be too distracting. I’ll have to find someone less attractive.”

“As long as that someone is really old and ugly,” he said, squeezing my hand before letting it go.
Everybody was outside, dancing around the pool or making out under the trees, but our host was nowhere to be found.

As anticipated, Danilo was in charge of the music and lighting, while Momo was playing barman and preparing cocktails. These boys and girls who had been so green when I first met them were mixing liquors with ease, smoking pot and sleeping around.

“Where’s Riccardo?” asked Chiara, who was sitting at the edge of the pool on her new boyfriend’s lap. He was Lucien’s friend Yvan, a gangly type with short hair and a large, engaging smile, who looked up at her adoringly; it mirrored the way she had looked at Riccardo when they’d danced together, and that didn’t bode particularly well.

Her question had been directed at our group, but none of us had the answer.

“He must be in the conservatory. All the lights are on and the windows are open,” said Elio, but his reply was half-drowned by the next song, a dance version of “This Is Not a Love Song,” which had us all jumping up and down like madmen.

An hour or so later, we were euphoric, drenched in sweat and more than a bit drunk. The G&Ts were heavy on the gin and the Bacardi Coke which Elio liked had plenty of ice and rum but precious little cola.

“Let’s go seek him out,” Elio said. There was a lull between songs and Viola had proposed we took a dip in the pool, which seemed an amazing idea. We had our swimming trunks underneath, since we knew that night swimming was always a possibility.

“If you want pot, Lucien’s friends are rolling some,” said Momo, who was as drunk as the rest of us and had abandoned his bar-tending post.

“I want to meet the girl. Aren’t you curious?”

Momo shook his head.

“I’ve seen her already. Bella gnocca, but like his other girls, too strange for me.”

“She must be interesting though, or he wouldn’t have brought her here.”

“Just go find them, if you are so eager to find out.”

It was ridiculous, to behave like he was some sort of Gatsby of the Pianura Padana, not to mention incredibly rude.

“Let’s go to the pond,” I said to Elio, after Momo had left us. “A couple of beers, two joints and…” Chiara had overheard me. “Yes, let’s go,” she said, and sent Yvan to fetch the drinks. “We’ve got something to smoke already, don’t worry.”

Elio was unconvinced, kept looking at the house, which was a brightly illuminated mansion yet seemed as evanescent as a phantom ship.

We had already been inside the conservatory and we’d found cigarette butts, empty glasses and bottles but no human presence.
Outside, past the glass panes and the potted plants, the black vastness of the poppy field was nothing but a drab sea of grass over which danced clouds of mosquitoes.

We had danced there, fast and slow, as if to exorcise the place and its surroundings.

Yvan came back with a big bottle of Ceres beer and one of Keglevich lemon vodka.

“I hope we are not walking too far or these babies will get warm,” he joked, to which Chiara rolled her eyes, not even trying to be subtle.

Naturally I had known all along we’d find them there, and Elio knew it too, but I felt he’d pretended not to, in order to convince me to be the one who’d insist on going; veil upon veil of dissimulation, but none opaque enough to hide a single thing.

Couldn’t I have spoken openly instead of using tricks, I asked myself later. For some odd reason, I felt as if we were living inside an acid dream devised by somebody else.

The previous time it had been Arabic music, while this time it was an Asian melody: the girl had straight long hair of that Scandinavian blond that is almost white and which stood out dramatically against her deeply tanned skin. She was slim but athletic, with the defined muscles of someone who exercised regularly. They were naked and swayed to the music, holding onto each other loosely, without talking.

Riccardo was the first to see us and I could tell from his smile that he was already high.

“At last,” he said, and the girl turned towards us and waited for us to go to her, as was evidently always the case.

Yvan had blushed scarlet and was doing his best not to stare at Lena’s body. Chiara had been stunned into silence, but her eyes were glassy and remote.

Elio broke the impasse.

“We brought beer and vodka.”

“Great,” Riccardo replied, “Put them in the water. It'll keep them cold.”

“Let’s have some of it first.”

“There’s some already open,” Malaspina said, pointing to a bottle of rum resting among the willows. We all took a swig from it and I could have sworn it had been doctored, as it had a much stronger kick than usual.

“Did you put something in this?” I asked.

The girl laughed, throwing her head back. She was truly stunning, with high cheekbones, full lips and the androgynous body of a model.

“Adam,” she replied, extending a long slim arm towards Elio’s face and resting her hand on his cheek.

I was about to correct her, but then I remembered that Adam was the name they’d originally given to ecstasy. In that case, we had about fifteen minutes before we started to feel its effect, or less, if the dosage was high.
“Who’s Adam?” asked Yvan, and Chiara whispered something in his ear.

“This isn’t funny,” I said, wanting very much to strangle Riccardo, “How much did you put in it?”

“Relax buddy, it’s just enough to take the edge off,” he replied.

“I’m not your buddy and I don’t need you to tell me what to do.”

“Hey, let’s not fight okay?” Elio said, smiling at Lena, who reciprocated, her big blue eyes staring him straight in the face, her lips red and moist.

Minutes later, I found myself discussing the words of Kershaw’s The Riddle with Riccardo. I was down to my swimming trunks, but I couldn’t recall how and when I had removed my clothes. Elio had kept his shirt on too, my shirt, fully unbuttoned to reveal his naked torso; Lena was clinging on to his neck and whispering something in his ear. Chiara and Yvan were one on top of the other, but I could feel her gaze on us, insistent. I had a lit joint in my hand and the world was drifting past, as if we were all sitting on a boat heading downstream.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” I insisted.

“But it does,” he replied, his hand on my thigh. He smelled of rum and sweat, a mixture which I found strangely enticing. “And days instead of me/ I only know what to discuss is genius. It reminds me of something Foucault said.”

“What?”

“Sex is boring.”

I wasn’t even remotely sharp enough to connect the dots between the two. His hand moved up and down my leg, inching closer to my groin. I watched it with interest, feeling both elated and distant.

“The act of sex is tedious compared to the discourse about it; and the self if also boring, so why not try and run away from it? Days instead of me: an outsider’s view rather than every single thing being always about the self.”

His fingers were tickling my inner thigh, and a sluggish tide of desire was making its way through my blood.

In the distance, Elio was caressing the dip of Lena’s spine.

“Look at you two, for instance.”

“What about us?”

He took the joint from my lips and put it between his, sucking hard on it.

“You can imagine being with a girl when you are with Elio, but he can’t do the same with you. You are forcing him to be one thing when he could be two, three or more. If you weren’t so jealous - a defect of the self - you could have lots more fun.”

“Like you do?”

His hand was palming my cock now, and there was no doubt that I was getting hard.
There was something I wanted to say though, which I was certain would change everything. A memory emerged of Elio’s voice, chiding me about Barthes. “You are resisting him,” he had said, and he had been right, because we were at the very start of our life together and I was still scared that everything might end there and then.

What was it? And then it came to me.

“You and Foucault are forgetting something fundamental: you’re neglecting the heart.”

He grimaced, clearly disappointed.

“Whatever I know, anyone may know- I alone have my heart,” I quoted. “That’s all there is to it, really.”

I glanced at Elio, and he at me, and all that was between us, that had been between us from the start, was as real to me as the trees and the water.

The sexual desire I had felt and would feel in the future, could be born in all kinds of ways, stimulated by all sorts of people, but it would always, always, be channelled through my heart and end up at Elio’s feet, where it belonged.

I removed Riccardo’s hand from my crotch, stood up trying not to stagger, wanting to go to Elio, but he was already next to me, curling his arm around my waist.

“Time to leave,” he said, and kissed me.
We left Riccardo and the others and walked into the night, like two drunken thieves.

“I want to go to your secret place,” I said, and Elio happily agreed, but I did not realise how far it was and how high we both were.

I held his hand and at some point we even started dancing a bastardised version of the waltz, while singing scraps of pop songs at the top of our voices.

*Can’t stand losing you* was the one that left us breathless from shouting, and we collapsed in a heap on the grassy bank of the river.

“I can’t go on,” he gasped.

“Well, the song is about suicide,” I replied, and for no reason other than my blinding happiness, I started giggling.

“He loves himself too much for that.”

Was he still talking about the song?

I turned to the side to look at him and, with his shirt open to reveal his torso, he was translucent like the moonlight.

The drug was still coursing through my system: I felt elated and aroused, but I wasn’t in a hurry to do anything about it.

“What did you think about Lena?” I asked.

“Alchemy,” he replied, and rolled over so that he was on top of me.

I lost track of time as we pushed into each other, skin on skin, seeking utter fusion while being ambushed by tenderness, more laughter and the sheer pleasure of being together.

“What do you mean?”
The question issued from my lips, swollen from his bites and stretched into a grin.

I couldn’t believe we could were still on the same planet as that pond among the willows.

“She’s stunning and sexy and she would have let me fuck her.”

“Why didn’t you?”

The question was an echo of another I had asked millions of years ago, about a different, much more precious girl.

Elio open his mouth trying to find the right words, but I licked into it, and we were gone again for another long spell.

“She turned into you. One minute she was Lena, the next, when I got hard, she was you; copper into gold.”

“So I am gold?”

I tickled him and he retaliated by pulling my hair, which was no real punishment anyway.

“Riccardo had his hands all over you,” he said, grinding his crotch against mine.

“I felt the same as you, do you believe me?”

“Yes,” he whispered, and it was my turn to grab a handful of his curls, force his head down and take his mouth in deep kisses full of tongue and teeth.

When we parted, he rested his head on my chest, and in the rural quiet, enlivened by the chirping of crickets and the occasional cry of unnameable birds, I yielded to the impulse of confessing the only secret I still kept from him.

“When I first moved in with you, I was afraid you might leave again. I tried to convince myself that if I could keep my distance and pretend that you were like any other boy, I wouldn’t suffer as much”

“That’s why you made love to me like I was a stranger.”

I stroked his back, his hair, his cheekbones.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why didn’t it work?”

“Why do you think? I can’t stand to see you suffer.”

He raised his head so that we could kiss again.

“I don’t really want a ring,” he said, breathing softly against my cheek.

“Oh?”

“But I would like something of yours other than your shirt; something meaningful.”

It was the easiest thing in the world, so obvious that I wondered why I hadn’t thought of it before.

“You’ll wear mine and I’ll wear yours,” I said, touching his Star of David.
His eyes filled with tears, bright like fireflies.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Our hands couldn’t manage the fiddly clasps, they were still too shaky.

Tomorrow, we agreed.

Tomorrow, which was already today, but this time it didn’t have any sinister connotation: we were not going to separate, I wasn’t boarding a train to the airport, not unless he came with me.

The after-kick of the drug came when the night faded: the colour of the sky was like a soft blush behind a dark veil.

I had forgotten how it made objects and sounds appear so fresh and vivid, and how the erotic pulse throbbed in a famished, all-encompassing manner.

Elio was as horny and impatient: he undressed me quickly, so quickly that elastic of my swimsuit caught on my heavy erection making me hiss in momentary pain.

He liked that and murmured, “yeah, yeah,” and shoved his face into my groin; I felt his wet breath on my cock then the broad swipes of his tongue on my balls, up the shaft, and down again, the pressure almost cruel, as if he wanted to punish my arousal; all the while he was grunting and humming, and the vibrations were driving me crazy.

When I buried my hands into his hair, the texture and scent of his curls went through my over-sensitised nerves as if I had absorbed them directly into the epidermis.

I knew I wouldn’t last long because I was already on the brink when he’d started.

He must have known it too, because he teased me a while before taking me fully inside his mouth. As soon as he did, he made it clear that he wanted it rough, that I should pull his hair and fuck into him. I was too far gone to object and the strangled, glottal sounds he made, along with the warmth of his saliva on my sac, drove me to a shivering, jolting orgasm. I shouted and sobbed and my eyes were blurry with tears.

“Oliver, Oliver,” he gasped, his voice ruined, his mouth still unsatisfied, kiss-biting my thighs, my hips, my stomach, every bit of skin that wanted soothing.

I knew what I needed and I was desperate for it.

“Come all over me,” I asked, in an even scratchier tone.

He tilted his face up and stared at me with an air of triumph and a hint of savagery: he was on top and was basking in the sensual power he had over me. I was even more turned on, if possible, by the idea of being the object of his pleasure.

“Ask me again,” he said, straddling my chest and slowly undoing the buttons of his trunks to reveal his thickened dick.

“Come all over me, please,” I said again, and my hand reached out to touch, but it was batted away.
“No hands,” he intimated, as he started to pleasure himself.

There was nothing I wanted more than touch him everywhere, but I didn’t want him to stop, didn’t want him to remove his fingers from my throat, my mouth, the hair on my chest, and all the other paths they might take while he writhed on top of me, back arched, throat bared, nipples hard and red.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he cried in between moans, and I bit my lips fiercely enough to draw blood.

He peaked mid-scream, his load shooting over my chest, throat and mouth, his semen cooling the feverishness of my skin.

The first words he uttered, as we lay spent in each other’s arms, were so absurd they made me laugh with the pure delight of being in his company.

“There are little snails hidden in the grass and we are crunching them.”

“You are seeing things because you’re high.”

“I can show you if you want.”

“Nah, that’s too gruesome. Well, let’s hope we haven’t murdered Jennifer or Vimini will never forgive us.”

“That’s a large snail, these are the tiny ones.”

I grabbed his chin and put my lips on his.

“You’re a snail connoisseur,” I murmured.

“You know some French already.”

“I still need a teacher.”

“A very plain-looking one.”

“We’ll see,” I replied, closing my eyes on the fast-approaching day.

Tomorrow was, magnificently, today.
The Sting

Chapter Summary

Bad things happen even in the most idyllic places.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to you all for being always so lovely to me.
Have a very Happy New Year!!!!

Anella noticed it as soon as we went down for a very late breakfast.

We had arrived home as Mafalda was attending to the first chores of the day: opening the downstairs window shutters, filling the *caffettiera* with water and coffee, separating the whites from the colours before loading the washing machine.

She had taken one look at us, shaken her head and muttered her disapproval in her brisk dialect.

Elio had kissed both her cheeks and she had ruffled his hair, while I smiled what I knew must be a watery, idiotic grin.

It was already stifling hot and I felt worn out, sweaty and smelly.

Upstairs, we took a lukewarm shower, soaping up each other’s bodies and fighting a losing battle to keep our eyes open.

And yet, despite our exhaustion and before we could snatch a few moments of sleep, we knew there was something that needed doing.

“Was it a nice party?” Elio’s mother asked, glancing at my Star which now lay above her son’s sternum. She didn’t comment on it, but her eyes shone as bright as her smile. He intercepted her gaze and immediately his hand rose up and touched the gold chain around his neck. I’m not sure he was aware of what he’d just done, but it made me immensely happy and proud.

“Nice isn’t the word I’d use,” he replied mid-yawn, “Lots of loud music, alcohol and Riccardo disappeared for most of it: it was great, wasn’t it?” he looked at me with eyes which seemed to contain the world’s entire wisdom.

“Yes, yes, it was,” I replied, my words sounding woefully inadequate.

“Yes, yes, it was,” I replied, my words sounding woefully inadequate.

“Poor boy,” she said, and for a second I thought she was referring to me, “Nobody really likes him, not even his brother.”

“Jack likes him.”

Mrs Perlman laughed and her expression reminded me of Fede.
“I don’t think it’s the sort of admiration he wants.”

I thought that there was nothing she didn’t know, nothing that she didn’t understand and accept in her own ironic, no-nonsense manner. If there was anything to know about her husband’s sexuality, it would not have escaped that gimlet gaze of hers nor would it have incurred any censure on her part, of that I was certain.

“He wants to be adored,” I intervened.

“Yes, and that will never be Jack’s way of loving people.”

“Is it a bad thing?” Elio asked, as he nibbled a slice of melon.

“Healthier than the alternative: adoration can be very dangerous.”

She looked at me and I didn’t know what to say, so I got to grips with my egg, making a mess of it as usual.

“Unless there’s the same level of commitment on both sides,” she added, lighting a cigarette and pulling on it with relish.

I wanted to ask her about Mathieu, whether he’d stayed on or had already left, but it could have been construed as an odd non-sequitur.

“How was your excursion to Caravaggio?” I asked, instead.

“Simona is really lucky. I can’t imagine a more rewarding job for her. And she will be so close to us, she could leave Fede here; maybe Jack would come down too.”

“But you won’t be here in the winter.”

“We can always stay on, if there’s a good reason for it. Samuel can stop in Milan during the week and I can work from here and drive to town when I need to. You could come and stay with us during the winter break, but I’m sure you’ll want to travel a bit.”

“Marzia invited us to Paris,” Elio said.

“That’s a great idea. The marché de Noël at Montmartre and the beautiful Sacré-Cœur towering over it... it’s so lovely, isn’t it, piccino?” she said, tousling her son’s curls.

I had never been to Paris, but I had a vision of us walking hand in hand along the Seine, snow softly falling over the city, a white blanket of silence. I felt obscenely happy just thinking about it.

Elio nodded, looking down into his coffee cup, trying to hide his ecstatic smile.

We spent the rest of the day in a daze: the comedown from the drug would have been worse if we hadn’t been so wrapped up in bliss.

Fede and Vimini dropped by, took stock of the situation, held a quick conversation sottovoce, then Elio’s cousin announced they were going to Villa Moreschi to see Virginia and Lavinia.

We didn’t even try to stop them; we barely found sufficient strength to turn the pages of the books we were attempting to read.
My eyes kept straying to Elio’s throat and what was nestled at the base of it.

I had always found the concept of marital pledges outdated and even vaguely offensive: if you loved somebody there was no real need to prove it with objects, unless they were the testimony of shared experiences, like the book Elio had given me. I understood Elio’s need to keep my shirt while we were separated, but I had never felt the necessity to wear anyone’s ring. I had bought one for Alice because it was customary, but the ritual of putting it on her finger had left me unmoved. Obviously, it could have been because I had not been in love with her, but I didn’t think that was the only reason.

This felt completely different.

I had given Elio a symbol of my heritage and he’d done the same for me; if was as if we’d been joined in marriage by a superior being, far above any earthly minister and infinitely more powerful. The weight of our people’s history was nothing compared to the strength of the love which united us all. And here we were, Elio and I, links in that eternal chain and bound together as friends, brothers, partners, spouses.

That evening we went to bed early, just after dinner. Samuel had been there and Simona too, while Fede had been staying with Vimini and Mathieu had boarded a plane to the Balearics.

“I have never felt like this since I was a child,” Elio said, as he stripped off his shorts and polo shirt.

I was already in bed, naked and partially covered by a camomile-scented sheet.

“Like what?”

“Free from desire, because I already have everything.”

He lay down close to me, our limbs barely touching.

I understood what he meant, but wasn’t feeling as Zen, not even remotely.

“Yes,” I replied, and sat up to switch off the night-light.

When I lay back down, he was already sprawled on my side of the bed.

“I thought you said,” I started, but was cut off by his tongue slipping inside my mouth.

“You are part of my having everything, so I’m having you,” he whispered, in between kisses.

We didn’t have the energy for a full-blooded fuck, but in a way it was even more intense than that: our bodies connected from head to toe, heavenly wet friction where it was needed, hands roaming all over, moans, cries and profanities all mixed together and uncensored.

Just as he was about to come, he clenched his teeth, grasped my Star, which was his, pulled it a little and asked, low and urgent:

“You are all mine now, aren’t you?”

My cock hardened even more.

“Yes.”

“Say it.”
I could hardly breathe.

“I’m yours, yours, yours,” I murmured, and felt the warmth of his semen on my belly.

He smeared his palm with it and went back to fisting my dick. One stroke later and I was spurting too, an orgasm so primal I felt it in my guts.

“I’m going to sleep for a year,” he said, when we settled down for the night. “Don’t wake me until it’s the summer of 1988.”

I kissed his shoulder and chuckled.

“That’s only an excuse so you won’t have to meet my mother. I totally understand.”

“Okay, I will meet her, charm her until she gives us her blessing and go back to sleep for another eleven months.”

“And what about me?”

“You’ll sleep too, of course.”

“Of course,” I said, and in fairness it didn’t seem such a bad idea.

Riccardo and Lena left for Ibiza two days after the party and we never saw them again. We learned that they had picked up a couple of tourists in Sirmione and brought them to the villa for a night of ‘fun and games’. Danilo had been sent to stay with Momo and only the devil knew the amount of drugs which must have been consumed that night.

Everybody was relieved of their departure, especially his brother who could go back to playing tennis in the grounds without risking an unsavoury encounter.

Our lives went back to their pleasant, unhurried routine of sunbathing, bike-riding, swimming at the river, going dancing or to the cinema at night.

My mother’s visit was fast approaching and Marzia was due to return from her European travels more or less at the same time.

It’s not easy to tell those days apart, but the easy joy which characterised them held a sting in its tail.

I had been prepared for it at the start of our holiday, but I’d relaxed when it had seemed acceptable to be what we were even in provincial Italy.

We had let our guard down and therefore were unprepared for the viciousness of the abuse which was thrown our way.

One evening we’d cycled to the town's outskirts and Elio wanted cigarettes. I went in to a bar to buy some and it took me longer than expected as there were people paying for their drinks. I went out to find a group of boys staring Elio up and down as if he were the most disgusting of specimens. There were four of them, none looking older than eighteen and dressed in ripped jeans and scuffed leather boots, their hair cut short or completely shaved off. They were so out place in that mild-mannered Northern Italian city that I almost believed I was imagining them.
“Hey, what’s the problem?”

They frowned, hadn’t expected my presence or my nationality. They didn’t speak English, outside of the few random words they had picked up from songs. They knew swear words too, as it’s often the case. What they did know was how to say fag in both languages, but that wasn’t their main gripe, although the tallest and biggest of them made a show of spitting in the direction of Elio’s shoes while he called him frocetto, little faggot; they had seen the symbol of our religion worn proudly and openly displayed and they were livid with fury. Sporco ebreo was the insult they were repeating with glee and Elio was watching them with bewildered eyes, his face grown pale and tense.

The altercation brought some of the customers out on to the pavement, and by that time my willingness to fight them had already weakened their belligerence. Jewish and gay I may be too, but I was bigger, fitter and American. They knew better than to meddle with strangers.

They shouted and spat some more, but from a distance, walking away with swaggers that suggested they were only leaving because they’d decided we weren’t worth their time.

“Ragazzacci,” said an elderly man, who had come out holding his glass of verdicchio and a half-smoked cigarette.

“Maybe we should inform the carabinieri,” I said, but Elio intervened.

“Let’s go home,” he said, touching my arm. His hand was ice-cold.

“They are not from around here,” the man explained, “They won’t dare come back again. I know their kind: cowards, the lot of them. Wouldn’t say boo to a goose. Have some wine,” he added, shoving his glass under Elio’s nose.

It would have been rude to refuse, so he took a sip and regained some of his colour.

We thanked the man and left him and the others as they confabulated noisily about such topics as “what’s the world coming to,” and “youths who look and behave like animals.”

“Are you sure you can cycle back? We could call your parents and ask them to pick us up.”

Elio nodded but he was distracted; I wasn’t sure what to do and adrenaline was still coursing through my body.

“Can we sit on that bench for a moment?” he said.

The rusty bench was near a bookshop where we’d once been into, Spazio Libri, and the illuminated window with its colourful volumes seemed like a beacon of sanity in a world that had suddenly shown its nasty, brutal side.

“Light me a cigarette?” he asked, and I did, even though all I wanted was to envelop him in the tightest of hugs.

“Is this what your mother meant about being Jewish of discretion? Has this happened before?”

He shook his head and sucked on the cigarette, closing his eyes.

“Not to me, but maybe to my parents; they never said.”

“Maybe she was right and I was wrong.”
I could be flippant about my own safety, but never about his: if anything bad ever happened to him because of me, I would lose it and with potentially dark consequences.

“I won’t take it off and I won’t hide who I am.”

The street was empty, but I asked all the same.

“Can I hold you?”

He collapsed against my chest with a soft whimper and I took the cigarette from his mouth and threw it away. I caressed his face, his hair and his back, whispering random soothing words until I felt him relax.

“I should learn to fight back. I can’t expect you to be always there for me. Maybe I should go to the gym more often, learn one of those oriental disciplines.”

“Or maybe next time you’ll let me inform the police.”

“That would only make the situation worse: they would really come after us then.”

“Let’s at least discuss it with your father.”

Elio sighed and placed a kiss on my chest.

“Okay,” he agreed, “Let’s go now.”

“Wait, let me hold you some more.”

I squeezed him tight against me, knowing it would make him laugh. Once I had told him that if I couldn’t feel his nipples through his shirt I wasn’t doing it right, and he’d giggled and been aroused in equal measure.

“You always make me feel better,” he whispered, his fingers raking through my hair.

“That’s my job.”

“And what’s mine?”

“Playing my favourite piano pieces without changing them too much.”

“Sounds like blackmail.”

“You know me: I am a dissoluto assoluto.”

He chuckled and I kissed the tip of his nose.

Time to go home.
Visit

Chapter Summary

A surprise visit.
Let's face it: this was always meant to happen....

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year to you all! May 2018 bring love and peace to you wonderful people!!!!

That night we fell asleep entwined, not a sliver of air between our bodies.

I felt the inescapable desire to protect Elio and he surrendered to me without protesting. I spooned his body with mine and kissed his hair, the nape of his neck, the patch of skin behind his ear. He sighed, covered my hands with his and caressed my toes with the arch of his foot.

For once I felt no sexual impulse, and I knew it wasn’t that it had been superseded by tenderness, but rather that the love I had for him had ascended one more level, and like the atmosphere on top of the highest peak of a mountain, it had become so pure it made me light-headed. The smell of his sweat, the freckles on his shoulders, the tangle of his curls, were as hyper-real to me as an acid-induced hallucination and I feared someone or something might try and snatch them away from me before daybreak.

“It’s okay,” he kept whispering, as if he sensed my agitation, which of course he did, since I could not quite control my heartbeat.

I nodded and pulled him closer still. I knew it was too hot to stay like this until morning, but I wouldn’t let him go until we both fell asleep.

Before morning, I had a nightmare; I usually didn’t remember them, but I did recall that one, because it was like a scene out of a Tennessee Williams play: Elio and I were among the ruins of Ancient Greece, under a sky white with heat; he was leaning on the chalky column of a temple and I was walking up the hill to reach him. I saw, as if from a great distance, a group of men closing in on him; I ran but didn’t seem to move from the spot. They weren’t making any noise, but I knew they were hurting him. I woke up in a sweat with the image of his body, lifeless and ravaged, and the men disappearing like cockroaches in daylight.

Next to me, naked and with his puffy lips slightly parted, Elio was deep in peaceful sleep. As I moved closer to touch him, I felt the usual tug in my groin: desire had not stayed away for long.

“I like waking up like this,” he said, towelling his hair dry.
“Like what?”
“I meant being serviced in the shower.”
“Serviced sounds cold and impersonal,” I replied, putting my red shorts on.
“It was a very hot and personal bit of servicing.”
“You were extremely serviceable too.”

We caught each other’s gaze and laughed.

The truth of the matter was that we had cuddled in bed for a long while in near-silence; we had then moved to the bathroom and under the spray of the shower, I had kneeled at his feet and sucked him off with delicacy which soon turned to greediness. I slurped him down and he held on to my wet, slippery hair, brushing them away from my face so that he could see what I was doing to him. Mid-act, we locked eyes and his were dark, wide, unfathomable. After he came down my throat, he helped me up and turned his back to me, but I was too afraid to hurt him; since he knew I adored his legs, we didn’t take long to find an alternative solution. My cock pushing between his silky wet thighs was never going to be anything less than heaven. Not when I could lick the length of his neck and rub at his hard nipples with my fingers. I came shouting his name and it echoed through his flesh and mine.

Our breakfast under the linden tree was as lavish and unhurried as always, so that the episode of the previous night seemed to be just another nightmare. It would have been easy to put it behind us without speaking of it with other people, but it was a conversation which needed to happen and the sooner the better.

Annella had accompanied Simona to the train station. She’s stayed longer than intended and Fede had refused to leave, so the girl was to remain with us, even though we knew Vimini’s parents were more than glad to have her there too.

Samuel was writing an article about a French archaeological charity named Rempart, but he was still reading the Corriere della Sera when we entered his study.

“What’s up boys?” he asked, smiling broadly and adjusting his reading glasses on his nose.

We sat down on the sofa and as I recounted the events of the previous evening, his smile disappeared and a frown creased his brow.

“I see, I see,” he murmured, at the end.

“Did anything ever happen to you or mum?” Elio asked.

“Not here, never here.”

“But it did happen?” I insisted.

“Yes, years ago and not in Italy; we had gone hiking in Austria and left Elio here with his great-aunt, who was the owner of this house. Annella was wearing that,” he gestured at the chain around my neck and I tried not to blush, “We were eating fondue in a chalet and this big, grey-haired man kept staring at us. We didn’t make too much of it, but when we left he followed us. It was dark outside and the path we took cut through a pine forest. He didn’t threaten us directly, but made it very clear
we should not flaunt our religious symbols in his mother country; that it was deeply offensive to do so and many people would see it as a direct challenge that might not go unmet.”

“So it was a threat.”

“Yes, in a way.”

“And mum stopped wearing the necklace.”

“We had you to consider: your future and your safety. Besides, not all things that matter have to be visible.”

“I won’t take it off or hide it.”

Samuel patted his son’s hand.

“And I admire you for this, but remember to pick your battles. Some people are only looking for an excuse to make your life a misery.”

“I’ll learn to defend myself.”

“Don’t you think we should inform the police? Those boys may be dangerous, for all we know,” I intervened.

Elio’s father scratched the back of his head.

“Let me deal with it. I know someone at the Prefettura. Which street was it?”

I told him and mentioned the bookshop as a point of reference; he nodded and told us to go, have fun and let him take care of things.

We had been taken aback by Samuel’s story, but the day had one more surprise in store for us, and what an unexpected one it was.

It was about six in the afternoon and we were in the garden, discussing whether to go down to the river or wait until it was time to go to Momo’s for the aperitivo, when we heard some commotion coming from the house.

A moment later, Annella hurried towards us, with an odd expression on her face: when she started talking, she addressed Elio but she was looking at me.

“Tesoro, we have a surprise visitor. You remember Maynard? He’s on his way to Florence and he stopped by to say hello to us. Naturally, I have invited him to stay to dinner and for the night. He’s in the study with Sammy now,” she concluded, and left us.

Elio turned to look at me and blushed.

“He’s your predecessor, two years before you.”

“The one of the postcard.”

“What postcard?”

I smirked.
“Don’t play coy with me, buddy. He left you a postcard of Crema with a message at the back which said: Think of me someday. I found it inside the drawer of your bedside table. I had thought of pinching it that summer, but I decided to wait until Christmas and by then it was no longer important.”

Because I didn’t need memories when I had you, I wanted to say but didn’t.

I had never asked about Maynard since I wasn’t sure I would have liked the reply.

“There was nothing between us; I was only fifteen back then and we never spoke much. He borrowed something from me once and left it outside the room. He didn’t even bother to knock to give it back in person.”

Too much information, I thought, and then it hit me.

“You would have said yes if he’d asked, wouldn’t you?”

He reached out to caress my face.

“I was curious, but that’s all it was. It was never even an atom of what I felt for you.”

I knew he was being honest and anyway, it no longer mattered.

“Let’s go meet this mysterious Maynard,” I said.

We were down to our swimsuits, and I had no intention of putting my shirt on. I handed it to Elio, so that he could wear it instead.

Maynard was a studious, good-looking young man from Seattle, with shy manners and very large, slightly bovine brown eyes. I could tell that he was very earnest and that he wouldn’t have gotten anywhere with Elio because of his passivity. He was an economics researcher, and yes, he had been given that name in honour of Maynard Keynes, whom our guest’s grand-father had once met at a conference in London.

During dinner, he eyed us both with curiosity, but he didn’t ask personal questions and we didn’t say anything about our relationship.

Samuel had introduced me as Maynard’s successor and we had chatted briefly about my field of expertise, which he knew little about and cared even less. Not that he said as much, but it was evident from the placid, unfocussed look in his eyes.

He drank three full glasses of rosatello and by dessert he was laughing more freely and his body language was more open and relaxed.

We talked of everything and nothing: he spoke of his memories of his Italian summer, anecdotes about Elio and his friends, the time he had gone to listen to a classical music concert in Crema only to find out he’d picked the wrong date because his Italian wasn’t up to scratch yet. I told him about my poker exploits and Samuel recounted our excursion to Lake Garda, but nothing was said of what had happened afterwards.

Elio spoke little, but I knew what he was thinking and feeling, because – under the table – his bare foot was on top of mine, firm and protective. It was doing things to me, and as I imagined his fifteen-year-old self grappling with another man’s attentions, I also pictured myself in Maynard’s place:
borrowing books and pens from this young boy, catching his eye as we met in the corridor on our way to bed.

It would have been even more difficult then, because I would have had to resist the temptation and probably there would have been no more chances.

Maynard’s bad luck was my good fortune.

We all stayed late and retired at the same time: I guessed it was done on purpose, not to give any precise idea about sleeping arrangements.

Our guest had been given a room at the other side of the house, far from ours. Thankfully, it was a big place and we didn’t need to have him in the room next door.

“What do you think of him?” Elio asked me, unbuttoning my shirt with a faux-innocent air.

“He’s nice, in a harmless sort of way.”

I undid his shirt’s buttons as slowly as I could in order to provoke his impatience.

“Well, he’s not as handsome as you, but then no one is.”

“You,” I said, and slipped my hand into his pants. We smiled at each other, and I was pushing him towards the bed when we heard a knock at the door.

“Elio?”

It was uttered in a whisper, but the voice was Maynard’s. I quickly decided to hide in the bathroom and gestured to Elio to open the door and talk to him. He silently protested, but in the end, he buttoned his shirt and did as told. I left the bathroom door ajar, so that I could hear what was being said.

“Hi, is everything okay?” Elio asked.

“I don’t want to disturb you, but since I’m not sure you’ll be here tomorrow before I leave, I wanted to speak to you alone.”

Brief silence.

“Sure, come in.”

I heard the scraping of the desk chair and imagined Maynard sitting down on it, while Elio sat at the foot of the bed.

“I hope my postcard didn’t offend you, back then.”

“Not at all; it was nice.”

“And did you? Think of me, I mean.”

That was some fast work, albeit not quite subtle.

“I remembered you fondly, yes.”

“Was there any chance, is there any chance that you and I,” he stuttered, but my heart stopped for a moment.
“You are a very nice guy, but I don’t-”

“You don’t like men; yes, I understand and please, let’s pretend I didn’t say anything.”

“No, that’s not what I meant to say.”

There was another silence, longer this time, and even though I couldn’t see, I could swear Maynard had come to the right conclusion at last.

“You and Oliver?” he asked, and Elio must have nodded.

The other man sighed then laughed, maybe bitterly, but I couldn’t tell.

“Did it start while he was staying here? Yes, of course it did. Well, he’s a very lucky man. Oh my god, he must be on his way here any time now. I better make myself scarce.”

Goodbyes were said and hugs were administered and then, like in a French bedroom farce, he left.

When I returned to Elio, his face was flushed and he was biting his lips.

“That was awful. Why didn’t you stay here with me?”

“I didn’t want to humiliate the poor man. Rejection was more than enough.”

I could see that he was upset.

“I’m tired of this! I want to tell people about us and if they don’t like it they can go away and leave us alone.”

“I don’t want you to suffer because of it.”

He glared at me.

“What about what I want? It’s not the first time you behave like this. That night after the cinema and dinner with Petri: I wanted to kiss you and you pushed me away for the same reason. Are you ashamed of us, of me?”

“You know I am not.” I tried to take his hand, but he brushed me off. “But you’ve seen what we are up against and until the world changes we can’t assume everybody will be as understanding as your family.”

He grimaced.

“What if Maynard had kissed me, what then?”

“He could have kissed you even if he knew you were taken. It happens all the time.”

“You wouldn’t have cared?”

I moved closer, as if magnetised.

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true though, isn’t it? You let Lena touch me, after all.”

“I was high and you were too! You know how I feel about people touching you.”
“How do you feel?”

His mouth was inches from mine.

“It drives me bloody insane.”

I went for his lips, but he turned away. I knew he was play-acting, but I had to kiss him, so I grabbed his face with both my hands and took his mouth, licking and biting and moaning into it. He gave as good as he got, pulling my hair and grazing my neck with his fingernails. When we parted, we were breathless and thoroughly ruined.

“God, you are a handful,” I joked, caressing his cheek.

“Never forget it,” he said, pulling my thumb into his mouth and sucking on it.

“At the moment, I can hardly remember my name.”

“Elio, Elio, Elio,” he whispered, and I lost all my self-control and took him to bed.
It was the night before the fateful day when my mother was due to arrive.

We had been subdued all day, even spent some of it apart: in the afternoon, I had gone off with Vimini to take some photographs of the flowers in her conservatory, while Elio and Momo had cycled to Crema to purchase some books. At dinner, we were joined by two of Annella’s friends. They were a middle aged couple from Naples, both translators, who were on their way to a rented villa on Lake Como. We spoke of literature and London, nothing too demanding or intrusive. When they left, we agreed it was time to go upstairs.

“You okay?” I asked Elio, once we were both in bed.

He was reading a book and kept his eyes on it, nodding by way of answer.

“I knew it that I should have said no.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked, frowning.

“You are worried and won’t talk to me about it.”

He put the book to one side and turned to face me.

“Will she mind that I’m only a student, with nothing planned for my career except in vague, undefined terms? She will think you could have done better for yourself.”

“That’ll be the least of her objections. I wouldn’t let it worry you, because I simply won’t care one way or the other.”

He placed a hand on my chest.

“You are so sure.”

“Have been sure for a very long time.”

“Remember when we met at the Brunswick Centre almost a year ago and you told me you were happy with Tim? That you loved him and what we had was best left in the past?”
Of course I remembered: it had been a shock for me to realise that I still loved Elio, that it would probably always be the case and that I had to keep the truth from him and from myself.

“You know why.”

“It’s just that it wasn’t that long ago. Some days this still feels like a dream.”

I contemplated his face, with the sun-kissed cheekbones, the freckled nose, the plump lips, all framed by his long messy curls: he was growing more beautiful by the minute.

“It is a dream,” I said, and kissed him on the mouth.

Once again, his next words came as a surprise.

“Do you still masturbate?”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sometimes,” I tried to kiss him again, but he pushed me away. “Not since coming to Italy, because I don’t really need to.”

“And in London?”

“In the mornings, after you’ve left, when I have a late start at work. The sheets still smell of you and it.... well, it sort of happens.”

“And you think of me when you do?”

“Hmm. If you’re trying to make me hard, it’s working.”

“What do you think of?”

“Your mouth, your neck, your skin, the way your back arches, your legs, all of you.”

“You never think of somebody else, Tim for instance?”

“What, no! Why are you asking me this? I thought we were done for good with the past.”

My arousal had wilted in an instant.

“We were, we are.”

He didn’t seem convinced, which was absurd after everything we’d been through.

“I told you: my mother’s opinion means nothing to me.”

“I want her to like me. She’s your mother.”

“And what does this have to do with my masturbatory habits?”

This conversation was taking a surreal turn.

“Nothing, but if there’s a chink in our armour, she’ll find it.”

“And you really believe that I’m hiding things from you?”

“Fantasies are unpredictable; we can’t control them.”
“Stop talking.”

I climbed on top of him and pinned his arms above his head.

“You have me completely and you know it, so quit making insane suppositions.”

He gave me a lopsided smile and freed one of his hands.

“I like the idea of you jerking off to me. I hope to catch you in the act, one day.”

“And what would you do: watch or join in?”

He licked his lips, slowly, and that did it: I was hard again.

“I’d try to just watch, but your big fat dick is too inviting.”

As he said that, he took my erection in his fist and stroked it roughly.

“Is it?” I gasped, thrusting into his hand.

“Hmm, see how wet it is already? All red and juicy just for me.”

“Only for you.”

I was breathing hard, trying to slip my tongue inside his mouth and touch him everywhere I could reach.

“Say it,” he said, and his tongue darted out to meet mine.

“You make me hard and dripping wet, I want you all the time, all the time, always,” I whispered, as his hand worked me with finesse.

“I want you too, so much,” he moaned, and finally let himself go, so that I could reciprocate his attentions, give him all the pleasure he deserved, until we both cried out, shaking and trembling through our release.

“What came over you?” I panted, breathing hard into his sweaty curls.

“Just nervous, in need of reassurance,” he replied, giggling, “And maybe wishing to have some quality sex before your mother arrives.”

“And what sex will we have from tomorrow?”

“Something more decorous and polite,” he said, caressing my back.

“What if I want to bend you over a chair and fuck your brains out?”

“Oliver”

“What?”

“Never leave me.”

“No, never, never.”

We hugged for a long while then we cleaned up and lay down again, ready for sleep.
“Vimini is looking forward to meeting my mother. She’s offered to keep her prisoner inside her villa in case she becomes annoying.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I bet she won’t stay long. She hates the countryside, the sunshine and the mosquitoes.”

“Nobody hates the sunshine.”

“Trust me, she does.”

“Why did we ask her to come and stay here?”

“You tell me.”

He yawned and kissed my neck.

“We’ll make it work.”

“Sure.”

I fell asleep knowing I wouldn’t fully enjoy that night’s respite because of the day which was going to follow it.

My drive to Linate wasn’t as desperately sad as that of 1983 when I had just left Elio, but it wasn’t a jolly affair either.

The airport was as busy as customary in summer, with the usual crowd of smokers just outside the arrivals area.

I was early, so I stopped there for a cigarette. She would smell it on me and complain, I thought, and it made me relish it even more.

What would we say to each other, I wondered? I only recalled one instance of real dialogue between us and she’d been intoxicated at the time. We’ll have to ply her with our rosatello, I concluded.

A half-hour later, I saw her walk through the gates like a soldier marching over the ruins of a conquered land.

“Darling,” she exclaimed, glancing at my shorts with obvious distaste.

“Mother,” I replied, taking charge of her suitcase.

She was wearing a sensible navy dress and her blond hair, the same colour as mine, was coiffed in stiff waves. That wouldn’t survive long in the humid weather, I thought, but didn’t say anything.

“I have resumed my maiden name,” she announced, once ensconced in the passenger seat of the Perlman’s car.

“Why?”

“You know how I never liked the way your father’s surname had been Americanized. Klein is a good Jewish name and if it was good enough for my father, it’s good enough for me.”
“I hope you won’t expect me to do the same.”

“I never expect you to do anything to please me.”

“I certainly wasn’t going to marry someone I no longer love so that you could feel better about yourself. By the way, is there any one new in your life?”

She glared at me with the full force of her ice blue eyes.

“The very least you can do is show me some respect. I was married to your father for most of my life and I never betrayed his trust.”

“You also said your marriage was like a coma.”

“I never said that.”

“At father’s shiva,” I replied, “You had a few too many.”

“I don’t remember anything of the sort. And I certainly wasn’t drunk at your father’s shiva.”

“You also said I was doing the right thing, with Elio.”

“I doubt it. Anyway, I spoke to Sarah yesterday: she said that Alice is in Italy, a place called Bordighera. If only she could join us...”

“I don’t think she’d want to be interrogated by you during her summer vacations.”

“I have the phone number of her pensione.”

“Call her if you like. She’s crazy about Elio and vice-versa.”

My mother sighed, pursing her carefully made-up lips.

“What’s so special about this boy of yours?”

“Everything.”

“Your aunt says you may be undergoing a transitional phase.”

“I have been in love with him for four years: how transitional is this phase?”

“In love, in love.... you speak like you don’t have any other responsibilities: what about family loyalties?”

“He comes first, because he’s my chosen family. Maybe love’s secondary for you, but not for me.”

“What about your health? This new illness is terrible, aren’t you afraid of it?”

“We are not promiscuous, mother.”

“You can’t be sure a boy his age will stay faithful. He’s Italian too, which makes it even more improbable.”

I stopped the car at the side of the road. She held onto her handbag as if she feared a robbery.

“Listen Judith, I will tell you this once and I don’t intend to repeat myself: Elio and I are in love and we are committed to each other. If marriage were a possibility, we would be wearing rings already.”
His family is one in a million and I would not have you sprinkle your venom on them. You are here because they invited you. They are Jewish, like us and partly Italian, yes, which happens to be a wonderful thing.”

“I never said it wasn’t.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way.”

I restarted the car and turned on the radio.

“I might visit Alice in Bordighera,” she said, after a few minutes of silence.

“Ask her first. She may not be alone.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“What do you think?”

“And you are not upset about it?”

“It’s nothing to do with me. I was more surprised to find out she wished to travel. When we were together, she never wanted to.”

“Did you tell her? Maybe if she’d come to Italy with you, you’d still be together.”

“I’m glad she didn’t then.”

I suddenly felt a pointy fingernail on my chest.

“This isn’t your necklace.”

“No, it’s Elio’s. I have given him mine.”

“But it’s a family heirloom.”

“And now it belongs to him.”

“I dearly hope he won’t lose it.”

“He won’t. I trust him with more than a gold necklace.”

“You trusted him once already and we both know how that one ended.”

“He was too young.”

“And now he isn’t?”

“I told you: we are committed to each other.”

“Let’s hope you aren’t just making the same mistake twice.”

“Maybe we should stay silent the rest of the way, what do you say?”

“I’m only thinking about what’s best for you and for your future. Your aunt said you should come back to the States and I agree with her: that’s your home, where your real family is.”

“Sure.”
I turned up the volume of the radio and we spent the rest of the journey in an atmosphere of enmity, which to me was reminiscent of my adolescent years.

She had not changed at all, not one bit: always the same arrogance and disregard for other people’s opinions; the same lack of empathy and understanding. Her nature was as impervious to genuine emotions as mine had been starved for them: it was no surprise after all that I had fallen so hard for Elio and his family.

What good could possibly come of her visit? None, I thought.
Sargasso Sea

Chapter Summary

Judith meets Elio....

Elio's POV.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all your kind wishes. Enjoy the new chapter!!!

“This house is very pretty, but parts of it are falling to pieces. And there’s no air conditioning anywhere,” said Oliver's mother.

I was standing just outside her bedroom, wanting to meet her and afraid of her censure.

I knocked and he opened the door, gazing at me with eyes full of love.

“Elio, come in,” he whispered, touching my shoulder.

“This is Elio and this is Judith, my mother.”

I was dumbstruck: did Oliver realise how much he looked like his mother? Blonde, blue-eyed, long-legged and with the same haughty expression on her face, she was as tall and imposing, but without the warmth which he exuded.

She stared at me with that same glare Oliver had reserved for me at the start of our acquaintance, but if his had been the product of shyness hers was clearly not.

“You look very delicate for a boy. And thin. Don’t tell me you’re on one of those protein diets.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Judith,” I said, extending my hand, and she reluctantly took it. “I have always been thin, no matter how much food I ingest.”

“You are very lucky. Oliver here is not as fortunate: at your age he was quite big, no use lying about it.”

“He’s twenty-two and at that age I was already going to the gym every day.”

“Twenty-two? You look no older than nineteen. And these curls,” she said, touching my hair, “Soft as a girl’s. Alice didn’t mention you were so effeminate. Is that how it works?”

“What do you mean?” Oliver asked, in a dark, menacing tone.

“You know exactly what I mean and he does too. Wouldn’t it be easier to find yourself a real girl, instead of a boy who looks like one?”
I didn’t know what to say, but Oliver was fuming with rage.

“Elio is a man, mother; a man, with all the requisite appendages, which I very much enjoy. And don’t look horrified, please. You just suggested I was using him as a woman surrogate, so you have no right to play innocent now.”

“I was only trying to understand this relationship of yours. I didn’t wish to offend you,” she said, gazing at me from underneath her thick eyelashes.

“You didn’t,” I lied, feeling as if I had just undergone a few rounds with a heavyweight.

“We’ll let you unpack and rest for a while. Dinner is in two hours. We usually have it outside, so better put on some insect repellent.”

“Why do you assume I took any with me?”

“It’s not like you to be unprepared.”

“Is there anything else I should be expecting, like roaches or mice?”

“Very funny,” Oliver replied, his lips drawn in a thin line, “We’ll see you later. There are fresh towels in the bathroom, and before you ask, yes, I checked.”

We left her still sitting at the edge of the bed, rigid as a statue and bursting with unuttered criticism.

“She probably wants a drink. I should have made sure she had a bottle of something in the room: gin or vodka,” he said.

“I’ll go get something.”

“No, better not; the thing is you never know which version we are going to get when she’s tipsy: it maybe the good chatty one or the bad insulting one. I’d rather keep things under a modicum of control.”

Outside we found Vimini, Chiara and Viola sitting by the pool drinking lemonade.

“Marzia should be arriving tomorrow,” said Chiara, but Vimini didn’t even try to disguise her curiosity.

“So, what is she like?” she asked, closing the book she had been reading.

“She looks exactly like Oliver,” I replied, not knowing what else to say.

“Are you staying for dinner?” I enquired, but they all declined.

“Family only,” said Chiara, winking at Oliver, who gave her a watery, unconvinced smile.

“What are you reading?” he asked Vimini, to change the subject.

“Wide Sargasso Sea,” she replied, clearly relishing the assonance of the last two words.

Chiara and Viola took me aside and asked me about Judith. I told them that she thought I looked like a girl, which made them laugh.
“Poor baby,” they said, and ruffled my hair. I lit a cigarette and tried to smile away the humiliation which had sneaked its way into my heart. Was it all that she saw when she looked at me: a girl-substitute, a feminine/masculine play-thing which served as a temporary pastime for her son, until he got tired and returned to more acceptable companions?

Naturally she didn’t know how Oliver liked to be taken and I certainly couldn’t tell her that he gave in to me as often as I submitted to him. I knew he didn’t see me as an object of pleasure, but rather as an agent of desire, so why was I so depressed?

I left the girls to their own amused speculations and turned my attention to Oliver and Vimini and their discussion.

“I think the same process should apply to every great novel: rewrite the story from the perspective of a secondary character,” she was saying.

“The villain’s point of view instead of the hero’s,” agreed Oliver.

“Bertha is not the villain, Rochester is.”

“But not according to Miss Bronte.”

“I no longer believe her.”

“They are all imaginary characters,” I intervened, “It’s not as if either writer can be absolutely right or wrong.”

“Historically, one reading is more plausible than the other,” Oliver said, “But the majority of people don’t even know about this novel, so for them Mrs Rochester is still the mad woman in the attic.”

“I will tell everybody,” said Vimini, who was clearly very serious about her new mission. “I want her to get justice. Justice for Antoinette: maybe I should get a t-shirt made.”

“Nobody will understand what it means.”

“I will explain it to them.”

Oliver smiled and shook his head. He took the book from Vimini’s hands and leafed through it.

“It certainly helps to see things from another point of view,” he said.

“Things which are different are always considered mad before they are accepted by society and become commonplace.”

“You should tell that to my mother.”

“I will, if you want me to.”

He laughed.

“We’ll see,” he replied. “I’m still hoping she’ll decide to leave. I can’t imagine how she’ll spend her time here.”

“Let Elio’s parents deal with her. They are used to having difficult guests.”

Oliver threw me an oblique smile.
“She’s so wise,” he said.

I nodded and stood up to go. I wanted to be alone to think about things. The afternoon was drawing to a close and so was our holiday.

We’d go back to London, back to our life together, which I had not realised I so intensely missed. It was great to be here in the sunshine, surrounded by friends and family, but there was a level of performance we needed to submit to, a measure of pretence which back home didn’t exist. Our bedroom had been mine before Oliver had moved in, but he had insisted on purchasing a new mattress and bedding, so that it could be truly ours: a brand new page, fresh and pure as snow. My room here had been mine alone for longer that it had been ours and even though it filled me with joy to share it with him, underneath it there were always the memories of a lonely past spent dreaming and hoping and wanting; tossing and turning in bed, my desires spreading their wings inside my chest until I had found the courage to set them free. There had been elation and joy, but pain too. And the pain was still here, hiding among the leaves.

“What are you doing?” asked Oliver’s voice, reaching me through a distance made of thoughts and dreams.

“Thinking of my music,” I lied, knowing he would catch me out.

“No, you are not,” he said, embracing me from behind.

“Well, it’s private, so I’m not going to tell you.”

“Yes, you are.”

He kissed along my neck while his fingers undid the buttons of my shirt.

“Your mother thinks I’m only your girl-substitute.”

“She couldn’t be more wrong,” he murmured, stroking my nipples.

“I feel so strange,” I said, as the rubbing turned to pinching.

“Don’t let her get to you.”

“No, it’s the opposite of what you think.”

I turned around and buried both my hands in his hair and pulled hard. He hissed in pain and I bit the underside of his jaw.

“Later tonight,” I whispered in his ear, “We’ll come out here and I’ll take what’s mine.”

“Al-fresco love?” he smirked.

I slipped a hand down the back of his pants, caressing the soft ring of muscle with the tip of my finger.

“I’ll start off with my tongue, if that’s all right with you.”

He moaned and melted against me.

“Pervert,” he gasped.

“No one needs to know.”
“That’s our secret,” he agreed, pressing his lips to mine.

He smelled of apricot juice and leather, or airport fumes and goodbyes. He belonged to me, all of him, even those parts of him which had tried to flee from me four years ago. I could have played his favourite Bach on the piano or the guitar and lured him back, like the sirens with Ulysses, but I had let him go, because I hadn’t known that he was in my blood and I was in his, that lovemaking can go further than a knife stuck in your guts, deeper than poison which forever alters the composition of your essence, of what makes us who we are.

I realised that I didn’t fear Oliver’s mother, because she could never reach us: no one could, because we had travelled too far already. The wide Sargasso sea stood between what we had been then and what we were now.

At dinner, Mafalda served us grilled sea bass and a mixed green salad. There was melon and ice-cream for dessert and champagne to celebrate our guest.

Judith praised the cooking and the balmy night air, but she was irritated by the mosquitoes and by my parents’ relaxed attitude.

It didn’t take her long to start on her preferred subject.

“Elio is still so young,” she said, batting an insect away, “Surely you can’t expect him to make any lasting arrangement. I heard there was a girl...”

“Marzia, yes,” replied my mother, “They have known each other since they were children. That’s all in the past. Now he’s with Oliver and they are very happy, aren’t you tesoro?”

She glanced at Oliver who smiled and nodded.

“I’ve never seen two happier people,” added my father, as he lit two cigarettes, one of which he handed to my mother.

“But what about the future? You can’t expect me to believe you don’t want grandchildren.”

“Mother,” intervened Oliver, but Judith ignored him as if he hadn’t been there at all.

“They will regret it one day, we all know they will.”

“I know no such thing,” said my mother, taking hold of my father’s hand. “But even if that were the case, it’s up to them to decide what they want to do. It’s their life not ours. We made our choices, they should make theirs.”

Judith glared at her and muttered something which we ignored.

After the liquore, which was a very strong grappa, I was asked to play something at the piano and I chose Corkine’s Come Live With Me, an Elizabethan song which I had recently discovered and never played for an audience, not even for Oliver.

Originally, it was meant for the lute, but I had transcribed it for piano and it sounded plangent and heart-wrenchingly romantic. By the end of it, Oliver had tears in his eyes and my parents were smiling at each other. Judith’s expression was impossible to decode, but her eyes were glassy, as if she’d remembered something which had touched her and that she’d tried to keep buried.
“You are very talented,” she said, and touched my shoulder softly, like a caress.
Elio and Oliver, happy and very lucky....

“Where are you?” I whispered into the night.

The song was still echoing in my ears: *come live with me and be my love.*

He had chosen to play something so pregnant with meaning, his heart in full display, his feelings painted all over his face.

I often wondered whether I could fall more in love with him, if it were even possible, and here I was, falling.

This otherworldly creature, this singular young man had been made for me and I had been so lucky to find him.

“Imagine that you had listened to your mother and had never come to Italy. Imagine you’d never met me and were now married to Alice. Maybe you’d already have a child or two. You’d be a father and a husband and I would be here, unaware of your existence,” his voice murmured, his sweet breath on my throat.

“Imagine that I came to see your father and met you. I’d be married with kids and I would fall in love with you, desperately and hopelessly. My honesty would render me unable to cheat on my wife and I would spend sleepless nights dreaming of your skin, your eyes and your lips, wanting them like air, knowing I could never have them.”

I felt his hands on my shoulders then on my back and all over my ass, cupping it with relish.

“We’d be in adjoining rooms and I would hear you piss in the bathroom. You’d unbuckle your belt and unzip your trousers and take your cock out. It would slap against your hand, fat and heavy, and my mouth would water.”

When he pressed his body against mine, I felt that he was naked. Slim and cool like a shimmery angel descended from a Botticelli painting: Elio, my beloved.

“Come here,” I said, and wrapped him in my arms, “I don’t want you to catch cold.”

“I would close the bathroom door and I would see you lying on your bed, your chest rising and falling and your lips bitten red. It would cost me the world to leave you there and not get into bed with you and make love to you.”

His lips sought mine, in the darkness.

“We have been so damn lucky,” he said.

“I’m the lucky one. You will be a famous musician one day not too far from now. I’m writing obscure books nobody reads.”
He giggled, mouthing at my throat.

“I’m too old to become famous. I should have started when I was a child.”

“It’s never too late; you can be anything you want to be.”

“That doesn’t sound right, but thanks for believing in me.”

I buried my nose into his curls and inhaled the combined scents of camomile and sweat.

“You could certainly be a composer if you wished to.”

“Mozart was a baby when he began.”

“You’re setting your bar very high.”

“I love music too much to infest it with my mediocrity.”

“You couldn’t be mediocre if you tried.”

He moved back so that he could look into my eyes: he searched me with his gold-flecked gaze and I submitted to its unrelenting scrutiny.

“You are not joking,” he said, arching his thick brows.

“Why would I be joking? I have admired you from day one. You are the brightest young man I have ever met; and you are passionate too, which is not always the case with highly intellectual people.”

“I can’t decide whether you are trying to get me hard or to distract me from sex by way of flattery,” he said, letting his head rest on my shoulder.

“Do I need to try and get you hard?”

“Not really,” he admitted.

I could feel his arousal pressed to my thigh. Even a semi-serious discussion like the one we were having couldn’t detract from the fact that he was naked, soft-skinned and doused in sex.

He moaned when I caressed his back, and his hand found its way to my crotch and teased the outline of my balls.

“Would you take off your clothes and go down on your hands and knees if I asked you to?” he whispered, thrusting his hips forward.

I didn’t say anything, but removed my shirt and my swimming trunks, letting them fall on the grass. I was on the ground before a full minute had passed since Elio’s request.

“You’re so obedient,” he mocked, but he was breathing hard, coming undone.

“I want what you want.”

“And what is it?”

“You, inside and out, all over me.”

“So you don’t think I resemble a girl?”
“We both know you’re not that at all.”

I felt his hot tongue licking along the seam of my buttocks.

“What am I?”

“A devil,” I was gasping for air.

“Not an angel?” he growled, and dived in.

“Yes, yes, yes,” was all I could utter for a long time, as he worked me open with his mouth and fingers before slipping inside of me.

There was an assuredness in his lovemaking now which made it even more erotic than it had been that first time he’d topped me, on our second night together. He knew what he was doing and which buttons to push; he knew when to let go and when to make me beg for it. And beg I did, for his cock, more of it, deeper, and the slap of his flesh against mine, the impatience of his hands and the hungriness of his kisses, the sweat running down his thighs and plastering his curls to his forehead.

When I came, I had three of his fingers in my mouth and they tasted of semen and pomegranate; he spent with a pained shout, shaking against my back; happiness and contentment came later; before was the ecstasy of pleasure, which once again caught us both by surprise.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” he asked, taking me in his arms.

What should I reply? This much pleasure would always hurt a little, because of the separation which came afterwards. I shook my head and nuzzled his throat.

“Oliver,” I said and he took my mouth in a frantic kiss.

“Elio,” he whispered, later.

Precious boy, I thought, then immediately corrected myself: man, he was a man, all of him, and I should never forget that.

“Oliver is my best friend,” I heard Vimini say, as I approached the table on my way to breakfast. Elio was still in bed and I hadn’t had the heart to wake him up.

“You must have friends your own age,” my mother replied, in a patronising tone.

Annella and her husband were smiling indulgently, but were clearly glad to see me, hoping I could help relieve some of the tension created by the conversation.

“Not many. They tend to be really boring. Take Lavinia, for instance. That’s Momo’s sister; they have a villa close by. She’s always reading stuff like Vogue and Marie Claire and she never reads books unless they are Harmonies.”


“And what do you read?”

Vimini told her about Jean Rhys’ novel and her objections to Mr Rochester’s personality.

“Maybe you shouldn’t worry so much about characters in books and care more about real people.”
“But I do, which is why I am best friends with Oliver. He’s more real to me than Lavinia. He lives in the real world.”

“Do I?” I asked, before saying hello to everybody and sitting down between my mother and Annella.

“Elio still sleeping?” enquired Samuel.

My mother threw him a horrified glance, probably worried about Vimini’s innocence being tarnished by the inference of two men sharing a bed.

“We went for a long walk last night.”

“What an odd thing to do,” said Judith.

“Oh no, I’d love to go on overnight rambles but because of my illness I’m not allowed to.”

There followed a long session of questions and answers about Vimini’s health which left my mother even more astonished at the sort of company I kept.

“And your parents allow you to walk around in this stifling weather?”

“They don’t allow me, but I run away as often as I can. I told them that running away is a good sign. If I were really sick I wouldn’t have the energy.”

She proceeded to slice the top off my egg, pressing her lips together with an air of prim satisfaction. We all laughed, except for my mother who sipped her coffee with the air of a martyr.

The conversation turned to the plans for the day: the Perlmans had suggested taking my mother to Lake Garda on a day excursion. She was undecided, but was actually looking forward to it, I could tell. She wanted to ask them questions without us boys around and even though I was sorry to let that burden fall on my friends’ shoulders, I couldn’t hide my relief and enthusiasm at getting rid of Judith for the entire day.

I was just finishing my second egg when Elio emerged from the house, well-rested and wearing a sheepish grin on his lips.

“I’m so late,” he said, scratching the back of his head.

There was a split second during which I hoped he would kiss me good morning and I nearly stood up to embrace him, but we merely smiled at each other, his face a little flushed. Vimini was braver than either of us: she poured Elio his espresso and as she put the caffettiera back on its stand, she planted a smacker on his cheek. He thanked her and she nodded, after which she left us in order to go and speak to Mafalda about the peach and banana frullato she was going to prepare that afternoon.

“What a strange little girl,” my mother said.

“She’s a genius,” I replied.

“That won’t make her happy. She needs to lead a normal life, among young people.”

“Boys and girls her age usually bore her. But she loves Fede, Elio’s cousin.”

“She loves Oliver more than any of us,” said Elio, “It’s been the case ever since she met him.”

His father smiled and sipped his orange juice.
“It was the same for all of us: we all loved him right from the start, didn’t we?” he asked, glancing at his wife, who nodded happily.

“He can make a good impression when he chooses to,” Judith replied, even though she was clearly sceptical.

“It’s not a matter of impressions: your son is a fine man and people do appreciate that,” Samuel insisted. As nice as he was, there was no contradicting him when he believed he was in the right.

“Do you still play poker?”

“No, I gave it up when I asked Elio to come and stay with me in the States. I never played for money again.”

“I never asked him to,” Elio told my mother, looking a bit embarrassed.

“The time for that sort of things had passed. Besides, there are better ways to spend one’s evenings.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m sorry about that. It’s not a nice way to earn your money.”

“I never cheated, if that’s what you are suggesting.”

“He’s just lucky,” said Elio, biting his lips.

“That I surely am,” I replied, winking at him.

I was blatantly flirting, but I wasn’t doing it in order to show off: I was proud of the man I loved and didn’t want him to doubt it for one single moment. We had nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of.

Luckily for her, when Marzia came to say hello my mother was still at Lake Garda with the Perlmans.

She’d let her hair grow again and it was as long as it had been in 1983. She was tanned and very slim and was full of stories about her travels.

“Why don’t you two go down to the river and spend some time alone? Vimini and I will be helping Mafalda with dinner. She’s making tortelli cremaschi and we promised we’d give her a hand.”

Elio threw me a strange look and took me aside.

“You’re not trying again to make something happen between the two of us, are you?”

I touched his necklace and he covered my fingers with his.

“She’s a very dear friend, that’s all,” I said.

“Yes,” he agreed, smiling.

“And she invited us to go to Paris, which I am very much looking forward to. I can’t wait to hear you talking to strangers in French. I’ll have to find that teacher: I want to at least be able to order a glass of wine in a bistrot.”

“Un verre de vin,” he murmured in my ear.
“Devil,” I laughed and pushed him away.

“Lucky devil,” he shouted, and Marzia laughed: everything seemed too beautiful and perfect to last.
“What is it?” Vimini asked, as we folded the freshly cut squares of *pasta matta*.

Mafalda was intent on grinding yet more *amaretti* so she wasn’t paying attention to us.

The kitchen radio was on and I had recognised the song as the one which I had been dancing to with Chiara at Le Danzing all those years ago, the night when Elio had left with Marzia. I had been glancing at him out of the corner of my eye, putting on a show for him which had been more effective than I had imagined.

Since now, I had never quite paid attention to the words though, because it was just a silly pop song and mattered little to me aside from the moment it had captured.

> “And feel love’s gravity
> That pulls you to my side
> Where you should always be”

“Nothing,” I replied, “I know this song.”

She scrunched her nose.

“It’s awful, isn’t it?”

I laughed and nodded, because I didn’t really want to explain the chain of thoughts which the lyrics had set in motion.

Was there really a gravity pull to love, which made it impossible for those who are meant to be together to be torn asunder? Was that another interpretation of Francesca’s *Amor, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona*? It did seem a fanciful theory, considering the number of lovers who were separated for one reason or another.

“Maybe you really have to want to be together for it to work,” said Vimini, reading my mind.

“I suspect we are giving too much credit to the concept of free will. So many things can go wrong and there are always more than just two people involved.”
“You are not referring to your mum.”

“No, because she can’t change my mind.”

“Could anyone?”

“Only someone who convinced me that Elio would be happier without me.”

Her laughter chimed like a silver bell, making Mafalda smile.

“Elio’s no longer that stupid.”

I smeared her nose with flour and she giggled again.

“He was never stupid,” I said.

“Yes, he was. And don’t say he was too young to know. I’m younger and I saw right through you.”

“But you are a seer.”

“He wasn’t looking at you, not really. You know him well by now: he gets lost in his thoughts. Did you read his diary?”

“Diaries are private, but yes, I know him now, and he knows me. Whatever happens, it won’t be due to a lack of communication.”

“Careful there,” said Mafalda, who then scolded us for not paying enough attention to what we were doing. Duly chastened, we focussed more on pasta-making and less on the mystery of love.

It was about seven o’clock when Marzia came back to the house. The car still hadn’t returned from Lake Garda, but we were expecting it back any minute.

“Is Elio here?” she said, filling a glass from the kitchen tap.

“No, I thought he was with you. You left together.”

Vimini had gone home to wash and change her clothes, while Mafalda was resting in her room. I was about to go out for a quick dip in the pool, but felt I’d better not.

“Yes, we did and we were down at the river with the others. I was talking to Chiara and we wanted a cigarette so we looked for Elio but he was nowhere to be found. Momo said he’d seen him walk along the bank, so we just thought he’d decided to come back home. He does that, disappear without a word,” she said.

I marginally noted that her English had improved by leaps and bounds, but I was already too worried for casual chit-chat.

“We haven’t seen him. Maybe he fell asleep in the garden.”

We went to look for him, but he wasn’t there. I went upstairs too, but was confronted with the solitary spectacle of his discarded clothes. I buried my face in his striped blue and white polo shirt and felt my heart kick in my throat. Such an insignificant garment, old and worn, discoloured by numerous washes, but it held Elio’s scent, the imprint of his skin and sweat.
Marzia was waiting for me downstairs and Anchise was staring at both of us with undisguised alarm. I told them to inform the Perlmans as soon as they arrived that we’d gone to look for their son and not to worry, then grabbed my bicycle and with Marzia, we went back to the river to search for Elio.

“He was here and then he wasn’t,” said Momo. “His bicycle is still there though,” he indicated a spot under a clump of trees.

“He can’t have gone far then. Did you notice anyone or anything unusual?”

Chiara and Viola intervened.

“You know how many people come here in the afternoon! There was a group of boys down there by the willows. They were quite noisy, but they left after a while.”

We started shouting his name and inspecting the surrounding area. I was scared that he might have felt sick while in the water and drowned, but why would he not cry out for help? Anything and everything seemed both probable and impossible at the same time.

We were about to organise a proper search which would include the emergency services when we saw him stagger towards us. He was lobster-red and glassy-eyed.

“Where the hell were you?” I shouted as I ran towards him.

“I must have fallen asleep. Not feeling too-” and he suddenly folded at the waist and vomited on the grass.

“Are you okay?” asked some of the others, who were now surrounding us.

I touched Elio’s forehead: it was hot and dry.

“Must be heat stroke; get me some cold water, it will help get his temperature down.”

I lay him down in the shade and fanned air over his face.

“I am okay, nothing to worry about,” he mumbled.

Chiara handed me a litre bottle of water, half of which I splashed on his face, hair and torso, while I made him drink the rest.

“Should I go back and see whether the car is back? Or should we call an ambulance?” asked Marzia.

“No, no, give me a moment and we can ride back,” Elio muttered.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

He stared at me with red-rimmed but alert eyes and I brushed his wet hair away from his face. Our friends were still crowding around us, which was nice of them but not very helpful. I explained as kindly as I could that Elio needed space; they left us bottles of various drinks and one by one went home or wherever they had to be for dinner. Marzia was the only one left behind and we were still discussing about what to do when we saw the Perlmans’ car in the distance. I ran to the road and was met by Samuel who was as worried as I’d ever seen him.

“It’s nothing serious, he overdid it a little these last few days. Probably too worried about my mother’s arrival,” I said, and he nodded, visibly relaxing.
He and Marzia helped Elio into the car, while I managed to cram our bikes inside the boot.

“You’re coming with us,” I told Marzia, but she replied she’d rather cycle so that we would have more room at the back.

“Should we take him to the hospital?” Samuel wondered, but Elio complained so loudly we agreed to call the family doctor instead. It was an elderly man who’d taken care of Elio’s health since after he was born and Samuel had run into him in Crema, which meant he was already back from his summer holidays.

I sat at the back with Elio’s head in my lap, his soaked shirt leaving a wet stain on my beige shorts. I still hadn’t really caught a deep breath ever since we’d left the house to go look for him: I felt a bit dizzy too, and the rest of the day was receding in the distance like a blurry dream. I had completely forgotten about the special dinner we’d been preparing and the idea of food made me nauseous.

“I’m sorry, but I felt so tired after swimming,” Elio said, but I pressed the palm of my hand against his lips.

“Shush, just close your eyes and rest.”

He nodded and clutched a handful of my shirt.

“How was the day, did Judith behave?”

Samuel chuckled.

“Your mother is just like you, Oliver: a romantic in disguise.”

“You know what your problem is? You are too optimistic. My mother doesn’t have a single romantic bone in her body.”

“Maybe she’s not been as lucky or as brave as you have been. Or maybe she knows the best part of her life’s gone and she didn’t fare as well as she’d hoped. I’m not here to tell you how to deal with her, but may I just advise you to try and see things from her point of view?”

“Believe me I have tried, but she’s never shown me anything but displeasure and mistrust.”

“What about what she said after you father’s passing?”

“She was more than half-drunk.”

Elio giggled and I caressed his bare arm: his skin was cooler now, which was a good sign.

“Usually that’s when people are guaranteed to tell the truth.”

“Isn’t it tragic when that’s the only time they do?”

There was nothing Samuel could say to that, because I knew he agreed with me.

The next couple of hours were a whirlwind of worried faces and voices speaking in multiple languages. The doctor, whose name was Edoardo Terzi, was about to have his dinner at home that evening, so it didn’t take him long to arrive. He was short, chubby and radiated a calm assurance which tranquillised us all. My mother had attacked the rosatello thanks to Vimini who, winking in my direction, kept refilling her glass. I remember thinking that it was lucky she wasn’t criminally
minded or she might have been a formidable killer: clear-eyed, unflinching and with the heart-shaped innocent face of a cherub.

Doctor Terzi prescribed ice packs, lots of fluids, a cool bath and no spicy or rich foods for at least twenty-four hours. Elio was not to stay in the sun for a couple of days and he had to be thankful of having at least applied sunscreen, which had spared him some of the worst consequences of his ordeal.

That afternoon Vimini had prepared two large jugs of peach and banana frullato and she willingly sacrificed one of her favourite drinks.

“Elio can have it. It’s both nutritious and hydrating,” she said, mimicking the doctor’s lingo.

Marzia helped me prepare the ice packs, so that Mafalda could serve dinner to Elio’s parents, my mother and the doctor, who had agreed to stay on and partake of the tortelli cremaschi, which was his favourite dish.

Annella had hugged her son, murmured sweet words in his ear and left him in my care, kissing my cheek as she left the bedroom.

“If you stay with him, I’ll run the bath,” I said to Marzia, who was pressing a towel filled with ice cubes to Elio’s forehead. At some point, as expected, his nose had started to bleed, so his lips and chin were red-streaked.

“I’m sorry that I lost sight of you, but I was talking to Chiara and you were swimming and everything seemed fine,” I heard her say, and I could barely discern his murmured reply: “Not your fault, didn’t realise how tired I was.”

“Get something to eat,” I told her when I went back to the room.

“Okay, should I bring you a plate of something?”

“Don’t worry; I’ve been picking at food all afternoon. I’ll have something later.”

She kissed Elio’s cheeks and left us alone.

“I don’t want to have a bath yet,” he said, as I was cleaning his face with a wet cloth.

“Lie down with me.”

“Not too close, your body needs to cool down.”

“Can you kiss me?”

“I’m not sure; don’t want to raise your blood pressure,” I joked, bringing my lips to his and staying still for a long while, just breathing him in.

“Were you worried?”

“Yes”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about; it happened and we are dealing with it. Drink some more of that fruity
thing. Vimini loves it and she left it all for you.”

“Where is she?”

“Downstairs, getting my mother drunk on rosatello; I will thank her later.”

“You like her as much as me.”

“Don’t be silly.”

He sipped the frullato and licked his lips.

“Well, aside from the sex part,” he said.

“And the loving part, and the sleeping part, and the breathing part,” I added.

“I was just kidding.”

“Of course.”

“I’m not jealous of Vimini.”

“I know.”

“Will you get inside the bath with me?”

I served him another glass of juice.

“That would defeat the purpose, surely.”

“Not my purpose.”

“Which is?”

“Sitting on your lap, while you sponge me down with camomile soap.”

“As long as you don’t get any interesting ideas-”

“I’m too exhausted for that. I may even fall asleep.”

“I sense a trap.”

“Like the French guy who didn’t know whether to speak or die?”

“That guy was an idiot.”

We smiled at each other and I carried him to the bathroom.
Odd Couple

Chapter Summary

An unexpected visit.

Chapter Notes

This is the full text of the poem quoted in this chapter (it's a translation, since the original is in French):

"In the night there are of course the seven wonders
of the world and the greatness tragedy and enchantment.
Forests collide with legendary creatures hiding in thickets.
There is you.
In the night there are the walker’s footsteps the murderer’s
the town policeman’s light from the street lamp and the ragman’s lantern
There is you.
In the night trains go past and boats
and the fantasy of countries where it’s daytime. The last breaths
of twilight and the first shivers of dawn.
There is you.
A piano tune, a shout.
And not only beings and things and physical sounds.
But also me chasing myself or endlessly going beyond me.
There is you the sacrifice, you that I’m waiting for.
Sometimes at the moment of sleep strange figures are born and disappear.
When I shut my eyes phosphorescent blooms appear and fade
and come to life again like fireworks made of flesh.
I pass through strange lands with creatures for company.
No doubt you are there, my beautiful discreet spy.
And the palpable soul of the vast reaches.
And perfumes of the sky and the stars the song of a rooster
from 2000 years ago and piercing screams in a flaming park and kisses.
Sinister handshakes in a sickly light and axles grinding on paralyzing roads.
No doubt there is you who I do not know, who on the contrary I do know.
But who, here in my dreams, demands to be felt without ever appearing.
You who remain out of reach in reality and in dream.
You who belong to me through my will to possess your illusion
but who brings your face near mine only if my eyes are closed in dream as well as
in reality.
You who in spite of an easy rhetoric where the waves die on the beach
where crows fly into ruined factories, where the wood rots
(crackling under a lead sun.
You who are at the depths of my dreams stirring up a mind
full of metamorphoses leaving me your glove
when I kiss your hand.
In the night there are stars and the shadowy motion of the sea, 
of rivers, forests, towns, grass and the lungs 
of millions and millions of beings. 
In the night there are the seven wonders of the world. 
In the night there are no guardian angels, but there is sleep. 
In the night there is you. 
In the daylight too.”

Robert Desnos
Sleep Spaces

It was long past midnight when I decided to go down to the kitchen to grab something to eat.
Vimini had been driven home and Marzia had come to say goodnight before leaving. Everywhere was dark and quiet, so I jumped out of my skin when I heard my mother’s voice. She was standing in the hallway, hesitating, as if she’d lost her bearings.

“How is he doing?”

“Fine: he just needs to rest and stay away from the heat.”

“Maybe you should give him some space.”

I walked past her, down the staircase, and she followed me. She was holding a glass which could have been full of water if her breath hadn’t smelled of gin.

“The room is large enough and we sleep on twin beds pushed close together.”

She made a face, like I knew she would.

“I don’t need to know.”

“Don’t you? It seemed as if you were enquiring about our sleeping arrangements.”

I entered the kitchen and opened the fridge: on a platter were a few slices of melon and next to it was a plastic container with salted beef slices, which the Italians call bresaola.

“You’re not eating pork now, are you?”

“Beef, as you can see,” I said, preparing a plate to take upstairs. “Say what you have to say, Judith.”

“I just thought that maybe you should let him breathe a little. Perhaps this is a sign that you need to put some distance between the two of you; not forever, but for a while.”

I stared at her and felt anger mixed with pity at her tired face with the lipstick-smeared mouth and severe blue eyes.

“Elio and I were apart for a long time, but we’re together now. We sleep in the same bed, always.”

“Your father and I-”
“I’m sure you had your reasons.”

“He said I talked in my sleep and he snored.”

I felt sorry for her, which is why I offered her my truth.

“I can’t sleep if he’s not next to me and he feels the same.”

She tilted her face to one side, observing me closely.

“You were never so... intense.”

“I just didn’t allow it to show, or maybe I had not found the right person yet.”

She sipped her drink, her eyes still on my face.

“I’m not sure I will ever understand you,” she said, after a while.

“It’s the most honest thing you’ve ever said to me, aside from what you told me at the funeral.”

We left it at that, said goodnight and went to our rooms.

At least this time she had not tried to rewrite the past, even though she had not admitted to anything.

The following morning I woke up with Elio clinging to me like a limpet.

We were both sweating and he had dark shadows under his closed eyes.

I kissed the tip of his nose and try to disentangle my limbs from his, which had the immediate effect of waking him up.

“Stay here,” he moaned and tried to grab hold of me again.

“I’m just giving you some room. The doctor said you needed to keep cool.”

“Is this your excuse for not letting me touch you?”

He slid a hand down my back and cupped my ass.

“Feeling like apricots this morning, uh?”

“Shut up,” he said, giggling, his eyes still shut.

“Praecoquum,” I replied, and guided his other hand to my dick, which by now was well on its way to getting hard.

“Apricot,” he chimed in, chuckling like a little boy.

“I could suck you off,” I whispered against his throat, “And you wouldn’t have to do a thing.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Maybe just pull my hair.”

He swallowed and I licked his throat, pressing down on it, lightly. He let out a low whimper, pushed me until I was on my back then climbed on top of me.
“You’re all naked,” he murmured.

“Yes.”

We always slept unclothed, but the way he’d said it left me bereft of words.

“My skin is so sensitive today,” he said, his voice low and hoarse, “My nipples especially,” he added, and started to rub his chest against mine. He was like velvet and I let him take what he needed, while my hands ran up and down his back, from nape to loins; my caress was little more than a whisper of fingers in counterpoint to his vigorous stroking.

After a while, he moved up so that his chest was above my face.

“They are sore now: can you lick them?”

“Yes.”

“Please,” he moaned, only so that I would hear him beg.

I pulled him closer and circled one hard nub with the tip of my tongue; he shivered, and I lapped it avidly, suckled it wetly then breathed on it, until he was desperate for the other not to be neglected. I obliged and went from one to the other like a man lost in a dream.

When I finally looked up into his face, his mouth was open and his lips were blood-red.

“Here,” was the extent of my eloquence, as I wrapped him in my arms and kissed the breath out of him.

“We didn’t even come,” he complained later, as we drank the last of Vimini’s frullato.

“Delayed gratification is not a bad thing,” I replied, caressing his leg, which was slung on top of mine.

He laughed and nudged my shoulder with his.

“We don’t have to remain here. As long as I stay in the shade, it’s okay to go outside,” he said.

“Okay, but you’ll let me know as soon as you feel tired or ill.”

“I’m fine,” he replied, resting his head on my shoulder.

“I saw my mother last night and she tried to convince me to sleep in another room, so you could have some space.”

“I don’t want space.”

“That’s what I told her. She said she doesn’t understand me.”

“Why?”

“She never saw me like this. I was never this in love before, so she does have a point.”

“Was she drunk?”

“A little.”
He kissed the base of my neck.

“Remember that night you were drunk and wanted to fuck me on my hands and knees on the floor?”

“That’s it! We are getting out of here.”

“Why?” he asked, mock-innocently. “Isn’t delayed gratification a good thing?”

I slapped his thigh and rolled out of bed.

I’ve had my share of weird days, but the one which was about to unfold surely must count as one of the oddest.

It was another hot day, but dry and with a pleasant breeze, so Elio was able to sit under the trees without feeling too oppressed. Marzia and Chiara were playing *ramino* with Momo and Yvan, while Vimini was writing her journal, a practice which she had resumed once she’d found out her health was on the mend.

Anella was showing my mother an album of photographs of her family, when one of the subjects of said pictures materialised in front of us, as if conjured up by a medium.

“Jack! It’s Jack!” shouted Vimini, the first to lay eyes on him.

It was indeed Elio’s cousin, dressed in blue Bermuda shorts and a Lacoste polo shirt, black espadrilles on his feet and the usual glasses perched on his nose.

He looked cool and unfazed; one could believe he was the host and we were the ones intruding on his peace and quiet.

“Jack? Where do you spring from?” asked Annella, standing up to greet her nephew.

“I was with Danilo. We met at the station and he gave me a lift.”

“We didn’t hear the car.”

“Oh, he took me home with him. He had something to show me.”

“Where’s your suitcase?”

“I left it there.”

The only two people unknown to him were Yvan and my mother, but he didn’t show any interest in the former.

“You look like Oliver,” he said to my mother, sitting down next to her.

Her eyes widened.

“I’m his mother, Judith.”

“Is it from Judith and Holofernes?”

We were all silent, just watching and listening to them.

“Yes, well, I suppose...”
“What’s your favourite painting of the beheading?”

“I don’t think, I’m not sure...”

“Many would say Gentileschi or Michelangelo, but I love Stuck’s depiction. You could argue that Klimt’s is better, but I find it too light-hearted.”

“And the one you prefer-”

“It’s dark and vicious and much more effective.”

“Judith is naked in that one,” said Vimini, with a Cheshire cat grin.

Jack ignored the interruption and addressed his aunt.

“Is Sam in his study?”

“No, he went to Milan to see a friend.”

“I know he has a book on modern sacred art. Do you know the one I’m talking about?” he asked, looking at Elio, who nodded.

“I’ll go look for it, if you don’t mind,” he said, and immediately stood up and went inside the house.

“He’s recovered alright,” I said to Elio.

“Recovered from what?” asked my mother.

“He had some sort of food poisoning,” I replied, glancing at Vimini, who kept her mouth shut for once.

“Does he live in London too?”

“He’s studying at the London School of Economics,” said Annella.

That meant more to Judith than any of our literary or artistic achievements.

“He must be very clever,” she commented.

“Yes, but he’s also really strange,” said Chiara. The four of them had resumed their game, used as they were to people weaving in and out of the Perlmans’ household.

Mafalda brought out a jug of fresh lemonade and ice and set it on the table where the two older women were sitting. Annella started pouring the drinks and my mother returned to perusing the photo album with increased curiosity.

“Should we go help him?” Elio asked me.

I wasn’t sure Jack would appreciate the intrusion, but I was too curious to care.

We found him sitting on the squishy sofa, surrounded by a number of large volumes, some of them open, all them hardbound and well-kept.

“Danilo said you suffered a heat stroke,” he said, without raising his gaze. “You should be drinking aloe vera juice.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” replied his cousin.
“Are you here to stay?” I asked.

“Just passing by; meeting a friend in Bergamo in two days and driving to Croatia.”

“I never took you for the sun-loving type.”

“I’m not, but he’s thinking of setting up a business there and he wants my opinion.”

“Is that what you are planning to do, business development?”

He finally looked at me and frowned.

“What, no, of course not; Akiko’s cousin is producing a brand of clothes and accessories based on Manga characters and we are going to sell them in London. He thinks Camden, but I think Soho would be preferable.”

“You are going to sell clothes?”

“No, Akiko and his sister will do that. I am going to be in charge of marketing and accountancy. You wouldn’t want Akiko anywhere near that side of things, if you knew him like I do.”

“We don’t know him at all,” said Elio.

“He’s creative, like all his family. Like you. What are you working on?”

“Nothing, but I was thinking about transcribing Les Espaces du Sommeil.”

“If you are tackling Lutosławski, why not do Łańcuch?”

“I love the poem by Desnos.”

Jack snorted, clearly amused. I was listening to them but had only a general notion of what they were discussing.

“You’re disgustingly romantic.”

“He was a surrealist.”

“If you say so,” he replied then “Here,” he said, having finally found a photo of the painting by Stuck. He turned the book upside down to show it to us.

“My mother will love this,” I joked, meaning the opposite.

He ignored me, but I was used to it.

“We should have pizza tonight. Pizza in London is an aberration,” he said.

“Maybe you could open a restaurant.”

“Food is too messy.”

Jack spent the rest of the afternoon talking to my mother, who couldn’t take her eyes off him, her stare both fascinated and horrified.

Annella went to Crema with Vimini to do some shopping, while our friends swam in the pool and
ate peaches.

As much as we wished to spy on Jack and Judith, I wanted Elio to sleep a little before dinner time, so we went upstairs and left them to their own devices.

“Here’s the poem,” he said, handing me a slim volume of modernist poetry.

“It’s in French.”

“I’ll translate it for you,” he said, and so he did.

“Jack’s right: it’s very romantic.”

“My favourite line is:

>You who belong to me through my will to possess your illusion,

but who bring your face near mine

only if my eyes are closed in dream as well as in reality”

He closed his eyes and I kissed his eyelids, which made him smile.

“I wonder why Jack’s so entranced by my mother.”

“She looks like you and he’s always had a faible for you.”

“That’s hardly a reason.”

“Jack’s motives are not for us mere mortals to understand. Ask him, no doubt he’ll tell you.”

“I can’t wait to hear you play that piece. I don’t think I have ever come across its composer.”

“The Royal Philharmonic Society awarded him the Gold Medal last year. It’s a great honour because that rarely happens.”

“Is there anything you don’t know?”

He chuckled and I gathered him in my arms, where he stayed until he fell asleep.
The Sin

Chapter Summary

This long day's journey into night....

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for your support and apologies for being slow at replying to your comments, but I promise I will asap xxx

That day was far from having exhausted all its surprises.

When Elio and I woke up, the sun was setting and a cacophony of noises and voices filtered through the windows.

“Did we sleep for long?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

I looked at my watch.

“About three hours. How do you feel?”

“Hungry.”

“You heard your cousin: it’s going to be pizza tonight.”

He played with the hair on my chest.

“Wasn’t food I was thinking of.”

“That’s unworthy of you,” I laughed.

“What if I said it in French?”

“I’m impermeable to flattery in any language. You have to take it easy.”

He sighed tragically and slammed his head against the pillows.

“You’re killing me here,” he whined.

“You’ll survive. Come on, let’s get dressed and see who’s staying for dinner.”

“You’re a terrible boyfriend.”

“I know.”

I took his hand and laced his fingers with mine. He smiled and bent down to kiss my wrist.
“I used to love the viscous sheen on your wrists.”

“Used to?”

“Still do, but once it was parts for the whole, while now it’s the entirety of you. Before your wrists were a synecdoche which represented those bits of you I couldn’t reach.”

“Marvellously put, but I’m still not having sex with you.”

“And I thought you were a romantic.”

“I would kiss you...”

“...if you could?”

“Don’t be an ass,” I laughed and went for his lips, but he ducked then ran to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

“Come and get me,” he shouted, and I did.

“I have given up the drugs,” announced Jack, as soon we sat down at the dinner table.

Anchise had been sent to Crema to pick up the pizzas which Annella had ordered by phone and when he came back they were still piping hot.

It was just the six of us, since Vimini’s parents had insisted she went home and the others had gone to Momo’s.

Predictably, my mother was horrified.

“What sort of drugs?” she asked, daintily biting into a slice of her *Margherita*.

“I didn’t inject if that’s what you’re imagining. Just the usual pills: uppers, downers, the lot. I tried coke, but it’s a party drug,” he grimaced at the thought.

“And that’s why you were in hospital?”

“I may have miscalculated the dosage.”

Samuel smiled and cut a big triangle off his *Quattro Formaggi*.

“I’m glad that particular game is over. Your parents were worried.”

“It wasn’t a game. I was testing the capabilities of my organs; pushing my physical boundaries; seeing what I could endure.”

“You could have practised some sports,” Judith suggested.

“That’s not remotely the same thing. Maybe you should try.”

“What, no, tesoro,” said Annella, shaking her head.

“Try what?”

Elio and I exchanged worried looks.
“I have some hash with me.”

“You took hash through customs?” I asked.

He frowned.

“No, that would be stupid. I told you I went to Danilo’s house. Riccardo had left some in a box in the conservatory.”

Must have been a leftover from the party, I thought.

Samuel and Annella tried to change the subject: they asked him about his studies, his friends, his plans for the rest of the summer. He answered, but it was clear to anyone who knew him that he was on autopilot, just waiting to return to his topic of choice.

We were drinking beer that night: large bottles of Peroni Nastro Azzurro, which were harmless compared to the rosatello. What I didn’t know was that, while we’d been asleep, they’d been drinking glasses of Martini Rosso for the aperitivo.

Jack and Samuel were stone-cold sober, but Annella and Judith were a bit tipsy.

We finished our pizzas and Elio was asked to play the piano, but we all preferred to stay outside a little longer.

There was a lull in the conversation and we smoked cigarettes, enjoying the balmy air of high summer, but I noticed that Jack was observing my mother and that she was unsettled by his stare.

“I really think you should try.”

“As you can see, I don’t even smoke.”

“Wouldn’t you want to know how it feels?”

“Don’t insist, darling. Not everybody is as eccentric as you,” intervened his uncle.

That appeared to silence him, but Elio and I suspected that more was to come.

I decided it was time to ask him what he was doing, so when we all adjourned to the living room, I walked up to him and forced him to stop outside with me.

“Why are you so keen on my mother? I don’t mind, but it puzzles me.”

He didn’t even stop to think or try to deny his intentions.

“I find her attractive,” he replied, calmly, as if that wasn’t the most absurd concept in the universe.

“You don’t even know her.”

Jack arched his brows and looked at me like a teacher would a recalcitrant pupil.

“You don’t have to know people to find them attractive.”

“I thought... never mind what I thought.”

“You thought I was like Elio, but I am not.”

“That’s never crossed my mind, believe me. But I thought you were involved with Akiko, that’s all.”
“You talk like a cheap novelette. The two things are not connected; I thought that was obvious.”

His lips curved in faint amusement.

“Nothing concerning you could ever be obvious.”

“I don’t see why, since I’m pretty much an open book.”

I wasn’t sure he was joking, but I laughed anyway.

Elio started by playing a Prelude by Franck followed by one of Glass’ works, which was part of that recording I had given him as a gift for his eighteenth birthday.

He smiled up at me and I let my hand find the back of his neck and my fingers tangle in his curls.

Annella and Samuel sat on the sofa, his arm around her shoulder, she smoking and both of them looking happy and fond.

My mother and Jack had been there, but in the interval between the two pieces, he had said something about preparing a gin cocktail and had taken Judith with him to the adjoining room, where the liquor was kept.

They returned while Elio was still tackling Glass’ infamous arpeggios.

To me, it was like witnessing real magic: the dexterity which created those complex waves of sound simply eluded me; I could strum the guitar, but I would never be more than a dilettante.

Jack offered some of his concoction to his uncle and aunt, but they shook their heads. Judith was already sipping it; she was flushed and her eyes were brighter than usual.

After Elio played the last note, we clapped our hands.

“I’m not quite sure about Glass,” said Jack, “What do you think?” he asked my mother, who took another sip of her drink to gain time.

“It’s rather repetitive,” she replied, after a while, “But in a captivating way.”

“I used to confuse him with Adams.”

“And now?” asked his cousin.

“I still do, but I’ve stopped caring. Music can be exhausting, if you try to figure out its patterns.”

Just enjoy the melody, I wanted to say, but knew it would mean nothing to Jack.

“It’s almost like a maze,” my mother added. Elio cast me a surprised glance which I reciprocated.

“I agree,” said Samuel, “A labyrinth of sounds and emotions in which it’s almost impossible not to get lost.”

His trip to Milan had tired him, so he and Annella went up to bed soon after.

We had been sedentary for most of the day and I longed for a bit of exercise.
“Let’s go for a walk,” I suggested.

Elio was keen, but Jack paid me no mind. I looked at my mother, but she was perusing the book of modern sacred art which Jack had showed her that afternoon.

“What’s going on?” Elio asked me, once outside.

“He says he finds my mother attractive.”

“What?” he shouted then less loudly, “What? She is and he is... what?”

“He lives with a man, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“That’s not what I meant. He’s never shown an interest in older people. Before Akiko, he had a girlfriend and I know about a few others, but they were his age or thereabouts. Does your mother know?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if he’d told her, but it’s not like he’s being coy.”

Elio sat down on the grass, under a pomegranate tree.

“I feel like I should apologize.”

“What for, it’s nothing to do with you.”

“I invited her here, I insisted and now I think maybe I shouldn’t have. She still doesn’t like me and now she’s being harassed by my cousin.”

“Oh, I don’t know about ‘harassed’; she would have put him in his place if she’d wanted to. She’s not shy.”

I sat down next to him and pulled him closer.

“He can be intimidating.”

“So can Judith.”

“I can’t believe we are having this conversation.”

He was shaking with silent laughter and I joined in.

“What do you think will happen?” he asked, caressing my thigh.

“I have no idea and I would prefer it stayed that way.”

“About the weed, I also filched some at the party.”

“You never said.”

“After what happened, I thought we’d had enough of drugs for a while.”

“We shouldn’t.”

His hand was teasing the inside of my leg, up and up, a breath away from my groin.

“It will relax you,” he whispered.
“It’ll make us horny, you mean.”

“We already are.”

In the next moment, my hand was on his face, his was on my sex and our tongues were battling and mating.

“Let’s go to bed,” he husked, nibbling my lips.

I wanted to joke about his eagerness, but since he had my very solid erection in his grasp, it would have been rather silly.

“Hmm,” I replied, and dotted his throat with kisses and soft bites.

When we entered the house, the living room was deserted and the lights were off.

I switched them back on and saw that the cocktail pitcher was gone and so were the two glasses, while the book had been placed on a side table. I leafed through it to find the painting of Judith and when I did, I examined it carefully. Elio came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

“It is a great painting. It has a definite Pre-Raphaelite quality.”

“It’s so sensual.”

I turned the page and was left speechless by the next photo, which reproduced another painting from the same artist. It was called The Sin and it depicted Eve, half naked, shrouded in black and with the head of the serpent resting just above her pale, bare breast.

“This is even more sensual.”

“It’s almost as if Eve was daring you to desire her.”

I nodded and turned around to kiss Elio’s lips.

“It says here that one of the versions of this painting is in Palermo. I was in Sicily that summer; if only I had known.”

“There is one in Seattle too. I wonder if Jack has convinced your mother to go see that one.”

“My mother never goes to museums unless it’s for charity events. And even then, she hardly looks at the pictures.”

“People can change,” he said, ruffling my hair, “Can’t they?”

“So it seems.”

We got a bit sidetracked again, staring into each other’s eyes and touching each other’s hair.

“The version depicted here is in Munich; maybe we could go there,” Elio suggested; he took the book from my hands, placed it back on the table and guided me out of the room.

“Paris, Munich, Copenhagen: we’ve got a busy schedule ahead of us.”

“I can’t wait to be there with you,” he said, and I felt the same.
As we climbed the stairs, I had forgotten everything which wasn’t the happiness of being with Elio and the life we were going to have together.

It was only when we reached the landing that we were greeted by a whiff of a well-known, sweetish smell.

“Hash,” I whispered, but Elio was already opening the door to our bedroom and I followed him.
The night, at last!

“Stop it and don’t you dare speak any of the words synonymous with you know what when talking about my mother and your cousin.”

Elio and I were on our bed, half-way through our second joint and wearing only our shorts. He wouldn’t have teased me about it had he not been high, but as it was he kept mentioning Jack and my mother, and because I was gone too, I started chuckling, which provoked him into lewder suggestions until we were both teary with too much laughter.

I had drawn the line at naming the act itself, but Elio’s wicked smile told me he was ready to break that rule too.

He puffed out a cloud of smoke and passed me the spliff, waiting until it was between my lips; then he brought his lips close to my ear and whispered: “Yentsn, my dear,” and I nearly spat the joint out.

“You pervert,” I hissed, and went to tickle him, but he rolled off the bed, falling on the Persian rug with a mighty thud. He swore and broke down into a fit of giggles.

I extinguished the reefer, let it die inside the glass ashtray then picked Elio up from the floor and threw him on the bed, covering him up with my body.

“End of the line, my dear,” I said, biting the underside of his jaw, “You can’t run and you can’t hide.”

“I don’t want to,” he murmured, arching up so that his clothed groin was rubbing against my naked abdomen.

“And what is it that you want?”

“You know exactly what I want.”

And it was true: the movements of his body had telegraphed his wishes to me, clear as a bell. But I wanted to hear it spoken; I always wanted his words, because the vocabulary of pleasure was as arousing as the geography of our interwoven limbs.

He never refused me, unless it was part of a game we’d silently agreed to play.

“You, deep inside of me.”

It didn’t matter how many times I heard him say that; it always undid me.

“How?”

“Want to ride you. Remember last time?”

As if I could forget: the frenzy with which he’d bounced on top of me, the obscene words dripping
from his cherub’s mouth; I had come so hard my eyes had rolled back in my head and I had lost track of reality for a long while.

I meant to ask about his health, whether his strength was completely restored, but his tongue was invading my mouth and all questions died a premature death.

He didn’t allow me to prepare him, but masturbated the head of my cock, sucking it inside his opening and playing with it, muscles contracting and his body moving up and down, slowly, enough to drive me insane. He had used plenty of lube and the slide was sweet but the squelching noises it evinced were filthier than words.

I hadn’t come in nearly two days and I was getting dangerously close; he felt it and between two ragged breaths, he sat on my dick, taking it all inside in one slurping motion; we both cried out, with raspy and broken voices, bodies slick and shiny with sweat. Last time, we’d been enthusiastic and determined, but this time we went at it like animals. The kisses were biting, growling and messy; tongues came out and lapped at one another; spit trickled down his chin: I licked it up as if it was ambrosia.

“Come on, come on,” he moaned, or was it me?

We were locked like wrestlers, he on top of me, his wet curls in my eyes, my fingers around his neck - the only delicate pressure - while our bodies crashed into one another, my cock so far embedded inside him it seemed to belong there.

My eyes fought to stay open, but I did see that he was staring at me with something like famished cruelty in his gaze. He rubbed and grazed my nipples and tugged at the hair on my chest, roughly, a crazed smile on his lips.

I grabbed a handful of curls at the back of his head and pulled; he whimpered, but I knew he loved it because I could feel the swell of his dick.

We were right on the brink, but in a way, we were past caring. When it happened, when his load hit my skin, warm and salty, he shook so violently he squeezed my orgasm out of me. I came, hard, and yet I felt like I had more to give; more, always more, never enough.

“Can we stay like this for a bit?” he asked, after I’d pulled out of him and held him in my arms.

I nodded, still unable to utter sentences.

We spent a while in a well of tremulous silence and it was Elio who broke it.

“When we first met, did you think we would be physically compatible?”

“The music you liked to play and the way you moved evoked sensuality, but I could never have imagined this.”

He kissed the hollow of my throat, suckling a droplet of sweat or semen, I wasn’t sure.

“I don’t think this is common: do you?”

“I doubt it.”

He trailed a fingertip along my collarbone; it made me shiver.

“How well do you know Satie?”
It was one of his unexpected questions, which enlivened our conversations and steered them in odd directions.

“I know the ones with the complicated names.”

“Gnossiennes and Gymnopédies.”

“Yes.”

“He wrote a waltz and the music is not my favourite, but the lyrics, well—”

I touched his lips; they were hot and wet and I wanted them everywhere on my body.

“I played it once for Umberto’s mother; I told you about her, that she loved Satie,” he said, tilting his face up so that he could look me in the eye.

It didn’t hurt any longer, but I couldn’t help a little twinge of jealousy and regret, for those lost years when our bodies had been far apart, in bed with other people.

“The words reminded me of you, these especially:

May my body be yours
May your lips be mine
May your heart be mine
And may all my flesh be yours”

“It is yours,” I whispered and kissed him, again and again, until we were out of breath.

“I’m sorry about before,” he said, softly. “I know you’re worried about your mother.”

“I’m surprised, because Jack is so young.”

“He’s very mature for his age.”

“I wouldn’t say mature. He’s just in a category of his own.”

“Same as me.”

“And which category would that be?”

“Men whose flesh is all yours?”

“Yes, that’s definitely a list with only one name on it.”

“Flesh in need of a shower,” he said, grimacing.

“I don’t mind the way you smell.”

“Who’s the pervert now?”

“I never denied it,” I smiled and caressed the swell of his buttocks.

A sharp tug in my nether regions told me that I could be soon ready for more and that, in turn, opened the floodgates of tenderness.

“Come on, I’ll wash your hair,” I said, and he took one look at my face and nodded.
“Okay,” he replied, because if I could read his mind, he too could read mine.

The following morning there was no trace of Jack or of my mother at the breakfast table.

“Jack went to Crema. He said he needed to go to the bank,” Annella told us, with her usual perceptiveness.

“Judith?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

She smiled at me in the same way as the morning after my first night with her son. It didn’t bode well.

“I’m sure she’ll be down soon,” she said, and as a matter of fact she was right.

Judith emerged from the house impeccably dressed and coiffed, not unlike every other morning. There was something different, but I couldn’t tell what it was.

“Morning,” Samuel said, raising his head from the pages of the Corriere della Sera which he was avidly reading.

“Sorry for being late,” she said, smiling.

“No apologies needed, my dear. We are here on holiday, no need for timetables,” he replied.

Annella offered to pour her a cup of coffee, but she went for the orange juice instead.

“I was thinking of visiting the area today, but I don’t want to inconvenience you,” she said, spreading a film of apricot jam on a slice of home-made ciabatta bread.

I knew her like the back of my hand: she was avoiding my gaze and being too nice.

“Elio and I could take you, if Samuel can spare the car,” I suggested.

“The car is at your disposal,” he replied, “I have some work to do today and Annella doesn’t need it.”

“Naturally, you could come with us too,” I added, looking at Elio’s mother, “The more the merrier.” Before she could reply, my mother interrupted us, like I had expected.

“I didn’t mean to go far, maybe just a walk in the countryside.”

“On your own?” I enquired.

“Why not?” she replied, and this time she looked straight into my eyes.

Having been a poker player, I knew this was one of the most frequent tells of those who bluffed.

“No reason, but wouldn’t you rather have company?”

Elio had been silent, but his face was as eloquent as a lengthy monologue.

He was glancing at his bread and Nutella with amusement and his lips were always on the verge of a grin. If we’d been alone, I’d have tickled his ribs until he begged me to stop.
In this instance, Judith ignored me and spoke to Annella instead.

“One doesn’t always want company, don’t you find?”

“Absolutely, and after all you’re not a guest here; Oliver is like a son to us, so you’re also part of the family. You should do whatever pleases you.”

“Whatever pleases you,” repeated Samuel, and the case was closed.

The conversation turned to topics of a more practical nature: what sort of shoes to wear, was anybody speaking English in the shops, was there any interesting architectural landmark in the vicinity.

I watched her closely and finally realised what had changed: her features were no longer as sharp and tense as they had been; there was an indefinable softness in her cheeks, almost a kind of blurring of the shadows underneath her eyes. As far as I could recall, she’d always had what I called the lines of disappointment, which bracketed her mouth, but they had gone.

Had she noticed a similar transformation in me, when I went home for my father’s obsequies? Maybe she had, maybe I too had become lighter and younger when Elio had told me that he loved me.

He’d said it over the phone, but the words had melted directly into my blood. Which words had Jack uttered to provoke this alteration? Words or deeds or both, I wondered, but didn’t want to go down that road.

Jack didn’t return for lunch, but no one was alarmed, since it was unlike him to hang around the house for long.

“Do you think they’ve agreed to meet somewhere?” Elio asked, as soon as we were alone.

“Yes, she would never walk in the fields on her own.”

“But Jack doesn’t care what people think. If he asked to borrow the car and take your mother for a ride, no one would object.”

I shook my head.

“You don’t know her: she would never want to be seen doing something objectionable.”

“But she must know we are all aware of what’s going on.”

“Maybe, but as long as you don’t actually see it with your own eyes, it’s as if it never really happened, whatever it is.”

“Yentsn,” he said, and Vimini, with her impeccable timing, turned up as Elio was speaking that word.

“I know what that means,” she announced, “I was reading a book on Yiddish terminology.”

“Of course you were,” I said.

“You are Jewish and I’m not, so I need to study. My favourite word is kvetch.”

“That’s a good one.”
“Anyway, who were you gossiping about?”

“No one in particular,” Elio replied, but she wasn’t to be sidetracked so easily.

“Where’s Jack?”

“Crema, probably.”

She hummed and frowned, the way she always did when she was putting two and two together.

“He likes your mum and she doesn’t scowl at him.”

“She doesn’t scowl at you.”

“Yes, she does. Same as you used to do with Elio when you pretended you didn’t like him.”

No point trying to deny it.

“Tell me what happened last night after I left,” she said, and Elio started to laugh.

“I knew it!” she exclaimed, in evident annoyance. “I shouldn’t have listened to my dad and stayed for dinner. Did they... you know?”

Elio’s laughter became manic and contagious and soon we were all partaking in the hilarity.
That afternoon, we played volleyball with Chiara and Marzia.

Elio insisted he was feeling great and the weather was giving us a respite from the stifling heat which had been our constant fare for such a long time. It was breezy and dry, the air redolent of lavender and rosemary, the sky enamel-blue.

Marzia and I were paired together and half-way through she was already giving me dirty looks.

“You are letting him win,” she said, low enough not to be overheard by the other two, who anyway were celebrating scoring another point.

“Not really,” I said, “I’m not at my best, that’s all.”

“You look okay.”

“I am fine, but I can get distracted sometimes.”

Elio was wearing a skin-tight tank top and sporting a bandanna tied round his head to keep his curls from flopping into his eyes: he looked as young as when I’d first met him.

She caught my drift and laughed.

“And I thought he was the obsessive one.”

I winked at her.

“Takes two to tango,” I replied.

“Less flirting, more playing,” Elio shouted and Chiara whistled at us.

“I was thinking that perhaps Marzia needed a shoulder massage,” I said, and she immediately grimaced, pretending to be sore. I started working her muscles, but unlike Elio had done back then, she didn’t flinch.

“Yeah, it’s a bit tight,” I joked, and a moment later I heard Chiara let out a cry of protest.

“She needs to relax too,” Elio said, a little smirk on his lips.

The girl slapped his hand away and turned around to face him.

“Stop doing this you two; we are not stupid you know?”

“What?” he squawked, playing innocent.
“First, he’s letting us win, and now both of you are trying to make each other jealous. We are your friends, we are on to you.”

“Just a game, no harm done,” I said, and the girls shook their heads and laughed.

“You may be older than us Oliver, but you are fooling no one,” said Marzia, and I was very close to blushing. “Can we play for real now?”

“Yeah,” I said, even though Elio was still pretending not to know what we were all talking about.

We kept at it until Vimini came to call us for dinner.

She grabbed my arm to slow my pace, so that she could talk to me alone.

“I heard what they said about Jack and your mother.”

“Who said?”

“Sam and Annella: they say he told them he’s invited your mother to go to Croatia with him. Before you ask, I don’t know what she replied, but they think she’ll say yes. He phoned his friends about renting his own car and driving there ahead of them, so she must have agreed, don’t you think?”

I was too shocked to think coherently or I wouldn’t have asked her the next question.

“Did they say anything at all about Judith?”

“No, you know how they are, but I could tell they were surprised and that they thought it was funny. Not in a nasty way,” she added, squeezing my arm to comfort me.

“It’s not their style,” I said, and just as we reached the house: “Where were you hiding?”

She straightened her back and cast me a baleful glance.

“I did not hide,” she replied, “They were in the kitchen and I was in the next room fetching some ice for Mafalda. It’s not my fault that the door is always open and they didn’t realise I was there.”

I did my best to contain a chuckle.

“How long did it take you to fetch the ice?”

She sniffed, but I could see that she too was biting back a smile.

“I looked inside the wrong freezer at first.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“And I was thinking that tomorrow we could go boating on the river. We haven’t been in a while and with this breeze,” Marzia was saying, but was interrupted by Jack’s sudden reappearance. He was doing that a lot and I was starting to suspect he enjoyed the little commotion he was causing. No, that was unfair, I told myself, and most probably incorrect: he wouldn’t have bothered and wasn’t that sort of egotist anyway.

I looked at my mother, who was standing close to him, but still tried to give the impression that their arriving at the same time was a mere coincidence: she was flushed and a little worse for wear, but her
clothes and hair were unimpeachable.

She looked more alive than I’d ever seen her, but also younger and a little sheepish. What I didn’t expect to find in her face was so much of myself, of the way I had looked when I had stared in the mirror the morning after sleeping with Elio for the first time. That complex blend of satisfaction, elation and sheer terror was replicated in her blue eyes and patrician features, divesting them of that authority which they’d always radiated, even when she’d been intoxicated or in mourning.

“Sit down, please... have something to eat,” said Samuel, while his wife told Mafalda to add two more covers. The latter complied not without grumbling, while Chiara and Marzia did their best not to stare. Vimini was bursting with questions, so I served her a large glass of her favourite frullato to keep her occupied. She knew what I was up to, naturally, but she gracefully gave way. Elio was sitting next to me and his foot was caressing my ankle, which was doing nothing for my blood pressure.

“Maybe just some fruit and cheese,” said my mother, while Jack clinically demolished his portion of grilled fish with potato salad.

“Did you have a pleasant afternoon?” Samuel asked Judith, and Annella at once lighted a cigarette and offered the packet around, to create a diversion.

Naturally, Jack was unaware of the French farce atmosphere he and my mother had brought into the room, so he replied without the least hesitation.

“Boating on the lake was less tedious than I’d imagined. The champagne was not bad either.”

“Champagne?” asked Vimini, and I couldn’t blame her for talking. In fact, it was the only thing that saved us all from hysterical laughter.

“Well, one could argue it was more of a spumante really, but the defining criteria are too nebulous for my understanding.”

“Were you celebrating something?” asked Elio.

Jack arched his brows.

“Celebrating is another vague concept and a waste of time. Judith had never gone boating and there was a breeze: I thought she might get queasy.”

“Why go boating?” it was my turn to wonder.

“Why not?” replied my mother, in a belligerent tone.

“I think it was a splendid idea,” said Annella, puffing out a ring of smoke.

She saw that I was about to say something scathing and she passed me her cigarette.

I shook my head, but accepted a fresh one and took my time in lighting it.

“Tomorrow we’ll be leaving early in the morning,” continued Jack, as if there had been no interruption, “We won’t be here for breakfast.”

“Did you get the car?” asked Samuel.

“We went to see Danilo and his father lent me their old Lancia.”
“Hmm, the silver one? Drive carefully, my dear.”

Jack glanced at him, but said nothing. Clearly, driving other than carefully was beneath him.

The next palpable hit came unforeseen.

“Are you taking Oliver’s mother to the airport?” asked Chiara, who should have known better and probably did.

“No, I,” started Judith, but Jack was faster.

“We are going to Croatia to see a friend of mine. Oliver knows about it.”

“I didn’t know you were going with my mother.”

His lips curved into one of his rare, boyish smiles.

“I thought that was obvious. Like I told you, I’m an open book.”

“And what does the book say about the future?”

“It’s a book, not a crystal ball. Anyway, I’ll be back in London and Judith mentioned she’d like to visit you.”

“Did you?” I asked her.

“If you don’t mind,” she replied, as if she’d obliterated the way she’d spoken about my life there and the man I was sharing it with.

“Of course we don’t,” the man in question exclaimed, clutching my hand and squeezing it. “We’ll be glad to have you.”

She smiled at him: it was tentative, but at least it was sincere.

I still couldn’t fathom what those two could have in common and what they would be talking about when alone, but I could hardly discuss this in the presence of all our friends.

“Can I come too?” asked Vimini, bringing the farcical element of the evening to a close.

“I know it’s none of my business, but I’ll ask all the same: what are you doing?”

I had followed Judith to her bedroom, where she had retired early to pack her suitcase. She continued folding her clothes with the utmost care, but her fingers betrayed a slight tremor.

“I like his company, that’s all there is to it,” she replied.

“Again, not my business, but I’m not blind. You are not just friends, are you?”

“What are you implying?” she said, but her cold demeanour did not convince me one iota.

“Do you really want me to say it?”

We stared at each other like antagonists before a duel, and she was the first to concede. She sat down on the bed and played with the hem of a camisole.
“You know the fourth verse of Psalm 90.”

“Of course I do.”

“For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past,” she quoted, “I never truly grasped its meaning until your father died, and even then I just caught a glimpse of it. When I arrived here, I felt I was out of place: I couldn’t understand you or Elio, and his family seemed perfectly nice, but nothing to do with me, with who I was. When Jack arrived,” she continued, and the way she pronounced his name, the studied indifference which was betrayed by the unbidden sweetness of her voice, told me more than a thousand words.

“When Jack arrived, he was talking to me as if he’d always known me. It was like a conversation which had started a long time ago and was only being resumed.”

Riccardo had said something similar to me, paraphrasing Foucault, and I wondered if he and Jack were treading the same philosophical paths.

“And you didn’t want to waste any more time,” I said, touching her wrist.

“It goes so quickly, you have no idea.”

“Trust me, I do.”

She nodded a few times then she wrapped her arms around me and held me close; she’d not done that since I was a child, and I wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

“Elio loves you,” she whispered. I knew she could only say that when her face was hidden from view.

“Yes, and I love him too.”

“Good.”

“Call us when you get there.”

“Yes,” she replied, after which we said goodnight and I left.

Strangely, I felt as if I had just lost a mother and acquired a sister.

Maybe, I pondered, that’s the meaning of adulthood.
Extase

Chapter Summary

Just our boys being happy together and talking about the future...

After my conversation with Judith, I felt emotionally drained, so I went to bed even though it was still early.

I could hear Elio playing the piano downstairs and I imagined the girls would still be there to keep him company.

Vimini had left after dinner, when her mother had come to fetch her. We seldom saw her parents, but I had gleaned from what she’d told me that they were working hard on salvaging a marriage which had been rocked by their daughter’s illness. They were still young enough to have more kids, and Vimini’s father had proposed that they should, but his wife had bluntly refused and still resented him for what she called “trying to replace their daughter.” Naturally, he’d been bitterly stung by the unfair accusation, which had led to a catch-22 situation that in turn had morphed into a cold war of nerves. They played the perfect couple in front of their daughter, but she wasn’t taken in by their act.

Fortunately, she was clever enough to understand their reasons and didn’t blame them; in fact, she almost pitied them, a sentiment which I had come to fully understand and empathise with since my mother’s bizarre involvement with Jack.

Parents are an odd breed: on average, they’d do anything for their children, but they’d still try to hide what pains them.

I sat on the bed with my back against the headboard and picked up a book from Elio’s pile on the desk. It was a collection of poems by Paul Verlaine, in French but with an English translation: *Romances sans paroles*, Songs without Words.

I remember Elio telling me that the title was inspired by a series of piano pieces by Mendelssohn and had in turn impelled Fauré to write the *Cinq mélodies de Venise*.

*This ecstasy of delight,*
*This fatigue of loving*
*Is the trembling of the forest*
*Rustling in the breeze*

The fatigue of loving made me think of the future, of what we could and couldn’t do, what was possible and what impossible.

I was still immersed in my reveries when Elio came in.

“If you’d come back down, I’d have played the Fauré or the Debussy pieces for you.”

He sat down next to me and caressed my hair.
“I spoke to Judith.”

“What did she say?”

I sighed, set the book on the bedside cabinet and told him.

“Should I talk to Jack? Or dad maybe could…?”

“And ask what his intentions are, like in a Victorian novel? They are adults and know what they are doing or at least they should.”

“She said she’s coming to London.”

“It probably won’t last that long, whatever it is.”

Elio gave me an unreadable look.

“Many would have said the same about us, back then.”

“You and I are seven years apart and neither of us has ever been married or had children. That’s hardly the same context.”

“Feelings have no age.”

I brought his hand to my lips and kissed each finger.

“Reality has a way of interfering with idealism.”

In a flurry of limbs, he came to lie down on top of me, his head tucked under my chin.

“What are you doing?” I asked, grinning.

“Comfort blanket.”

“All elbows and knees.”

“You’re spoiling the mood.”

“Come up here, blanket, I want to kiss you.”

“I bet you never thought that one fine day you’d say that.”

We shared a moment of mirth, which always relieved the pressures of our most intense moments. He rolled off me and I scooted down to press my lips on his.

I didn’t have any carnal urges, only a desire for closeness and affection.

Experience had taught me that these moods could turn on a dime, so I did not force them one way or the other: I just let them be.

We were still dressed except for our bare feet. Our legs were tangled together, the way they’d been from that very first night.

“This didn’t play out the way I’d imagined,” he said, allowing me to gather him in my arms and to kiss his temple and the corner of his eye. “I thought we’d drive your mother around and that she’d befriend my parents and maybe the Moreschis; that she would play cards with them and tell us anecdotes about your childhood.”
“We didn’t know Jack would turn up.”

“Not that it would have made a difference; knowing, I mean. The universe can be absurdly random.”

“I wonder if he’d have behaved the same way if his mother and sister had been here.”

Elio chuckled.

“The summer he turned thirteen, Jack decided he wanted to spend his birthday naked. First thing I said was that he would not dare do that in front of his parents and Fede. I lost that bet.”

“Perhaps they have become immune to such shocks.”

“He can be reckless, but he always knows when to stop.”

“I wonder what he’ll tell Akiko.”

“We are not written for one instrument alone.”

“Did he say that or was it you?”

“What do you think?”

I kissed him again, but this time I aimed for his lips: it was a chaste brushing of skin against skin, but our breaths mingled and our eyes met: it was like swimming in molten gold or floating on air.

And then it came to me and I berated my idiocy: what hadn’t I thought about that before? How stupid had I been, when from the very start my actions had all led to the same conclusion? But I wouldn’t say it now, because it could be construed as a reaction to my mother’s behavior even though it had nothing to do with it.

“I think that you have the mind of a musician and the soul of a poet.”

He nuzzled my neck and pressed his lips to the patch of skin beneath my ear.

“You smell so good,” he whispered, and kissed along my jaw, while his hand slipped inside my open shirt and curled around my shoulder.

“You always say that, even when I’m rank with sweat.”

“Hmm, even more so,” he hummed.

“If time stopped now, I wouldn’t mind too much.”

I felt his breath on my throat.

“Kiss me again,” he asked, and I did.

We fell asleep soon after, forgetting to undress and to switch off the Oxford night-light.

“Is it morning already?” Elio mumbled, when I dislodged his head from my shoulder as I got up to relieve myself.

“Not even close. Go back to sleep.”
We had dozed off for a couple of hours, which meant that it was still the dead of night. The breeze of
the previous day had turned into a fiercer wind; I could hear it whistle and wail through the gaps in
the shutters.

When I returned to bed, Elio was wide awake and unclothed.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he said, as he sauntered past me and into the bathroom.

“Not planning to,” I replied; and just like that, my celibate mood was gone.

For who could resist a sweaty, sun-kissed, naked Elio? I certainly couldn’t.

“You know the book you were reading?” he asked, when he returned. I was naked too now and
sitting on the bed; he stood in front of me, his erection enticingly close to my mouth.

“Hmm?”

Not very eloquent, but it was all I could muster.

“When Verlaine was in prison, they found one of his poems among Rimbaud’s things. You know
what it said?”

I shook my head and he bent down, his mouth on my ear.

“What hard angel stuffs me full between the shoulders,” he quoted, making me moan.

The next thing I knew, he was licking my neck with the broad of his tongue.

“And at the end, he begged: mount my loins and trample me,” he husked, and it went straight to my
 groin.

“You want that?” I managed to ask, but I could hardly breathe.

“Mount my loins and trample me,” he repeated, this time speaking the words into my mouth.

I had him and then he had me, until we both collapsed in a sated heap of tired, semen-painted limbs.


The following morning we slept until late, deceived by the absence of light. The sky was heavy with
dark clouds and when we went down for breakfast, Anchise, with a gardener’s superior knowledge
of weather indicators, declared that it would rain heavily for the rest of the day. He was right.

My mother and Jack had left early, like he’d said they would, and hopefully should have been far
enough from Crema to escape the worst of the deluge.

I was reminded of one such afternoon that first summer when I had been cycling to town to see my
translator: I had ignored the distant rumbles of thunder and had been whipped by vicious lashings of
rain, buckets of water which had soaked me to the bone. It had been an unsettling experience,
especially when lightning had crackled just above the trees, but I had also felt oddly free and fully
aware of my body, of its strengths, its fragilities and the infinite possibilities I had long tried to
suppress. Later, Elio had told me that it had been that same afternoon when his mother had read him
the Heptaméron and he had made the decision that it would be better to speak rather than die.
Blessed be that day.
After lunch, we had no choice but to stay indoors.

Samuel retired to his study to attend to his papers while Annella did some translating work in her room.

Elio and I were slumped on the sofa, reading and half-listening to Wagner’s Liebestod. As soon as that was over, he sprang up and strode to the piano.

“What are you going to play?”

“Something I have been working on.”

“Is that the one you and Jack talked about?”

“No,” he replied, with a little smile, “This is dedicated to the storm.”

As soon as his fingers hit the keys, I was swept away by a silvery curtain of notes, a precious veil made of glittery, sonorous threads. It was akin to listening to rain falling inside an upturned bell. It was soothing and stimulating at the same time.

When he was done, I went up to him and tousled his hair.

“That was sublime,” I said, and he leaned into me and closed his eyes.

“It’s Takemitsu’s *Rain Coming*. It was composed for fourteen instruments, but I think the piano captures the delicate structure of the piece.”

“I told you already that you should become a composer.”

“Maybe,” he conceded, turning his head to the side in order to kiss my belly.

“I would support you in every possible way.”

He frowned.

“I never doubted you.”

“I know, but I’d rather not leave anything unsaid. Silence has caused us enough problems in the past.”

“True,” he conceded then let out a sigh, “Composing is such a lonely occupation, just like writing. I’m not sure if that’s how I want to spend my working life.”

“What do you see yourself doing?”

He chortled.

“Such a true-blue American kind of question; where do you see yourself ten years from now?” he said, mimicking my accent.

I pinched his cheek.

“You can mock all you like, but that’s a reasonable thing to ask.”

“Yes, I know, but all I can see for certain is that I will be with you. As for my occupation, I wish I
could do a number of things, not just be tied down to one career. Maybe we could collaborate; we did work well together, didn’t we?”

I couldn’t disagree: I had truly enjoyed our TLS partnership and not only because it had meant spending time with him.

“I wouldn’t mind combining philosophy with music.”

“Maybe with a dash of poetry,” I suggested.

“Once I had an idea about a piece inspired by Celan’s poems.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“And afterwards, we could discuss it in an essay, like Foucault did with Boulez.”

I smiled down at him and he nodded.

“Setting your bar very high,” I joked.

“That’s what I always do,” he replied, reaching out with his hand to touch my lips. I kissed his fingertips and let my mind wander far into the future.
The Vanishing

Chapter Summary

Major angst warning...

Elio's POV

Our holiday was coming to an end.

The hot summer weather, the lack of restrictions on our freedom and the myriad things which had happened, all of it had contributed to make it seem endless.

Now that the mornings were hazier and the nights longer, we were caught between lassitude and hyperactivity: at times, we just wanted to stay at home with my parents and Vimini to enjoy the last of their company, but there were other occasions when we crammed as much as possible inside a day; those times we ended up so exhausted that we collapsed on our bed and passed out without so much as a proper kiss goodnight.

Oliver had taken up jogging again, because he said he’d been eating too much and he was putting on weight; I didn’t notice anything of the sort, only a rounder apricot perhaps, which to me was perfection itself.

Judith had called us from Croatia: her voice had changed, Oliver said, she sounded younger. He was still unconvinced; years of formality and lack of communication between them had rendered him diffident, as he had every right to be. I, on the other hand, was delighted: however things turned out between her and Jack, we’d be all part of the same family, entangled in the same messy web of fear and desire.

She was closer to us than she could ever had been, even closer than my parents were, because she was living something not unlike what we had gone through in the past.

This event had slightly tipped the balance of our relationship: for once, I was able to offer comfort and assure Oliver that all would be well and that Judith was only taking a well deserved stab at being happy.

This wisdom didn’t extend to my own affairs, which were still up in the air, undefined like a landscape submerged by fog.

I had begun working on the Celan piece, but I felt restless, unable to concentrate. I wanted to always be with Oliver, as close to him as I had been on the last days of our first summer together. Back then, of course, the painful awareness of our imminent separation had intensified our need to be together, but why would I feel the same when I knew he was mine to keep forever? I didn’t know, but feel it I did, and he laughed indulgently at my clinginess, allowing everything and reciprocating in kind.

That morning, four days before our departure, I woke up to an empty bed.

“Jogging again,” I mumbled, touching the cool sheets and burying my nose in his pillow. I took a
quick shower, dressed and went downstairs.

“Did he have his breakfast?” I asked my mother, who had finished her coffee and was smoking a cigarette.

She nodded.

“He said he was going to the bookshop in Crema.”

“I could have gone with him,” I grumbled, “There’s something I want to buy before we leave.”

“Maybe he wants to get you a present,” she replied, smiling. “Perhaps it’s the book you want.”

“I didn’t tell him what it was.”

“He may have guessed.”

I poured orange juice in my glass and took a sip.

“He loves you very much,” she said, “But more than that, he cares for you. Sometimes love is not as important as truly caring for the other person.”

“What is the difference?”

I thought I knew, but I wanted her to say it for me.

“Love can be blind then one day we wake up and realise we don’t really like the other person. Oliver admires and understands you, as a friend and a brother.”

My throat was tight, but I did my utmost not to cry.

“And what about me?”

She ruffled my hair and caressed my cheek.

“You were in awe of him, but I things are more equal now and it’s healthier that way.”

“But do you think I care for him?”

“Tesoro, you always cared for him, even when you thought you disliked him,” she replied, pinching the tip of my nose. “I remember the way you glared at me when Oliver didn’t turn up for dinner.”

“I had shaved just for him,” I confessed, laughing.

“Yes, and you’d put on your favourite shirt too,” she said, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

“He was trying to keep away from me.”

“That seldom works, especially when you’re constantly talking of the person you’re avoiding.”

“Did he?”

She nodded and I couldn’t believe, after four years, how happy that made me.

“Where’s Oliver?” Vimini asked, as she emerged from the kitchen, where she’d been helping
Mafalda to dice the ingredients for the *macedonia*, the fruit salad.

I was trying my new composition on the guitar, thinking of Celan’s desperation and his constant dissatisfaction with his artistic output; how he was wrongly accused of plagiarism, the manner of his death: I didn’t want the music to veer into Mahler territory, but rather to mirror the poet’s modernist style without falling into the trap of the purest avant-garde: that of being eccentric just for the sake of it.

“Bookshop,” I replied, distracted.

“Won’t he come back for lunch?”

“How is he doing?”

“Almost half past one,” she replied, sitting down on the grass next to my bench.

We hadn’t always had lunch during our stay, but since we were soon to be deprived of the Italian cuisine, we’d agreed to try and enjoy it as often as we could.

“Maybe he met one of our friends and got side-tracked.”

She wasn’t convinced.

“He’d have telephoned.”

“Remember how he used to disappear.”

“He had a reason.”

“You’re not suggesting—”

Vimini grimaced in a way that reminded me of Jack.

“No, he’s not trying to stay away from you, which is why I’m worried.”

My parents were sitting down at the table already and Mafalda was serving linguine with mussels.

“Mafalda said that she told Oliver she was making them just for him.”

I refused to show concern, but I knew I wouldn’t fool those who knew me well.

“I’m sure he must have a good reason,” said my father, “He knows many people in town and some of them are returning from their holidays. You know how it is: first they offer you an *aperitivo* then you buy them one and you lose track of time.”

“He loves the linguine,” Vimini intervened.

“They will keep,” said my mother, smiling, “They taste even better when you warm them up again.”

“We told Marzia and the others that we were joining them for a bike ride to Yvan’s farm.”

It was in fact Yvan’s brother who was renting the farm with his wife and another couple. We’d offered our help with the fruit picking, because Oliver hadn’t been able to resist once he’d found out they had an abundance of peaches.

“You owe them,” he’d said, smirking.
“I don’t even know Chiara’s boyfriend all that well,” I’d protested.

“I meant the peaches.”

I had punched him in the shoulder and we’d pretended to wrestle on the bed until we’d given up and made love instead.

“At what time?” my father asked.

“We are supposed to be meeting Marzia at three.”

“I’m sure he’ll be there.”

“You don’t think he fell off his bike like he did when he scraped his hip?”

I couldn’t wait until three, so after coffee I grabbed my bike and cycled to Crema.

The bookshop owner told me that, yes, Oliver had been there that morning. He’d purchased a few books but had not taken them along with him. Did I want them, he asked, but I shook my head. This reminded me too much of Armance, of Se L’Amore and our brief spell together before everything unravelled.

I would have scoffed if anybody had called me superstitious, but the combination of Oliver and Italian bookshops provoked an ache in my chest which I could not dispel.

In this case, the problem was made worse by the music coming out of a car parked outside.

_Sentivo che finiva_

_E il giorno ce l’avevo addosso già_

I felt it was over

And the day was upon me already

It was the song which had been playing the day Oliver left, when mum had gone to buy cigarettes. I had stared at the car radio and had wanted to smash it to smithereens. That same song had been playing in a bar a month before, when we were together, and now it was playing but Oliver was gone. Is there anything worse in life than knowing that the world is still turning while we are dying inside?

“Is Oliver here?” I asked Marzia, as soon as she opened the door. I didn’t even bother to say hello or kiss her on the cheek.

“No, why, what happened?”

I told her and she didn’t try to make light of it.
“That’s unlike him,” she said, offering me a cigarette. “Let’s phone Chiara and Momo or have you done that already?”

I shook my head.

“I didn’t think it would be necessary,” I said, which was true, since I had hoped to meet Oliver along the way or in the piazza.

She made a few phone calls but without results.

When we rang Villa Malaspina, Danilo told us that he’d seen Oliver outside the newsagents at around eleven; they had said hello, but Danilo hadn’t stopped because he was driving his mother to the train station.

“He can’t have disappeared without a trace,” Marzia said.

I had finished the first cigarette and was lighting the second one. My heart was in my throat and I felt cold, as if a vampire had sucked all my blood.

“Should we inform the carabinieri?”

“They can’t do a thing until he’s been gone for longer than just a few hours.”

“I’m not going to wait until tomorrow!”

I started pacing the room, feeling like the walls and ceiling were closing down on me. I hadn’t wanted to say it out loud – because it would become real - but I could no longer be silent.

“I was threatened by a gang of skinheads once. They called me names, but then Oliver came to my rescue. What if they saw him in town and decided to teach him a lesson?”

“I have never seen any skinheads around here.”

“Maybe they drive around looking for trouble.”

“Didn’t you report the incident?”

I told her what my father had said at the time, and it was obvious that our best course of action consisted in going back to mine. Marzia had told Chiara we weren’t going to Yvan’s, so that at least had been taken care of.

When we arrived home, my father was in his study.

He was sorting through his correspondence, but I could tell that he was worried.

“I spoke to Maresciallo Gardini at the time and he told me that they were aware of the problem. Unfortunately, there isn’t much they are allowed to do until the law has been broken. It’s always the same: something bad must happen for this sort of abuse to be taken seriously.”

He must have seen how terrified I was because he hastened to add:

“I’m sure this isn’t the case, Elli.”

My father never called me that unless he wanted to comfort me.
“What shall we do?”

“Let’s go find him.”

We spent a fruitless afternoon looking for him everywhere. Our friends came to give us a hand and even Vimini was allowed to join the search party. We asked around, we went to all the bars and shops he frequented, but Danilo seemed to be the last person who’d seen him.

“He was standing right here holding what looked like the Herald Tribune. He seemed perfectly fine,” our friend told us.

“I will go to see Gardini,” my father said, when evening came, “Even if he can’t initiate a search, he may have some useful advice.”

My mind had started to wander by that point: I found myself at home with Marzia and mum. They were urging me to drink some brandy or maybe it was whisky, but I refused to, since I wanted to be sober and awake. Vimini was sleeping on the couch, because she had refused to go home until she knew what had happened to Oliver.

The end of the day was upon me already, but was it over?
Oliver’s absence had given me a taste of what my life would be without him: it was like being stranded in a desert, the very air I breathed dense and gritty with the sands of memory and regret. I don’t remember sleeping at all that night, but perhaps I did and some of my recollections were only the fragments of a nightmare.

Dad had returned from his meeting with the Maresciallo, who had told him that he would advise his men to look out for Oliver, even though they couldn’t do anything officially yet. They had rung the local hospitals, but to no avail.

It was early in the morning, must have been only five, when I heard Anchise’s loud expostulations. He was in the garden talking to a gnarled elderly man I had never met before. I ran down the stairs and almost collided with Vimini, who was rubbing her eyes and smoothing down her bed-tousled hair.

“What do you mean: is he sick? Why didn’t you call an ambulance?” I asked, raising my voice.

At that point, I felt a hand squeeze my arm: it was my father. He looked pale and tired, but his smile was as warm as usual.

“I don’t think so, but I don’t want to touch him. You better come down there and have a look at him.”

I hadn’t even realised that I was wearing only my boxer shorts, while Vimini was fully dressed and ready to go.
When I came back down, mum handed me the first-aid kit and a bag which contained some fruit and a bottle of water. She kissed me on the forehead and hugged me.

The story was that Anchise’s friend, Giovanni, had woken up early to go fishing and when he’d removed the tarpaulin which covered the boat, he’d found a man underneath it. Initially, he’d thought about calling the police, until he’d recognised Oliver. He was hurt, that much Giovanni knew, but he’d been too scared to check his pulse or even just touch him to see whether he was alive.

“What did they do to him?” I asked, but my father just shook his head.

“Whoever did it, they’ll pay for it,” said Vimini, calmly. I turned to look at her, and her poise stunned me. She wasn’t a little girl any longer, but a determined, vengeful woman.

It wasn’t too far, it must have taken us no more than fifteen minutes to drive there, but the journey never seemed to end.

Giovanni had put his brother Luigi in charge of guarding the boat and its unwanted cargo and when we arrived, he was sitting on a rickety wooden chair, smoking a cigarette. Dad told him that Giovanni was eating breakfast at our house, so he just nodded and indicated the boat, before sitting back down.

“He’s alive,” he muttered, “He was talking in his sleep.”

I watched as Vimini and dad ran towards the boat, but I was rooted to the spot.

“Oliver, Oliver,” I kept repeating his name, as if it were a magic spell.

When I finally found the courage to go to him, I saw that his hair was matted with dried blood, that his cheekbones were bruised and one of his eyes swollen. The worst were his lips which were ruined in ways my minds didn’t want to dwell upon.

“He’s been beaten up, but I don’t think it’s as serious as it looks,” dad said.

“Oliver, please wake up,” said Vimini, caressing his face, tender as I had never seen her. I bent down and kissed his ear. “I’m so sorry,” I said, and tried in vain to fight back the tears. Dad laid out the first aid kit and soaked a flannel with mineral water and disinfectant.

“I’ll do it,” I said, and while I was cleaning Oliver’s cuts and grazes, his eyelids flickered.

“Elio,” he tried to say, but his voice sounded odd.

“Don’t talk,” said my father, who was now instructing Luigi to go call an ambulance.

“You will be alright, don’t worry,” said Vimini, holding Oliver’s large hand between her tiny ones.

He made as if to smile, but something hurt him so much that his entire face was distorted by a grimace.

“What’s wrong with his mouth?” I asked, looking at my father; he shook his head.

“Oliver, do you think you can open your mouth?”

He tried and tried, but in vain. I was terrified; even the relief I had felt at finding him alive was dissipating as I witnessed his suffering.
“I don’t know what to do, please tell me what to do,” I murmured, close to his ear.

“Not taken it,” he managed to say, and finally his lips parted and a gush of blood came out together with a metallic object which I recognised as my Star of David.

I stared at it and then at him and was about to break down when Vimini kicked me hard in the shin.

“What the hell?”

“That’s better,” she said, nodding.

“He must have met those boys,” said my father, who was now assessing the state of Oliver’s mouth, “They saw him and the Star and gave him a beating. They must have pulled the chain until it snapped. Is that what happened?” he asked, and Oliver nodded. There was a large red welt on his neck, crusted and inflamed.

“It’s my fault,” I said, and it was, because if I had reported the incident like he’d told me to, this horror wouldn’t have happened. Oliver’s hand sought mine and his fingers caressed my palm; he was trying to reassure me, I realised. What a snivelling child I was, making this entire ordeal about myself. Vimini had been right to kick me: I’d better pull myself together, since this wasn’t the moment to give in to melodrama.

“The ambulance is on its way,” I said, kissing his cheek. “You will be all right, I promise.”

On his lips was the ghost of a smile and his eyes fell shut.

In the evening of the following day Oliver was released from hospital.

They had injected, prodded, x-rayed and disinfected him: the soft tissue inside his mouth had been punctured in several places by the points of the Star of David- my Star – as he’d tried to keep it safe without swallowing it while he was being slapped and kicked.

Two things had saved his life: one, that the thugs had probably been afraid of causing serious or even fatal injuries to an American citizen, and two, that the car they were driving was stolen so they were racing against time.

They had pushed Oliver out of the running car not far from Giovanni’s boat, which is where he’d decided to lie down to regain his strength, but when there he’d fainted and drifted in and out of consciousness until Giovanni found him.

Luckily, Oliver had memorised the number plate, certain that the car, a red Golf, couldn’t possibly belong to any of the young men.

The theft had been reported by the car owner before they’d abducted Oliver and since they had added one crime to another, and on top of that they were careless and drove like maniacs, they were easily apprehended by the Carabinieri as they attempted to speed through a roadblock.

Our friends were in shock, not only because this ordeal had happened to someone they knew and loved, but also because such sordid crimes had never taken place so close to them. Sure, one did read about them in the papers, but never before had they pierced the safety bubble inside which our lives went on, day by day, as if in splendid isolation, far away from the squalor and deprivation of the
underclass.
We had been too lucky and this was perhaps a timely reminder that there was a reality out there over
which we had little or no control.

“Are you thirsty?” I asked him.

Oliver shook his head and looked away.
He was already at the stage of his convalescence when he couldn’t stand people fussing about his
wellbeing. He was fine, he kept muttering, and he insisted everybody should go about their business
as if nothing had happened.
Vimini had finally been forced to go home, and judging by her father’s worried expression she
probably wouldn’t be allowed back for a while.
As for me, Oliver was keeping me at arm's length. He asked if I could read to him, but he couldn’t
bear poetry, he requested something by Henry James, if possible. Why him, I enquired. He had never
expressed a preference for James.
He shrugged his shoulders and I didn’t insist. As I read the intricate prose of The Golden Bowl,
dense as it was with elaborate descriptions of things and people, it came to me: he wanted cold,
cerebral prose, as detached as possible from the viciousness of what had happened. Poetry meant
emotion, but James’ novel was as distant from it as the earth from the moon.
He fell asleep as I was starting the second chapter.
“I got you something to eat,” said my mother, who had come in with a tray which I took from her
hands and placed on the desk. Oliver was only allowed to drink through a straw, so there were soup
and fruit juices as well as a plate of spaghetti with tuna for me. As a kid, it had been my favourite
dish, so mum always prepared it for me when times were bleak. Proust and his madeleine have a lot
to answer for.
We left the room and sat down on the bench outside.
“How is he?” she asked.
“Fine, I think, but he doesn’t want to talk about it yet.”
“He doesn't want to think about it and probably wishes you’d do the same.”
“Where is dad?”
“At the Casaerma, speaking to Gardini again. They will need a signed statement from Oliver, but it’s
more of a formality since one of the boys broke down and confessed. He’s only seventeen,” she
shook her head, looking pained.
“They did that to him because he’s Jewish,” I said, and she covered my Star of David with the palm
of her hand. “Dad told us what happened to you two in Austria.”
“Don’t let it get to you.”
“But you stopped wearing it.”
“Maybe I was wrong. I was only thinking of you.”

“And I am thinking of him,” I said, and let her take me into her arms. “Those boys knew we were together, that he was my boyfriend. Maybe if he had been with a girl the first time we met them, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“You don’t know that and anyway you can’t blame yourself for the bigotry of other people.”

“Maybe it would be better if he’d never met me.”

She caressed my hair for a while.

“You’re lucky Vimini is not here or she would have slapped you.”

“This morning she kicked me,” I chuckled, “It hurt.”

“She was so annoyed with her father for taking her away.”

“If I were those boys, I’d be very afraid.”

We smiled at the thought, and as some of the tension dissolved, I suddenly felt very tired.

“I think I’ll go to bed now; I’m exhausted.”

“Drink some of the soup at least; Mafalda prepared enough for two.”

“Okay,” I replied, but she knew I wasn’t going to.

We said goodnight and I went back to Oliver. I lay down next to him, closed my eyes and listened to every breath he took until I fell asleep too.
“Would you like to talk about it?”

I cannot count how many times I heard that question in the days which followed the incident.

The only one who did not ask was Vimini: she offered to play cards, read me the Sole 24Ore, help her fill in the daily crossword; she spoke about Jennifer and Fede, about Mafalda’s cooking, anything that would distract me, and I loved her for that.

She managed to escape her parents’ clutches by telling them a half-truth, that in two days we would be gone and she would spend more time at home with them. In fact, we’d been forced to re-book our flights, adding another week to our stay.

I did not want to answer that question, because I wasn’t sure what I would say and where the reply would take me. They certainly expected me to say that I had been terrified or at least afraid, that I hated what those thugs had done to me and the reasons which have prompted their assault: I couldn’t affirm any of that, at least not completely.

There was a part of me which believed I had brought it upon myself, because I had introduced my careless American arrogance to Elio’s world, and it had smashed it like the proverbial bull in a china shop.

“That might work for your mother,” I’d said about Elio’s being a 'Jew of discretion', and here I was, chastised and humbled, like I deserved to be.

They could have done that to Elio, I kept thinking, and maybe because he wasn’t as strong as I was, he could have died of it; died because I once smirked at his mother’s caution, at her desire to protect her only son; died because of me: the mere idea made me retch.

I couldn’t be close to Elio, not the way he wanted to be. If I let him get too near, he would read me like the book of misfortune that I was.

“Does it hurt so much?” he asked when I shrunk away from his touch.

“Yeah,” I replied, closing my eyes.

“Vimini hugged you earlier,” he said, as it became clear to him that I was lying.

“I couldn’t stop her.”
“She wouldn’t hug you if she knew it’d hurt.”

Silence.

“Are you angry with me?”

“Of course not,” I replied, avoiding his gaze, “Read me another bit of Henry James?”

“Okay,” he said, and we spent the next hour distracted by fictive problems.

Naturally, it couldn’t last.

“You should have let them take it,” he said that evening after dinner. I was still bedridden, but had already decided to put a stop to it, starting from the following day.

“Would you have, in my place?”

He thought about it for a while.

“I don’t know,” he replied, “Maybe, if I had been really afraid for my life.”

“I wasn’t.”

Elio looked stunned.

“They meant to hurt you, they could have killed you.”

“I wasn’t really there.”

I hadn’t meant to say that, but it slipped out.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Tell me what you meant.”

I looked away and let out a sigh, which turned into a hiss: the inside of my cheek stung like hell.

“The usual coping mechanism of being detached from what’s hurting you in the present: the victims of torture often resort to that.”

His face crumpled: perhaps I shouldn’t have phrased it that way.

“It was my fault wasn’t it? I know it was,” he whispered.

“Don’t be silly. I just forgot how much hate there is out there. I thought we’d be safe here, but that kind of idyllic place doesn’t really exist in reality, does it?”

“Why won’t you let me touch you?”

“I need to figure things out.”

His cheeks turned pale, translucent as wax.

“You aren’t going to leave me, are you?”
I shook my head, tried not to reach out.

“Couldn’t if I wanted to.”

“Wanting to would be bad enough for me.”

He bit his lips, like he was going to cry.

“I’ll never want to, you know that.”

“I don’t know anything at this point.”

“Well, here goes: I will always want to be with you, always. That’ll never change.”

We locked eyes for a while then he nodded and retrieved The Golden Bowl from the desk; when he started reading, his soft curls tumbling down on his forehead, he looked so young and frail, even more so than Vimini.

“You can have a word?” Samuel asked.

It was late in the evening and Elio was downstairs preparing camomile tea.

“Please, come in,” I said, suspecting what I was about to hear.

He sat on the mahogany chair and gazed at the books on the desk.

“Henry James is helping, I gather, by being the polar opposite of what you encountered: extreme refinement as opposed to crass brutality.”

Of course he’d understood, like he always did.

“Yes, and the language is ornate and intricate as lace-work.”

“Ornate and cold,” he concurred, smiling.

He made to light a cigarette but stopped mid-gesture.

“Does the smoke bother you?”

“On the contrary,” I replied, and he offered me one. Elio preferred I didn’t smoke until I was fully recovered, but I felt like I needed a prop to get through that conversation.

“I won’t keep you long,” he started, “I only wanted you to know that we are here for you, no matter what you decide. Elio is our son, but you are our son too. When you left four years ago, I advised Elio to never suppress the pain he was feeling. Yours is no heartache, I know, but the principle is the same. Those boys, they ripped something out of you and you have every right to feel angry, disgusted and every other feeling which is troubling your soul. If you don’t let these feelings out, they’ll only fester and those delinquents will have accomplished even more than what they’d planned.”

My heart was thumping in my ears and my throat was tight.

He surely saw it, that I was about to cry, because he left after having squeezed my hand.
When he opened the door, Elio was on the other side of it, a mug of tea held in both his hands.

“I’ll drink it without the straw,” I said, and he sat on the bed, unsure whether he should help me. “I’ll manage.”

“What did he say?”

“He was only trying to make me feel better.”

“Doesn’t look like he succeeded,” he said, with a bitter smile.

“How so?”

“You know what I mean, but never mind.”

“No, please, say what you have to say.”

He drew a deep breath and run a nervous hand through his curls.

“You are upset and of course you have every right to feel this way, but I feel like I am not welcome here, like you’d rather be on your own, so if you do, just tell me and I’ll go sleep in the room next door. I don’t mind: after all, it will be like being back to the time when you treated me like I was invisible.”

He was breathing hard and he had a tight smile on his lips which meant that he was desperately trying to keep it together.

“Sorry, sorry, I shouldn’t have said any of it. It’s just that I was hoping you’d let me...”

“Take care of me?”

He shook his head, tugged at his hair in frustration.

“I was hoping that I would be the one person you’d let in. If it were allowed, I would already be your husband or have you changed your mind about that too?”

“Stop doing that, you’ll ruin your hair.”

“I don’t give a fuck about my hair!”

He seldom swore outside of bed and the way he’d shouted it combined with the absurdity of the situation made me laugh. He glared at me, but it wasn’t long before he joined in.

After a while, I reached out to tuck a curl behind his ear; my fingers lingered on his neck then down to his collarbone and his shoulder.

“What do you want?” I asked, sensing his tension; he wanted to lean into my touch but didn’t know if it was allowed.

“You, I want you,” he whispered, and the tears that had threatened to spill when Samuel had offered his support, finally broke through my walls of manufactured indifference.

“Don’t cry,” I heard him say, through my sobs, “It’s okay Oliver, it’s okay,” he repeated, holding me close and dotting my face with kisses.

“I’m such a fraud,” I said, when the worst was over, “I did to you what I have always begged you
not to do to me.”

“I don’t think you are a fraud,” he murmured, pressing his cheek against mine and caressing me everywhere he could reach. “You were very brave and I admire you for it.”

“Do you?”

“Hmm.”

He had taken hold of my hand and was kissing it.

“I hate that it should have happened here, but at least you weren’t with me.”

“And I can’t stand the thought that you were alone. I have nightmares of you left for dead inside that stupid boat.”

I didn’t know how to comfort him, except for giving him what he needed.

“Do you want to know what happened?”

“Only if you feel like talking about it.”

I spent the next few hours lying in Elio’s arms, telling him everything I remembered, every detail of what I’d experienced, my thoughts and emotions, even the seemingly insignificant details. He held my hand throughout even though I could feel him tremble from time to time.

“Sleep now,” he said, when I was done.

“Won’t I be too heavy?” I asked, since I was half-sprawled on top of him.

“Sleep,” he repeated, and I did.

Two days later I was well enough to sit outside in the garden. I was still black and blue, but the worst of it was gone. Even my mouth was better and I had started eating solids again.

Samuel drove me to the Caserma where the proceedings went as he had anticipated: I showed them my documents, was asked a few questions, shown photographs, and finally given a typewritten account of my ordeal, which I dutifully signed.

It was brief and painless, but I was glad when it was over. I had asked Elio not to come with us, because I didn’t want him involved; he wasn’t happy, but I told him that we’d probably have to face this sort of things again in the future, so I’d rather spare him while I could.

We had a long way ahead of us, I told him, and it won’t be all sunshine and heaven.

“I think I will get on with my Celan piece,” he said, and I understood that it was his way of telling me that it was okay, that he could deal with that.

“I can’t understand why you are so in love with Rimbaud,” said Vimini, point-blank. We were basking in the pleasant late-afternoon sunshine, reading books and drinking mint-flavoured granitas.

“What?” Elio muttered, removing his sunglasses and stretching his arms above his head.
“Rimbaud, why do you like him so much?”

“Are you serious?”

“He was a vicious, violent teenager who hated everything and everyone, and ruined the life of those who cared for him.”

“We love his art, not his character,” I intervened.

“I think you wouldn’t have loved him as much if he’d been a nice person.”

“Maybe not,” said Elio, “But what does it matter?”

Vimini cast him a glance which made me smile broadly. It was her trademark ‘you really are an idiot after all’ look.

“Those boys, if one of them wrote the most amazing verses in the world, then what? Would you forgive him for what he did to Oliver?”

“No, but that’s different.”

“The only difference is the passing of time. Time is a terrible thing,” she said, and since it was true, we stayed silent, watching the death of yet another day.
And we have reached the end...

Prepare for a ton of fluff and some smut.

You have been amazing and I love you all.
Sending love and light your way <333

Edit: I am planning to write about their Xmas in Paris. I didn't mean to, but my mind goes its own mysterious ways...

Chapter Notes

Starts with Oliver's POV, ends with Elio's POV

“Will you tell Judith?”

“I don’t think so, no. What would be the point? She would worry for nothing.”

“What if she finds out from Jack? News travel fast.”

“Jack wouldn’t tell her.”

“You seem to know my cousin better than I do.”

“He’s an open book.”

It was the night before our last full day in Italy and we were in the same spot where we’d been on our first evening, among the pomegranate trees.

“You said it was almost like walking in a dream,” Elio said, reading my mind, “And now it’s all been ruined.”

I cradled his face in my hands and kissed the tip of his nose.

“Nothing’s been ruined; this is still a slice of heaven.”

He pulled me closer and smirked.

“What?” I asked, even though I knew what he had in mind.

“It didn’t take long to revive.”
“I have no idea what you are referring to.”

“This,” he replied, palming my erection through my shorts. “It’s back at last.”

The medications I had been prescribed had an unpleasant side effect, especially considering that my desire for Elio remained undimmed. Thankfully, I was done with most of them, except for the occasional tablet of pain-killer.

“Back with a vengeance,” I said, circling my hips.

He kissed me lightly on the lips and murmured, “I want to be inside you.”

“You do?” I gasped; his fingers were rubbing the head of my dick and I had trouble staying upright.

“Hmm, and not only with my cock,” he replied, licking my parted lips, but avoiding my tongue.

“What dirty mouth you have, my dear.”

“Not as dirty as it’s going to be.”

We heard a noise in the distance and it startled us, but it was only the cry of an owl.

I wrapped him in my arms and kissed his forehead. The mood had been broken, but not spoiled. I knew that we would recapture it once we’d returned to our room.

“At night, this place is so solitary it can get frightening,” he said. “I remember once my friends and I went to the cinema. I must have been about ten years old. We went to see Profondo Rosso, Deep Red: ever heard of it?”

I shook my head.

“It’s an Italian mystery slash horror film, with a terrific and terrifying score. I will play it for you one day.”

“Were you scared?”

“Out of my mind,” he chuckled, “And when I returned home, the house was in total darkness. I was going to run to my bedroom and didn’t notice Mafalda, who was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs. She touched my arm and I was so frightened I couldn’t even scream. I nearly fainted, poor Mafalda.”

“No horror movies for you then.”

“I’m not a child now.”

“I’ll rent that film then and we’ll watch it together.”

He shivered and I squeezed him tighter.

“Maybe not,” he replied, burying his face in my neck.

“My impressionable baby,” I joked.

“You never called me that before.”

“I was saving it for the right moment.”
“I would have thought-”

“What, that I would use it in bed? Nah, it would be too predictable.”

“Oh, he agreed, “But what about other silly names?”

I pulled back to gaze into his eyes.

“Don’t think we need them.”

He stared and stared then looked away: he was blushing.

“You’re right, we don’t.”

His mouth on me was more than just a slice of heaven.

I had wondered whether he would be cautious and polite, but he did the exact opposite: he prised open my apricot and ground his face into its crease, his tongue lapping everywhere, while his lips latched on the rim, sucking hard; our combined moans and cries added another layer of bliss to the insane pleasure I was feeling.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” he said, but the adrenaline was overriding any ache I might have felt.

I stroked his neck and his chest, and held him by the hips as he pushed into me.

“I missed this so much,” he whispered, his voice thick with unspent tears.

“Me too, so much,” I replied, feeling already on the brink of orgasm.

“I can never get close enough,” he sobbed and I nodded, pulling him down so that I could revel in the mingled scents of sweat and sex.

I was holding all that beauty in my arms, inside and outside, all over me: I couldn’t last very long.

“Oliver,” he shouted, when he came soon after, and I repeated my name over and over again, seeking complete fusion and, for a moment, convinced that we’d finally achieved it.

Later, he took care of me, made sure I wasn’t hurt, cleaned me up and forced me to swallow an aspirin couplet.

“I am not a wounded soldier.”

“In way, that’s what you are.”

I licked the salt off his throat, heaving a contented sigh.

“Should I call you doctor or nurse?”

He laughed.

“No silly names in bed, you said.”

“Maybe we could make an exception: extraordinary circumstances and all that.”
“You can call me all the names you want,” he said, ruffling my hair.

The illumination which I had not yet chosen to share with Elio had turned into a firm decision and perhaps - I thought - that was the time and the place to tell him about it.

“Listen,” I started, looking into his lustrous eyes, “I don’t think we should move to Denmark. I wouldn’t mind visiting or even staying for a while if you fancy it, but settling there would be too daunting, don’t you think? Our friends are all over the map, that’s true, but our life is in London.”

“And you don’t believe we could be happy elsewhere?”

“Of course, but we’ve already more than our fair share of obstacles to look forward to without adding an abstruse language to the pile.”

I wasn’t really making a good fist of it.

“You don’t want a civil partnership,” he said, tight-lipped.

“Yes, of course I’d like that, but I also want us to live in a city we love, the city where we’ve met again and decided to be together.”

“And what if my job took us away from London? If I choose to be a musician, I will have to travel.”

“That’s different and you know that I have no objections to moving around a bit. But that’s not all I wanted to say.”

“It isn’t?” he asked, with a hint of sarcasm.

That was one of the most important moments in our lives and I wanted to get this right, so I did what I had done that summer afternoon, when Elio had shown me the things that really mattered: I traced his lips with my fingers until he opened his mouth and sucked them inside.

“There’s one very simple thing I can do and it’s absurd that I never thought about it before. The first night in your bed, when I made you mine, I asked you to do something, remember?”

He nodded.

“You asked me to call you by my name.”

“Yes,” I replied, and realised I was close to tears.

“I don’t understand,” he said, and his frown was so reminiscent of Jack’s it made me smile.

“I would like to take your name. As a US citizen, I can do that by deed poll. It’s a long procedure, lots of forms to fill in, but it’s still easier than learning Danish.”

“But won’t you mind?”

“Do married women mind when they take their husband’s name?”

“People will think we are related.”

“Yep, they may well assume that we are brothers.”

He smiled and brushed his cheek against mine.
“My brother, my lover, my husband, my friend,” he whispered.

“All of it and more.”

“Oliver Perlman,” he said, testing it for the first time.

It sounded like the name I should have been born with and perhaps this way a new life would begin.

I woke up early and Oliver was still asleep.

The discoloured bruises on his face and body likened him to a boxer but he was peaceful in his sleep, his worry lines utterly erased and the fringe of his lashes untroubled by even the slightest tremor. He wasn’t dreaming then, I pondered, and why would he be, when reality was surpassing fantasy?

I left him there and went to the bathroom; the light outside was that livid shade which precedes dawn.

Was I sorry to leave Italy and return to London? I guess I was, a bit, because like most people I don’t like endings: the end of a holiday, the end of summer, the end of an era.

Why does everything have to be finite, I wondered idly, and smiled, thinking of Riccardo and his favourite Foucault theory: the concept that a discourse was never initiated or concluded, but that it went on forever and we were only jumping in the midst of it, like rope skippers. It was a soothing thought, which suggested continuity rather than rupture.

“What are you doing?”

Oliver had appeared behind me, startling me.

“Staring in the mirror,” I replied, leaning back into him.

“What does it say, are you the fairest of them all?”

He wrapped his arms around my torso and smiled at my reflection.

“Did you really mean it?”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything.”

I grinned back at him.

“They will call your Professor Perlman, like my father.”

“Sick and twisted enough for you?”

“You have no idea.”

We joked for a while then did what we had to do and went back to bed.

“What will happen with your books?”

“I will have to discuss it with my publisher, but I suppose it’s best to leave things as they are. After all, authors adopt pen names all the time.”

“Makes perfect sense,” I agreed.
“Can’t wait to tell our friends,” he said, as his hand travelled up and down my thigh.

“Pierre’s head is going to explode. I’m still going to take Danish lessons though: Petri needs the money and anyway I like learning new things.”

He tickled the inside of my thigh until the prickling morphed into lust. I spread my legs wide; he took the hint and a few moments later he’d taken me fully inside his mouth.

The picture we were making was nearly as arousing as his tongue on my dick: I, sitting with my back against the bedstead, open-mouthed, moaning wantonly, and Oliver, going down on me like a savage, his powerful hands on my groin, stroking my balls, holding the base of my cock; the noises of suction, his saliva dripping on my sac; his hips pumping wildly as he chased his own release; his dishevelled hair, the soaked fur on his chest, the glistening sweep of his back: every single part of this was dear to me, and I would never lose it or misplace it, because Oliver was the key to my innermost self.

“You two look very happy,” mum said, when we finally joined them at the breakfast table, “I hope it’s not because you are leaving us.”

My father was there too, and he swiftly folded his newspaper to give us his undivided attention.

“Oliver wants to,” I started, but my throat suddenly closed up.

It was he who told them, going into detail even though my mother had already stopped listening and was hugging him tight enough to choke him.

My dad was silent, but his eyes were bright and when he lighted a cigarette, his fingers were unsteady.

“How’s a very special day,” he said, squeezing Oliver’s arm.

We drank coffee and ate toasted bread with apricot jam; he ate his egg, which I had sliced open for him; I longed for his bare foot on mine, but that unfulfilled desire only made that instant even more memorable.

“I have something for you,” said Vimini, looking up at Oliver, “But you have to promise not to get all sentimental about it.”

He chuckled.

“I will be cool and distant, but I cannot vouch for Elio.”

We were apricating on deck-chairs and she was sitting on the grass. I had my sunglasses on and was pretending to read a book, but in fact I’d been stuck on the same page for a while.

“Well, here it is. My grandmother gave it to me for my First Communion, but it’s too long for me. She gave me a shorter one with a golden cross which I never wear, but that’s another matter.”

It was a delicate gold chain to replace the one that had been ripped from Oliver’s neck. He kept the Star in his wallet and I hadn’t wanted to ask what he planned to do with it.

“It’s pretty,” he said, doing his utmost not to be moved to tears. “I will never take it off,” he added.
There was a bit of fumbling and when I turned to look, the Star, my Star of David, was resting against his sternum. I wanted to kiss it, to lick it, and with it the skin and hair which would always touch it.

“It’s a lovely present,” I said, unsure whether I should hug her or maybe just shake her hand, but then I had an idea.

“Wait for me here.”

“We aren’t going anywhere,” Oliver said.

I dashed upstairs and came back with my offering.

“This is for you,” I said, handing her my Polaroid camera. “I’ll buy another one at the airport or back in London.”

She took it and, to disguise her emotion, she said:

“I’m going to take a photo of you two together.”

Oliver cheek brushed against mine and his arm curled around my waist.

A couple of minutes later she showed it to us: sun-reddened faces, freckled noses and wide, beatific smiles.

Elio and Oliver Perlman, Northern Italy, summer of 1987.

“I can’t believe that we are all here,” Marzia said, glancing at our group of friends: some frolicking in the water, others disseminated along the grassy bank of the river.

“All but Riccardo, Fede and Jack,” Vimini corrected.

“I wonder how things are going in Croatia,” Chiara intervened, taking a breather from her make-out session with Yvan.

“I spoke to Fede on the phone,” said Vimini, and we all turned to stare at her, even Oliver who, apparently had not been informed either. She returned his surprised gaze, “It only just happened, she called at lunchtime. It’s not like it’s a secret or anything. She said that Jack spoke to their parents and announced that Judith is going to London with him. I don’t think he wanted to tell them, but they asked and he’d never lie.”

Chiara whistled but Marzia glared at her.

“Sorry,” she said and went back to kissing her boyfriend.

“How do you feel about it?” Marzia asked Oliver.

“Well, at least I’m going to see her more often than I have in the last ten years. She barely knows me as I am now.”

“And you don’t know her,” I said, and he smiled at me.

“Apparently not,” he conceded, “But then again she’d never met anyone like Jack before.”
“Well, at least she didn't meet Riccardo,” said Vimini.

We all agreed that it was a good thing that Riccardo hadn’t been there when Judith arrived, for heaven knows what he would have done in order to compete with Jack.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t come to London,” Oliver said, making us laugh.

“You are still coming to Paris for Christmas right?” Marzia enquired.

“Can’t wait,” I said, thinking that by then Oliver would probably travel under his new name, my name.

“I wish I could see Paris,” said Vimini.

“You can come too,” Marzia said, “There’s plenty of room and you could invite Fede to come with you.”

I had never seen Vimini so animated.

“Can I really?”

“If your parents let you, yes, of course.”

She waved a dismissive hand.

“I’ll deal with them,” she replied.

“Maybe we should just rent a big palazzo and invite everybody,” Yvan suggested.

We all looked at him, as if we’d never expected him to come up with an intelligent idea, and perhaps we hadn’t.

“Why not?” said Oliver, “We can discuss it with Momo and the others later.”

The Moreschis were holding a drinks reception in Oliver’s honour that night, partly to bid us goodbye, but also to celebrate his recovery.

“Discuss what?” asked Momo, who’d come to fetch his beach towel.

Oliver and Marzia told him and he loved the idea.

“I’ll ask Danilo, but better not tell Riccardo, don’t you think? Although I doubt he will be in Europe by then. His brother mentioned he was going to Mexico.”

“Why Mexico?”

“Guess.”

Drugs, I thought, and I saw that we’d all reached the same conclusion even if no one said it out loud.

“It’s a plan then,” Oliver stated, to general acclaim.

Maybe Judith would come too, I wondered, but couldn’t imagine Jack coming to Paris with us. He might surprise me, though; after all he always did.
The day of our departure the sky was an unblemished blue and the cicadas were out in force to bid us farewell.

My parents drove us to the airport, and since they too had agreed to come to Paris for Christmas it wouldn’t be long before we saw them again.

“Professor Perlman,” Oliver joked, as he hugged my father.

“Right back at you,” was the reply, and we all laughed.

“Oliver, my love, take care,” said my mother, holding him in her arms.

“Why am I getting no hugs?” I pretended to grouse.

“Come here, you silly boy,” dad said, as he and mum enclosed me and Oliver in a collective embrace.

“Call us when you land,” they said then they kissed us and were gone.

“This is so much better than last time,” Oliver said, brushing the back of his hand against mine.

“And why is that?” I mocked.

“Oh I don’t know, let’s see: back then I was heartbroken and lonely and now I am with you and deliriously happy.”

“Deliriously?”

“Yeah, it does feel a bit like I’m dreaming.”

“Maybe you are.”

“In that case, please don’t wake me.”

“I won’t,” I replied and, making sure no one was watching, I kissed his smiling lips.

End Notes

If you’ve enjoyed the story, please let me know. I worship kudos/comments ha ha Much lovexxxxxxx

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!