Maktub

by Eva Marlowe

Summary

Maktub is Arabic for “it is written”.

I could have titled it Paris, but then again why be boring?
Elio’s POV to start with, but Oliver’s too, at some point.

Please note that I have been to Paris, but I haven’t lived there so I am bound to make mistakes for which apologize in advance.

Enjoy it more for the fun of it than for the historical accuracy.

Cole Porter’s I Love Paris by Les Negresses Vertes put me in the mood before I started writing this story.

The usual warnings apply: please do not copy or repost my work anywhere else without my explicit permission.

I do not own these characters, but boy do they own me.

Notes

I started with the boys still in London, because I wanted to give some context to their time in Paris. Also, because I love to spend time with them, in case you haven't figured that out yet.
ha ha.

The chapter contains information about works of art and as far as I know it is all correct. Latham's Burial of Count Orgaz is currently on display at Tate Britain. As for Peter Eaton, he was a committed socialist, a Women's Lib militant and a great art and book collector.

Edit: thanks to my lovely reader lothlorien (numan_baba) who pointed out that in Turkish Mektup means letter. I feel a bit like Oliver with his Philology 101 lols.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Letter

“So now you are a being

I knew as someone else”

Paul Celan

It truly felt real only when I saw the letter: it was from the London Review of Books, nothing important, just one of their monthly bulletins. The name on the envelope, printed out in their distinctive typeface, was Prof. Oliver Perlman.

It was a day in late September, a little less than a year to the day when I had chanced upon Oliver at the Blitz.

I had been told that it would feel different, but I had not believed it. What could change from one day to the next? We were lovers and friends, we shared a flat and a bed, we told each other everything, held no secrets back, and Oliver’s name change was hardly a surprise. And yet seeing it in black and white did something to me: it filled me with pride, excitement and possessiveness.

As soon as we’d come back from Italy, Oliver had decided to grow a beard and to work harder at the gym: no doubt he wanted to put the incident behind him, make sure that he could take care of himself and of me, look even bigger and stronger.

The results were spellbinding: his was now a rugged beauty which turned even more heads, and because he was both happy and oblivious, he attracted men and women like never before.

That afternoon we’d agreed to meet in Russell Square and when I got there I saw him talk to a leggy blonde in a skirt as minuscule as the shorts Oliver had worn back in Italy. He had not spotted me yet and was discussing something with great animation, his eyes shining with merriment: I knew I had no reason to be jealous, but I couldn’t help it.

“Elio,” he called out, as soon as he saw me, and I smiled at him. He introduced me to her, she was a student named Clara. She was French and he had thought she could maybe teach him the language, he told me later, after she’d left.

I nodded, said nothing.

“Not plain enough for you?” he mocked.

“She looks like a model,” I said, bitterer than I’d intended.

“I hadn’t noticed,” he replied, and I snorted.

“Think I’m joking? I couldn’t tell you what she was wearing if you paid me.”

“That’s because there wasn’t much on her at all. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was in the first stages of hypothermia.”

He laughed, throwing his head back, showing off his now-bristly throat.
“That bad?” he asked, still chuckling, “Well, she’s from Brittany, maybe she’s used to the cold.”

I glared at him, which made him laugh even harder.

“I mentioned our future trip to Paris and she was giving me advice.”

“We don’t need her advice,” I muttered, “We already know where we’ll be going.”

He glanced at me, bit his lips.

“I can’t believe you are still jealous,” he whispered.

I wasn’t going to deny it.

“Do you mind?” I asked, instead.

He shook his head.

“That cellist at the Queen Elizabeth Hall the other night wanted to carry you home together with his instrument,” he said, “If you’d let him.”

“We were only talking about my work on Celan; he seemed interested.”

“I’m sure he was,” he smirked, “I could tell by the way he stared at your lips.”

“I can’t believe you are still jealous,” I threw back at him.

“I am the one taking your name,” he said, softly.

I wanted to kiss him, but there were too many people around us.

“I informed the powers that be at work: they were very understanding. Mountains of paperwork, but where there’s a will, as the saying goes,” he told me, as soon as we sat down on the upper deck of the 205 bus.

I held his hand and kissed him briefly on the lips: I was more daring because we were sitting at the front and the bus was half-empty.

“I hope it’ll be worth it, despite all the trouble.”

“Goose,” he replied, bringing my fingers to his face and grazing them with his scruff. He knew I liked that very much and that later I would beg for more.

“What do you think of this?” Edmund asked, as the three of us stood in front of what looked like a charred collection of objects stuck to the vertical surface of a blackened billiard table.

The curator of the exhibition and a friend of Petri’s, Edmund was a gay boy who’d moved from Devon to London to study and come out of the closet.

The Lisson was a prestigious gallery and he was nervous since this was his first major assignment.

“We got this one on loan from the Tate, while the others are all new works. This is called Burial of Count Orgaz,” he said, brushing a hand through his fashionably unkempt ginger mane.

“It’s inspired by El Greco’s painting, I suppose,” I said.
“Latham got his books from Peter Eaton’s shop in Holland Park. I’ve convinced him to show us his Sandys, but we’ll have to drive to Lilies.”

It was Jack’s voice and as usual I had no idea what he was talking about.

“How did you do that?” marvelled Edmund, who to my utter surprise, appeared to know and understand my cousin.

“Eaton’s a Women’s Lib militant and a socialist,” Jack replied, as if that explained anything. A few steps behind him, Judith was talking to her son.

We hadn’t seen them since Italy, but I knew that Oliver had spoken to his mother on the phone and I had heard about my cousin from Pierre: they were busy, inseparable and very private. When I had enquired about Akiko, Pierre had shrugged his shoulders: no idea, except they were still going ahead with the business venture.

I tried hard not to stare, but Judith was a changed woman: she had lost weight and looked even taller, her hair was shorter and wavy, but not as severely styled as before; she was wearing an oversized black jacket over a pair of coral slim-line trousers; her lipstick was the same shade of red and there was mascara on her eyelashes. Watching her as she stood close to Oliver, it was hard to believe that she was old enough to be his mother.

“We are not coming to Paris,” Jack said, once Edmund had gone back to his duties.

“I doubted you would. What about the Sandys you mentioned earlier?”

“A painting of Judith that Eaton acquired during the war.”

I should have imagined something of the sort, considering my cousin’s penchant for obsessive thoroughness.

“And he will show it to you because?”

“Because of Judith,” he replied, looking at me like Vimini usually did: with affectionate scorn.

“It is serious then,” I said, “You and Oliver’s mother, I mean.”

“Sounds like a disease.”

I wanted to ask whether she was another one of his mad experiments, but it was none of my business and he would have had every reason to tell me off.

“I’m going to the States for Christmas.”

“Meeting the family?” I asked, trying not to smile.

“Haven’t seen our great-aunt in ages,” he replied, “I don’t think she’d recognise me if I knocked at her door.”

That was all the information I was going to get from him, so I didn’t insist.

“Did you know that we would be here tonight?”

“You wouldn’t miss Edmund’s big opening. He needs a smoke, I think.”

“Can’t have a joint while he’s working.”
“You’d be surprised,” he said, before ditching me and making a beeline for Edmund.

“You weren’t kidding,” said Petri, who’d just arrived and smelled of ale and London pollution.

“What about?”

“Oliver’s mother looking like him: if he shaved that fuzz, they could pass for twins. He’d have to lose some of the muscle too. What’s going on with that, by the way?”

I hadn’t told him about the incident in Italy because Oliver preferred not to speak of it.

“Just keeping fit.”

“He’s gonna crush you, if you’re not careful,” he joked, “You bruise like a peach,” he added, which made me laugh so hard half the people in the gallery turned to stare at us.

“You’re having fun without me,” said Oliver, a moment later. He didn’t seem worried, so I didn’t press him about his conversation with Judith. She and Jack were gone before I could approach her.

“Why didn’t you introduce me to your lovely mater?” Petri asked, slapping Oliver’s shoulder in lieu of greeting.

“They are in a hurry, she said. Going to a dinner with some Japanese hot shots who are putting money into their venture; Akiko will be there to translate, even though Jack is almost fluent already.”

“Is he?” I asked.

“Yeah, but that’s not surprising.”

“Not like our Elio here, whose progress in Danish is painfully slow. He lacks motivation, that’s why,” said Petri.

“You have been insulting me ever since you got here,” I joked.

“I need a drink, that’s all. I know where Edmund keeps the booze, so if you’ll excuse me,” he replied, and went in search of alcohol.

“She didn’t want to say hello to me,” I said.

Oliver let out a long sigh.

“She asked me to give you a hug. I think she’s embarrassed: after all that she said about us, she went and eloped with your twenty-something cousin.”

“Did you tell her that I don’t care, that nobody in my family would ever interfere?”

“She’ll get there in the end; she’s just very stubborn.”

“Don’t know why that reminds me of a certain someone.”

“Idiot,” Oliver said, smiling.

“Why is everybody insulting me tonight? Let’s go find Petri and get some wine into you.”

“You don’t need to wine and dine me to bed me, just so you know.”

“Are we pretending we just met? What’s your name, sir?”
He stared into my eyes and for a moment the entire gallery receded into the distance.

“You just want me to say it out loud, don’t you?” he whispered in my ear.

I had, but no longer wished to, since I felt the compulsion to give him more than a chaste peck on the lips.

“Later,” I replied, and wasn’t that our ‘open sesame’?

“I almost prefer the Latham over the Del Greco,” I said.

After three beers and only a sandwich for nourishment, I was feeling a bit tipsy.

The gallery was nearly empty now except for the four of us and two elderly men who – Edmund had informed us – were important art critics.

“Don’t be blasphemous,” Petri said. He was drunk, which always made him inflexible about art matters.

“I said almost, but what if I did? El Greco’s faces depress me.”

“I like the one titled Film Star,” interjected Oliver, who was at the giggly stage of intoxication.

“Muvi Star,” I said, with an exaggerated Italian accent. He bowed and started laughing.

“What are you on about?” our friend said, taking another swig of Carlsberg.

“It’s coded language,” Oliver murmured, “We are spies in disguise.”

“Elio wouldn’t last five minutes. He has zero poker face.”

“I would be great, because I would double-bluff everybody.”

“What if Oliver was on the side of the enemy?”

I was about to reply when Edmund joined us, enthusing about the critics’ positive comments and the Tate’s intention of purchasing the quasi-entirety of Latham’s works.

We celebrated his success in his little office, drinking and sharing the joints kindly donated by my cousin.

“Did she tell you that they are going to the States instead of coming to Paris?” I asked, caressing Oliver’s bare chest.

We were in bed, sharing the last cigarette of the day.

“What?”

“I imagine they will stay with your family, but Jack didn’t want to say.”

“It must be serious then.”

“That’s what I told him and he laughed at me. She looks amazing.”
Oliver passed me the cigarette and let his head fall back against the pillows.

“When I was talking to her, I had the strange sensation of being with someone my age or even younger. She wasn’t acting young, that wouldn’t have been as odd. It’s like she’s shed her old skin.”

“You did call her a snake once.”

He pinched the tiny roll of skin beneath my navel.

“Ouch,” I cried out, “Petri warned me you should be careful with me, since I bruise like a peach.”

He came closer and slipped a hand into my boxers. I had kept them on so that he could be the one to remove them.

“How careful should I be?” he whispered, teasing the underside of my cock.

“Very,” I moaned.

He removed his hand and placed it on my sternum.

“Tell me,” he said, softly, and I knew what he meant.

Our lovemaking had changed again, a subtle shift into a darker eroticism and, at times, quite paradoxically, into jocular tenderness. We switched roles and positions, but it was more complicated than that. The contrast between our bodies had intensified: he looked bigger and harder, and I appeared even more inconsistent and translucent by comparison. His hands on me, his arms encircling me, his body curling behind mine: I belonged to him and disappeared underneath and inside him. But he had my name and that infused me with the certainty of a power I had not been fully aware of.

He was fully naked, so instead of talking I straddled him and owned him with my hands and mouth; I wanted to be everywhere at once: biting on his neck, pulling his hair, rubbing his nipples, licking into his mouth.

When he kissed my throat, I threw my head back, relishing the scratch of his beard on the soft skin of my Adam’s apple. Once, I had forced him to stroke me too hard there and it had left a light bruise, which I had tormented with my fingers for days, pressing against it to feel the ghost of an ache.

I loved it when his scruffy cheek stroked the length of my dick or the fullness of my sac; the first time it had happened, I’d arched off the bed and nearly shot my load there and then.

He let me do as I pleased, which is why we ended up sucking each other off until our mouths were full and our throats hoarse.

“I should shave it off,” he said, later. “You’re red all over.”

“Good,” I replied, prodding my swollen lips with the tip of my fingers.

I kissed him deeply, holding his face in my hands.

When I pulled back, his eyes were amused and full of love.

“What’s happened?” he asked.

“A letter arrived for you this morning,” I replied, and he bumped his nose against mine.
“Oliver Perlman,” he whispered.

Yes, I said, and thought how silly that a name should mean so much, and yet it did.
**The Ring**

Chapter Summary

In which Oliver is working on his French and talking to Judith.

It's November, so Paris is just around the corner...

Oliver's POV

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all of you for your lovely comments and for your kudos!!!!!!!!!

“Steak frites et un verre de vin rouge,” I said, and saw Elio bite his lips to stifle a smile.

“What?”

“No, nothing,” he muttered, going back to his music writing.

In the end, I had decided against hiring a language teacher: after all, I was living with a fluent French-speaker and one who was extremely jealous. As a joke, I had suggested asking Pierre for help and Elio’s reaction had made me laugh for days.

“Okay, if you think he’ll be reliable,” he’d said, lighting a cigarette.

“He seems clever enough.”

“He likes your feet.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Yes, he does. He often talks about them.”

“What can he possibly say about my feet?”

He'd puffed on his Silk Cut with ill-manufactured indifference.

“That they are big,” he’d muttered, “I told you already, remember? He inferred a correlation to the size of your, never mind.”

Inferred a correlation – I’d snickered inwardly - my arse.

“Yeah, but that was a long time ago, and anyway he’s our friend, he won’t try anything funny.”
He’d stubbed the cigarette out and had immediately taken another one from the packet.

“Okay, yes, I will ask him and maybe you could,” he’d started, but I had been unable to contain my amusement.

“My feet, what will you come up with next?” I’d asked, as I removed the unlit cigarette from his lips and kissed the tip of his nose.

“That’s not, I’m not jealous of Pierre,” he’d said, with such innocent eyes I’d almost believed him.

“I would never ask him, not after the stunt he pulled with you and Tim that night I was away,” I’d replied, and Elio had visibly relaxed.

“He’s not a bad person,” he’d explained later, “But he can’t help himself. I know you would never cheat, but just the idea that he might, you know-”

“Touch my feet?”

“Yes.”

“That’s never going to happen. Listen, we are going to stay in Paris for a week, it’s not like we are moving there. I can buy one of those language cassettes and you’ll help me when I’m stuck. How does that sound?”

“Parfait,” he’d replied and the case had been closed.

“Out with it,” I insisted, removing my headphones.

“Your accent is atrocious,” he said, smiling.

“As long as they understand me,” I countered, “I need to learn how to order le steak rare without them bringing me a slab of uncooked meat.”

“Saignant,” he suggested, but when I repeated the word he made a face.

“Try à point.”

I did as told and it sounded better. I leafed through my bilingual dictionary, found the words and copied them into a notebook.

When I finished, I felt Elio’s gaze still on me: he was beaming.

“What now?”

He shook his head.

“You’re only preoccupied about food,” he replied, “It’s not romantic, but very endearing.”

“I can say baise-moi, but I’m not going to write it down.”

Elio stood up, crossed the room and sat in my lap.

“Say it again,” he asked, caressing my face.

“My accent is atrocious.”
“I don’t care, just say it again, s’il te plaît,” he begged, pulling the hair at my nape.

I was starting to enjoy learning French, and the fringe benefits that came with it.

It was a dreary afternoon in mid-November when I met Judith again.

Elio was rehearsing his Celan composition with a friend who played the violin and I had given a lecture at the Conway Hall. She was walking down Lamb’s Conduit Street, wearing an oversized fake-fur coat and flat shoes. I had never seen her wearing anything but high heels or platforms. She hadn’t noticed me at first; maybe she was deep in thought or in a hurry.

“Oliver,” she marvelled, but seemed pleased to see me.

“If you have time, we could go for a drink.”

She thought about it for a moment before agreeing.

“I have time for a drink,” she said, so I steered her towards a small pub which I knew to be full only on game nights and at week-ends.

We found a quiet table at the back and I ordered two glasses of dry white wine.

“How’s Jack?”

To my intense surprise, she blushed.

“You haven’t forgiven me yet,” she said, “I deserve it, of course.”

“What, no, there is nothing to forgive, I told you already. I’m not being passive-aggressive, Judith: I genuinely want to know, because I care about you both. We care, Elio and I.”

She stared down at her hands and it was then that I noticed it: she was wearing a ring I had never seen before. It wasn’t on the canonical finger, but with Jack in the equation everything was relative.

“Is that what I think it is?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Yes and no,” she replied, coldly. Like me, when cornered, she always resorted to haughtiness. “We are not engaged or anything as stupid, don’t worry. At my age, it would be ridiculous.”

“Yes, you did. He’s younger than you, don’t try and pretend it doesn’t matter.”

“Well, in time it might matter, but you can still be happy now, in the present. I’m not going to be the one who stands between you two. Besides, I doubt Jack would allow me or anybody else to meddle.”

That made her laugh and it broke the tension a little.

“He’s so different from all the men I’ve ever met, even those boys I dated when I was a girl. I’m not sure you want to hear this.”

“Yes, yes, I really do.”
She downed half the content of her glass in one gulp and cleared her throat.

“It’s just that... he doesn’t want me to be the woman in the relationship; he only wants me to be Judith, if that makes any sense.”

I nodded.

“He doesn’t abide by any standard of beauty or age or any other criteria I’ve always seen applied in traditional relationships. I could be twenty or a hundred: it would make no difference to him.”

“When one falls in love—”

“No, that’s not what I meant at all. Love blinds and embellishes. He sees my wrinkles and all the rest of it, but they just don’t mean a thing to him.”

“What about you, what do you get from him?”

She looked me straight in the eyes and it was as if I were watching myself when I gazed at Elio.

“I see,” I said, “So tell me about the ring.”

“We went to Lilies to see that Sandys and the ring was part of the collection. It belonged to the model who’d posed for the painting of Judith, so he just had to buy it for me.”

“And Eaton agreed to sell it?”

“Actually, he gave it to us.”

“Why?”

Judith’s eyes shone with pride.

“Jack told him about me, about us, and Eaton wouldn’t take any money for it. He said he liked people who went against the grain.”

“I’ve heard he supported the Women’s Lib. You’d have avoided him like the plague back in the day.”

She drank the rest of her wine without looking at me.

“That was then,” she replied, “I had you when I wasn’t even twenty. My family and your father’s family: you know what they are like. I wish I had been as strong-minded as you are.”

“I must have gotten it from someone,” I said, touching her fingers.

She heaved a deep sigh; her lips trembled slightly.

“All those years feeling numb, drinking to make life bearable,” she said, suddenly close to tears.

“You did what you could with what you had. No one’s holding it against you.”

“Not even you?”

I squeezed her hand and she reciprocated.

“Least of all me,” I said, “If it hadn’t been for you and dad, I would not have gone to Italy and met Elio. My unhappiness at home brought me to the man I love. And perhaps yours has done the same
for you. Maybe everything is written.”

“Maybe,” she whispered.

“Why don’t you come to dinner one evening, with or without Jack? Elio would love it if you did.”

“Yes, all right. I will phone you, okay?”

“If we are not in, just leave a message.”

She nodded then told me she had to go.

“Odd coincidence to meet you around here,” I said, as she put on her coat.

“Not so odd, your name was advertised beforehand as joint lecturer tonight.”

“What, so you waited for me to come out in order to chance upon me in the street?”

She threw me a look that I knew oh so well.

“I was there, you silly boy. You were brilliant, by the way, Professor Oliver Perlman.”

“Yes, about that-

“I changed my name back to Klein, I don’t see why you shouldn’t do what you like with yours.”

She kissed me on the cheek, patted me on the back and was gone before I could follow her outside.

“How did it go?”

It had started to rain and Elio seldom carried an umbrella with him. He unzipped his sodden parka and emerged from under the fur-lined hood shaking his curls like a drenched puppy.

“Very well,” he said, “Lev suggested a few corrections, but he liked it.”

Lev was Elio’s nickname for his friend Leo, a studious young violinist from Norfolk who was enamoured with Russian literature, music and ballet.

“Even though it’s not inspired by Shostakovich or Pushkin?”

He threw his jacket on the radiator and laughed.

“He wasn’t in love with it, but he didn’t hate it.”

“That’s all right then.”

“What about you? I wish I could have been there, but Lev’s always very busy and couldn’t reschedule.”

I handed him a cup of tea and, as we sat on the sofa sipping our hot drinks, I told him about Judith.

“Do you see all my flaws and love me all the same, too?” he asked.

“They are not flaws, just parts of you.”

“Well dodged, Professor. Are they just character defects or physical too?”
'Fishing for compliments, Mr Perlman?'

He grinned and tapped the tea mug with his elegant fingers.

‘There must be some part of my body you dislike.’

‘Guess which was the one I first fell for, apart from your face.’

‘Was that my neck?’

I was about to tell him, but I had an idea. My hands were hot from holding the steaming cup of Earl Grey and I knew he was still feeling a bit cold because the tip of his nose was pink and shiny.

‘Maybe I’ll show you.’

‘Hmm,’ he replied, closing his eyes.

The moment was so sweet I hardly dared spoil it, but I told myself I was improving on it. Minutes later, my supposition turned out to be accurate.

Elio was sitting between my legs, entirely naked but for his open shirt. His back was against my chest and his head rested on my shoulder. He was trying to keep his eyes open to see what I was doing, but they kept falling shut, while his lips were parted and his tongue was darting out, as if trying to mimic my fingers.

I had both my hands on his chest, working on his nipples. I had started with soft caresses followed by prolonged pinching and was now alternating stroking and rolling them between thumb and index. Elio’s erection was at the stomach-slapping stage and mine, pressing against his lower back, was ready to burst.

‘My nipples?’ he asked, hoarsely.

‘Hmm, yes,’ I replied, and to explain, ‘They are rosy and perky.’

‘Almost like you named them,’ he groaned, trying to touch his dick, which I told him was forbidden.

‘What’s French for nipple?’

‘Téton’

I repeated the word, and one of my hands drifted to his groin.

‘It sounds silly in both languages,’ I murmured, as my fist closed around his cock.

He screamed and moaned, and I drank it all, from his mouth into mine.
The Student

Chapter Summary

Our boys, talking about serious stuff and making plans for the future.

Elio’s POV

Chapter Notes

Thank you all very much for being so lovely and so very supportive.

“I just spoke to dad,” I said, slumping down on the sofa next to Oliver. He was marking some papers, but seemed miles away. He had been alternating aloofness and affection for a few days, and I wanted to get to the bottom of his vagaries without making it a big deal. I wondered if it had anything to do with Judith, since we had not heard from her in the two weeks after Oliver had met her in Holborn.

“What?” he asked, without raising his gaze from the page.

“Mathieu is letting us stay in his house in Rue des Francs-Bourgeois.”

“All of us?”

That seemed to have captured his attention.

“It’s a big house, spread on three floors. Marzia’s uncle lives in Le Marais too.”

“Isn’t it the Jewish area?”

“Jewish and gay,” I replied, winking at him.

“And where will Mathieu go? Will he survive among that pandemonium?”

I nudged his shoulder with mine.

“We are not that bad and my parents will be there too.”

Oliver gazed at me as if he wanted to say something but couldn’t bring himself to utter the words.

“What are you thinking of?”

“He’s being very generous. Do you know if he lives on his own?”
“No idea. He’s not married, that much I know.”

Silence, scraping of pen on paper, pursed lips, frown.

“Tell me what’s bothering you.”

His arched eyebrows were hammy and unconvincing.

“Don’t give me that,” I warned.

“I was just wondering about what we discussed back in the summer.”

“My father and Mathieu, is that what you are worried about?”

He shook his head.

“I’m not worried about them.”

I waited patiently, aware that insisting wouldn’t yield the desired results. He fiddled with his Montblanc pen then gathered up his pile of papers and shoved it to the side.

“I have this student called Manuel,” he said, caressing my thigh, absent-mindedly. He often did that when we were watching a programme on television or when we were reading in bed.

“He’s South American, from Uruguay, I believe. He’s bright, nice, gets on with everybody.”

“Good-looking?”

“Black curls, big eyes, not unlike you.”

I flinched slightly and he reached out to take my hand. He was smiling at me: I was an idiot to react that way, because he would never do that to me. I leaned towards him and left a trail of kisses along his neck. He wrapped his arms around me and I rested my head above his heart, my cheek pressed to his hairy chest. It never ceased to turn me on, this contrast between my smooth torso and his furry one, the attraction of enhanced masculinity versus the ambiguity of androgyny. He felt the same and often, when we were too tired to make love, we would just rub against each other, him on top of me or, more frequently, me all over him.

“He stopped attending my lectures,” he said, “I thought maybe he’d left the country, that his visa had expired or that he’d had a family emergency.”

“What happened?” I asked, even though I’d already guessed the answer.

“He found what he thought was a rash on his shoulder blade.”

I felt Oliver’s heartbeat accelerate and wished I could hide inside of him for a little while and comfort him.

“Kaposi’s sarcoma,” he added, and I squeezed his hand. “He’s going home to die. A boy about your age, and he already looks like an old man.”

“When have you been to see him?”

“A few days ago, during my lunch break.”

“Tell me how I can help.”
Oliver’s hand caressed my cheek, traced the outline of my jaw.

“He’s probably on his way to the airport at this very moment.”

“I wish you’d told me, I would have come with you.”

He tugged at my curls.

“They cut his hair because he had bruises on his scalp. If, or rather when, he gets worse, he’ll have to wear diapers like a baby.”

“Did your friend... George, did he have Kaposi’s too?”

He nodded.

“It often happens, because their immune system is shot to pieces.”

“I’m so sorry, so very sorry.”

I raised my head to look him in the face: his eyes were bright and red-rimmed. There was nothing to say that would make it better, so I just held him and caressed him.

When he spoke, his voice was thick with tears.

“I was talking to him, saying the usual platitudes, but I was screaming inside. He reminded me so much of you and I thought about last year, when you were going to Subway—”

“I didn’t—”

“Yes, I know, but I believed that you did. That time when you left my flat and said you were going there, I spent the night staring at the ceiling. I was jealous, yes, but also terrified that you’d get too drunk and become careless. It’s what George did. At the time, we were having those crazy nights out... we’d get drunk and high and hit the clubs... fuck our way into the following morning’s bleak hangovers. I was careful, but I know I was lucky too—”

I raised my fingers to his lips and traced their contours, softly.

“I wanted to forget you without having to actually admit the truth to myself. It was stupid and I should have known better, but when I imagined you doing the same thing, it almost drove me insane; that you could have risked your precious life—”

He was crying now and I was too, so I kissed his mouth and he held on to me like that night when he’d finally come here to stay for good.

“I’ve been such a bloody coward,” he whispered, “That night when we went to the Tate exhibition, I wanted to confess everything, tell you that I still loved you, but instead I lectured you and you left. I thought you were going to Subway and it killed me and yet I didn’t do anything.”

“We were two idiots. I shouldn’t have lied to you and I’ll never do that again.”

He drew a deep, tremulous breath.

“Manuel’s tragedy reminded me of that awful period. He’s so young and had so much life ahead of him, same as you. All reduced to dust because of a little mindless fun.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t just look away,” I said, tentatively. Perhaps sweeping our past under the carpet
had been a mistake. “We have lived inside our safe bubble for almost a year and we’re about to go
on our dream holiday. When we get back, we could think about, I don’t know, stepping out into the
real world?”

I read in his eyes that he’d already come to the same conclusion.

“The clinic in Soho,” he said, “They are always looking for volunteers to man the reception, give out
leaflets, answer phones. And they always have two members of staff at the front desk.”

We would be working together while helping those who’d been less fortunate than us.

“Yes, I’d like that,” I replied, smiling. His sadness had dissipated, leaving in its place a gentler
sorrow. He petted my curls like he always did when he was seeking reassurance and I pushed into
his hand, my body melting against his. I was forgetting everything but the warmth of his skin, the
plasticity of his muscles, the fragrance of his manhood.

“Tell me about the house in Paris,” he murmured, and I was about to embark on my narrative when I
remembered.

“Why did you wonder about Mathieu’s marital status?”

“I was thinking about your father, what you told me of their friendship.”

“It was just a supposition, probably a crazy one.”

“Is he going to be there?”

“I’m not sure, but why not? The place is huge and it was Mathieu’s idea anyway.”

“Really?”

“That’s what dad said. Why, do you think something might happen between them?”

Oliver bent down to kiss my forehead and the bridge of my nose.

“That’s not what I meant, you goose,” he chuckled, “If there had been unspoken feelings between
them, surely they’d have come out before now.”

I tilted my head upwards angling for a kiss and getting it.

“I don’t know,” I murmured, “Look at us: if I hadn’t broken down in tears in front of you, who
knows what might have happened? We could have spent months or even years living parallel lives.
And then one day, maybe twenty years from now, we would have met somewhere, by chance or by
design, and what? Tell me Oliver, what would you have done?”

He shook his head, closed his eyes, held me tight enough to bruise.

“I can’t imagine having wasted all that time,” he replied, “Two decades without you, when we
cannot even spend one night apart!”

Sleeping together was still an imperative, and Oliver had rejected several assignments which would
have taken him away from London for more than a day. He only accepted when he was certain I
could go with him, and I never chided him because I felt exactly the same.

“Yes,” I breathed into his hair, inhaling the scent of his Roger & Gallet’s Citron Fresh shampoo.
“But what if we had wasted all that time? Do you think you’d have stopped loving me?”
“I don’t know how to do that. I’m certain that I would have recognised you immediately and that I would have been as in love as if I had never left you.”

His eyes were the purest azure and once again I wished I could drown in them.

“What if I grew a beard like yours?” I joked, to regain some measure of control.

“That’ll never catch,” he replied, smirking, “You might be able to grow some strays on your chin, but that’s about it, my dear.”

“Are you implying I am not man enough?”

Suddenly, he slipped his hand inside my tracksuit pants.

“There’s plenty man in here,” he growled, and that put an end to our conversation.

That same evening, after dinner, Oliver asked me to play something for him and I chose the Debussy which I had promised him that night after he’d talked to Judith, before she left for Croatia.

I was still playing when the phone rang and I knew it was her.

“Answer it,” I said.

He still detested talking on the phone and even more so when he was enjoying what he called “my mastery”.

I caught bits and pieces of the conversation, while I tinkered with the notes, superimposing my own version to that of the French composer.

“Okay, yes, I won’t forget. Yes, I’ll write it down,” he was saying, with a dash of impatience. “All right, we’ll see you then. Yes, I will. Ciao.”

“Did you just say ciao to your mother?” I asked when he returned into the living room.

He sat on the sofa and raked his fingers through his hair.

“She said it first. How did you know it was her?”

“You have that tone when you speak to her, it’s very filial.”

“She invited us to the opening of their shop in Soho. Actually, she called it concept store, whatever that means.”

“It’s probably Jack’s idea,” I replied. “I hope he’s going to trade-mark it.”

“Do you want to go?” he asked, looking a bit like a lost puppy.

“I can’t wait,” I said, and started playing his favourite Bach, the one the young composer had dedicated to his brother.
Judith and I were the tallest people in that crowd, so I immediately spotted her near a futuristic display, holding a cocktail glass filled with a colourful concoction and talking to a couple of suited-and-booted Japanese men. The backers, I thought. She was wearing a figure-hugging ankle-length black dress and metallic blue platforms and seemed thoroughly at ease. I wasn’t surprised, since it had often been her role in the plethora of committees she’d been part of back in the States. The difference was that at the time she’d needed alcohol to function while I noticed that now she hardly sipped her drink.

“What’s this music?” I asked Elio, who was already bopping to its beat even though we’d only just arrived.

“Katsumi Horii,” a voice replied, “Hot is Cool, that’s the song. Sounds a bit like early Spandau Ballet, I think.”

It was Pierre who - together with Akiko - had picked the playlist.

The latter was holding court amongst a cluster of Japanese boys and girls all kitted out in the Manga and anime paraphernalia sold in his store.

“Where’s Jack?” Elio asked, grabbing two glasses from a tray and handing one to me.

“J’sais pas; maybe he was running out of ganja,” Pierre replied, then to me: “How’s your French coming along?”

“Comme ci, comme ça”

He made a face.

“Yeah, I know: my accent’s terrible. We are not moving to Paris, so it will have to do.”

“You’ll be fine. They’ll just look at you and say oui even if they don’t understand a thing,” he said, giving me one of his unashamedly appraising looks, lingering on my feet.

Elio glared at him, but Pierre shrugged it off.

“What? Not my fault that Oliver’s hot!”

“Hey, I’m right here!”
“I have to go tell the DJ to mix it up a bit,” Pierre said, and ambled off.

“Let’s go dance,” I suggested.

One part of the downstairs area had been turned into a makeshift disco with strobe lighting and mirror balls.

We gave in to the music and to the joy of being there, together and ready to face any challenge the world might throw at us.

Dancing always brought back memories of Italy, of having Elio’s eyes on me while I pretended not to notice, of performing just for him, only for him.

He was at his sexiest when he danced, throwing his head back in rapture, shaking and thrusting his hips; parted lips, hooded eyes, curls bouncing all over the place.

I didn’t have his elegance or his way of riding the waves of rhythm as if they were rising and falling within him; music – whether played or experienced – inhabited him completely; I followed it like a disciple, but Elio had mastered its secrets and, with his elfin sensuality, could seduce his way through every dance floor and concert hall.

Japanese fusion-pop was replaced by the eerie atmospheres of The Sugarcubes and we decided to take a breather.

The lights had been dimmed and a sense of trance-like elation spread through the crowd like a suppressed scream of delight.

“Do you think he pumped some strange drug into the air?” I asked Elio, but he wasn’t the one to reply.

“Why would I waste my drugs on you?”

Jack looked the same as usual: same casual style, same pale skin and unfashionable glasses; there was, however, a hint of pride in his stance and more solidity to his presence; he seemed less mercurial, but perhaps I was only confusing the singer with the song: this business was his creature but I suspected he could take it or leave it.

“I love what did with the space,” said Elio, “But what about this concept-store idea?”

“You haven’t been upstairs, I guess,” he said, but before either of us could reply, we were joined by Akiko, whose eyes were shimmering with excitement and maybe a touch of intoxication.

“I am so glad you are here!” he exclaimed, nodding several times, a large smile on his child-like face. He turned to me and added, “Judith is a very clever woman; she helped us a lot with the finance. But I don’t understand much about money things; it’s too confusing.”

I didn’t know what to say, but he didn’t give me the time to marshal my thoughts.

“See you around,” he said, and flitted away.

“Are you two still together?” I asked Jack.

“As you can see.”

“You know what I mean.”
He rolled his eyes, but his lips were quirked in a half-smile.

“You overestimate me,” he said. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I felt someone’s stare on us and when I turned, I saw it was my mother’s. She was chatting with a tiny Japanese lady dressed in – of all things – a pastel pink Chanel suit, but darting glances in our direction. The moment her eyes met Jack’s I felt as if I were intruding into something very private. He returned her gaze with unblinking calm, but he couldn’t fool me: I knew that demeanour too well, having adopted it with Elio at the start of our acquaintance. She smiled and it was – as always – a replica of my smile, but oddly, it also reminded me of Elio’s guarded happiness, when he couldn’t quite yet believe that I wanted him.

“Let’s have a look at the rest of the store,” said Elio, taking my hand.

“When you are in Paris, would you do something for me?” asked Jack. The unusual request left us both gaping.

“The Musée Gustave Moreau has a painting of Judith. Would you go see it?”

“And buy you a postcard?”

He snorted.

“I don’t need mementos; I would only like you to see it.”

“And tell you what we think about it.”

“Tell us,” he corrected, and that was more than I’d ever expected to hear from him.

“This is amazing,” Elio exclaimed, admiring the rows of make-up booths interspersed with fluorescent gaming machines. On the walls were TV screens playing anime cartoons on a loop. It was like being transported to modern Japan, which had little in common with its past, or at least what we knew of it here in the west.

“A bit disconcerting, but it’s probably what the future is going to look like,” said Judith. She guided us to a secluded alcove in the refreshments area, where sushi, miso soup and tokutei meishō-shu were being served.

“I still can’t believe this is my cousin’s shop,” Elio said, “And yours, of course, I mean-” He was babbling, trying and failing to look her in the eye. In Italy, where he’d had the home advantage, he had not been as flustered.

Judith smiled at him, shaking her head.

“No, no, you are right: it is your cousin’s... and Akiko’s, of course. I only helped them secure part of the money. A middle-aged American socialite – which is what I am in their eyes – seemed more reliable than a couple of students.”

“You are enjoying it,” I said, and it wasn’t a question.

“Yes, I do. In fact, in case of success, we are hoping to turn it into a franchise.”

“I never imagined Jack would become a business owner,” I said.
“That’s because it’s not what he is.”

“And what is he?” asked Elio.

“I have no idea,” she replied, “And for once in my life, I don’t care.”

“Not knowing doesn’t bother you?”

This was more disconcerting than any other development, because she’d always been the black and white type, the one who disapproved of any attempted blurring of the lines or transgression of the rules. Who was this woman and what had she done with my mother?

“It scares me a little, but it’s better than the alternative. Wasn’t it the same for you?” She was addressing Elio.

“I was too scared, so I left Oliver,” he said, looking crestfallen, “I wish I hadn’t.”

“You were too young but I’m at the other end of the line, with nothing to lose.”

How surreal to have this conversation here, I thought, but it was probably easier to say the words in this alien context than in more traditional surroundings.

“What are you planning to do?” I enquired.

“We are leaving for the States next week, in time for Hanukkah. After that, we’ll see.”

“You never came to dinner,” said Elio.

“Oliver told me about the Festival Hall.”

Elio had been invited to perform his Celan-inspired piece as part of a contemporary classical music event: he and Lev were going to be playing in the Clore Ballroom. It was a free concert, but it would give him the opportunity to display his talents in front an audience.

He blushed and bit his lower lip, which made me want to kiss him.

“I’ll be there,” she said, touching his hand.

“That would be, yes,” he said, giving her one of those toothy grins which always floored me. Her answering smile wasn’t as unfettered, but it was a start. I had to look away, in case my gaze broke the fragile spell.

“I better go back to my duties,” she said soon after, “Enjoy Paris.”

“You should have come too,” I said, as she got up to leave.

“Next time,” she replied, and maybe this time she really meant it.

We drank and danced some more and left just as Petri, who had arrived while we were with Judith, was trying to get it on with a busty brunette in pigtails and shiny white boots. He winked at us, as he steered her away from the crowd.

“I’m seeing stars,” Elio declared, as we made our way to the tube station.
“Yeah, it was like being inside a video game for three hours. It’s going to be a great hit with the Soho crowd. Jack was right about the location.”

“Jack’s always right. Well, almost always.”

“When he gets it wrong, he gets it spectacularly wrong.”

Elio chuckled and stopped in a doorway to light a cigarette. The acid neon lights of a sex shop nearby bathed his face, turning it into a pop-art masterpiece.

“You told Judith about the Festival Hall.”

“I’m very proud of you,” I said, stealing his Silk Cut, “I’m telling everybody, even people I barely know.”

“Do you think she’ll come?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Not with Jack, I hope. He’ll find a hundred and one things wrong with it and criticise Lev to his face.”

“I don’t think he would.”

“Because of me or because of Judith?”

“You know the answer.”

He kissed me briefly on the mouth then brushed his lips against my cheek.

“I can’t wait to be in Paris with you, but I was wondering about something,” he whispered then looked around to see whether we were alone. It was out of habit more than fear of being seen, considering where we were standing.

“Tell me,” I urged him, pushing him until his back was against the wall.

“It’s going to be difficult to be alone just the two of us. I love it that we’ll all be there together, but maybe not all the time.”

“What are you suggesting?”

He threaded his fingers through my hair and tugged, softly. I threw the cigarette away and wrapped my hands around his neck. His heart kicked and his eyes snapped shut.

“Maybe we could stay in a hotel on the first night,” he said, just before I slipped my tongue inside his mouth. I pinned him to the wall, his crotch grinding against my thigh, his fingers kneading my ass.

“And do what?” I enquired, in between wet kisses.

“We could, hmm, pretend to be strangers,” he gasped, as I palmed his erection, watching the sweet tremor in his eyelids and savouring every hot breath he exhaled.

“Kinky,” I whispered, licking and nibbling his earlobe.

“Thought so,” he moaned, arching into me. “Let’s go home, please.”
I eased my grasp, caressed his face and hair, let him see how much he affected me and how happy he made me.

“We should book the Hotel Chopin,” he said, resting his cheek on the palm of my hand.

“Yes, we should,” I answered, and wished we were already there.
The Hotel Chopin

Chapter Summary

It's Paris, baby!
Fluff, angst and smut as they boys arrive in the city of love.
Elio is a drama queen and Oliver is a big ball of fluff.
Starts with Elio's POV and ends with Oliver's.

Chapter Notes

All the information is correct, including the bit about Clarinette. She does exist now, but let's pretend she also did back in 1987.
Van der Werve's Nummer Vertieen is dated 2017, but let's close our eyes and pretend it isn't. All the other details are accurate.

We had decided to travel by train, because it was more romantic, and besides I hated flying. We arrived at Dover just after dawn and saw the pale winter sun rise from the choppy waters of the Channel.
“This is the best coffee I’ve ever tasted,” I said, sipping the inky brew which we’d purchased from the Food Court on the ferry.

Oliver laughed loudly and a few heads turned to stare at us.
“I’m offended on behalf of Mafalda,” he said, “This isn’t even comparable to her wonderful espresso.”

“Leave me alone,” I replied, nudging his side with my elbow, “I’m cold and this is hot and strong.”

“Are you still talking about the coffee?” he joked, taking his coat off and draping it around my shoulders.

I rolled my eyes and bit back a smile.

“Won’t you be cold now? I don’t want you to get sick.”

“Hot and strong, remember?”

“Stop it.”

He smiled and pursed his lips to blow me a kiss.
“Nummer Veertien.”

We were on the TGV from Calais to the Gare du Nord and Oliver was munching on his first croissant of our Parisian holiday. He’d ordered it together with a *jus d’orange* and was inordinately proud of himself.

“Are we speaking Dutch now?” he said, wiping his mouth and fingers on a serviette. I turned around and kissed him on the lips: they tasted of citrus and almonds. I loved that we could be bolder here, since France was a more tolerant, sexually liberated place.

“It’s a work of art by an artist named Guido Van der Werve. It’s about Chopin, but it contains an interesting parallel with Alexander the Great.”

“Which is?”

“They both died in exile, far away from home. Chopin’s body was buried in Paris, but his heart was taken to the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw.”

Oliver was staring at me, his expression a mixture of admiration and curiosity.

“Who did that?”

“He requested it in his will and his sister complied. She secreted it back to Poland inside a jar of cognac. During WW2 the Germans stole it, but they returned it afterwards.”

“Imagine travelling with your brother’s heart in a jar,” he murmured, shivering.

“Would you do that for me, if I asked you? When I die, will you take my heart and bury it in the spot where we kissed for the first time?”

Tears welled up in his eyes.

“Cor cordium,” he quoted, “Heart of hearts.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes for a while, unable to verbalise the current of emotion which crackled between us.

“I will go first,” he said, “You will have to be the one who carries my heart in a container full of booze. I’d have the *rosatello* instead of the cognac, if you don’t mind.”

“That’s morbid.”

“Look who’s talking.”

I caressed his bristly cheek and he placed his hand on mine.

“Lev and I have decided to play Van der Werve’s Requiem at the Festival Hall as an encore. I have transcribed it for piano and violin and we’ll perform it in the manner of Chopin.”

“I can’t wait to hear it.”

“The hotel has a piano in the lobby; maybe they’ll let me use it.”

“I’ll make sure they do.”
He pressed his lips to my palm and I felt the tip of his tongue dart out to lick my skin.

“You sound très confiant, Professor.”

“You have no idea.”

At the Gare du Nord, Oliver wanted to take a taxi but I was adamant that we should learn to navigate the city by public transport. We had acquired a bunch of guides and the station provided a helpful leaflet with a printed map of the metro network. Since we were staying over ten days, we purchased two travelcards which covered the zones one to five. Used as we were to the London tube, it was easy to adapt and soon enough we were on a train to Grands Boulevards, the stop close to our hotel.

“What are you smiling at?” I asked, amused at his beaming expression.

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” he repeated, shaking his head, “You, Paris, this, you speaking French, pouting: it’s cute, that’s all.”

“I wasn’t pouting.”

“You do, when you speak French. It’s extremely fetching.”

“Bof,” I replied, just to make him laugh.

The Chopin was one of the oldest hotels in Paris and it retained its 19th century style, even though the rooms had obviously been redecorated.

Located in the Passage Jouffroy, off the Boulevard Montmartre, it was a hidden gem, distant from the noise yet close to the heart of the city.

Oliver had booked a room with a view over the rooftops: we had chanced upon the photos in a brochure and it had been love at first sight.

“I can imagine Chopin making love to George Sand here,” he’d said.

“That’s never been confirmed.”

“Well, I believe it and anyway I will have my own personal composer to seduce.”

“Remember that we are supposed to be strangers.”

“You won’t be able to resist me.”

I had wanted to disabuse him of the notion, but it would have been a lie.

As soon as we entered the lobby, we were greeted by an unexpected sight: on the reception desk, sat between the telephone and a stack of brochures, was a lustrous black cat.
“Meet Clarinette,” said the concierge, an impeccably groomed brunette who resembled Leslie Caron and spoke fluent English. “She’s two years old and is here to welcome our guests.”

I liked both cats and dogs, but Oliver was a definite cat person. He completely forgot about the room and let me deal with the check-in while he and Clarinette got to know each other. She was an extremely friendly cat, happy to be petted and scratched by strangers.

“I see you have a piano there,” Oliver said, while Clarinette did her best to climb on his shoulder. “Elio is a composer and he’s about to perform at the Festival Hall in London.”

The woman clicked her tongue and tilted her head to the side.

“We don’t usually allow guests to play it and besides it’s not been tuned for a while.”

Oliver was about to reply, but she interrupted him.

“The reception is open day and night, but after a certain hour the concierge is only on-call. Tonight, as it happens, Marcel will be at the desk and he usually falls asleep after two am. He snores,” she added, scrunching her nose.

When I finally convinced Oliver to part from his new best friend, we took the lift to the top floor, carrying our back-packs. We hadn’t taken much with us, intending to live as simply as possible and perhaps purchase any additional item we might need.

The room was like the one depicted in the photo we had seen: wooden floors, exposed beams, a small square window showing a breathtaking view of the Parisian skyline. The king-size double bed left space only for a couple of chairs and a dainty rosewood desk. The coverlet, upholstery and drapery were in a vivid shade of green; absinthe-green, Oliver said, with an evil smirk.

“What’s the plan then?” I asked, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“We eat, we spend some time apart and we meet again here.”

“And the game begins.”

He cradled my face in his hands and fingered my lips.

“I wish I could have you right now,” he whispered.

“Can’t do, Sir,” I replied, even though my groin was already sending out a distress signal.

“Tease,” he joked, biting the tip of my nose.

“Let’s go to the restaurant before you eat me alive.”

“I’ll have you know, Mr Perlman, that the two things are completely unrelated: I will still want to eat you up afterwards.”

“I should hope so.”

He kissed down my neck, making me shiver.

“You know so,” he said, and he was right.
Elio had chosen the restaurant, which was a traditional brasserie called *Bouillon Chartier*. Our table was in the mezzanine and had *potage de légumes* and *steack haché sauce poivre vert* with *frites*. He let me order, and I suspect he picked the same dishes in order to make it easier for me. We drank red wine and shared a platter of meringues for dessert.

“I’m full enough to burst,” I said, when we’d finished eating.

“A *Pastis* should help,” he replied, and signalled to the waiter.

It did help, but it also made us sleepy. We took a short stroll along the boulevards then retraced our steps to the hotel.

We cleaned up, undressed and fell asleep as soon we hit the mattress.

When I woke up, it was already dark and the other side of the bed was empty.

On the pillow was a note containing a few instructions: I was to vacate the room at six and come back three hours later.

I looked at the watch: it was four.

In the two hours at my disposal, I took a shower and shaved: not a clean shave, but just enough that it would alter my appearance. I put on a black turtle-neck and black denims then headed out in search of a bistrot. I walked around with nothing on my mind but Elio and his smooth white skin which I had not touched since the previous day. We had been at home, in London, which now seemed a million light years away. I found what I was looking for and had a wholesome, unpretentious meal. When I paid the bill, I realised they sold cigarettes so I bought a packet of Gitanes. I smoked one on my way back, feeling oddly elated and free, as though I had been transported inside one of those films of the Nouvelle Vague which Elio adored.

When I knocked at the door at the agreed time, I was nervous and light-headed with anticipation.

He ordered me to get in, but when I did he wasn’t there.

The window was closed but the curtains were not: the Parisian traffic was not too far away yet none of its clamour could reach me. All I could hear was the thrumming of my heart and the water running from a tap.

Before I made any move to remove my coat, Elio came out of the en-suite: he was naked.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said, looking at ease, almost defiant. His wet hair was glistening and his body was as white as snow. Four years I had known him, for nearly one year we’d lived under the same roof and here I was, jealous of myself.

“I have ordered some champagne,” I replied, my voice sounding alien to my ears.

There was indeed a bucket filled with ice and a bottle of Perrier-Jouët.

“Good,” he said, staring at my face, briefly allowing his mask to slip.

“You can take your clothes off, or I could strip you, if you prefer.”
I was already hard and he hadn’t even come within touching distance.

“I’ll do it,” I replied, because I didn’t want to see how my Elio undressed a stranger. I could smell the shampoo in his hair, and it evinced a shiver of tenderness which I decided to quash.

Once I was down to my boxer briefs, I sat at the edge of the bed. He was looking out of the window, as if he too hadn’t wanted to see how I stripped down for this other man.

“Why are we here?” I asked.

We had not rehearsed our parts, only agreed on being strangers who met for the first time for a fuck. For the first time and a good time: it sounded like the perfect tag line for an escort service.

He turned around and raised his arms, stretching them above his head, feigning a yawn.

“I want to try something different. My husband-” he started, and I gave up breathing for a moment.

“I didn’t know you were married,” I whispered.

“We are very happy.”

“Yes?”

“Yes,” he replied, gazing into my eyes and licking his lips, “But there are things which become entwined.”

“What sort of things?”

“Sex is inseparable from sentiment.”

“There’s always space for role-playing, if you are both up for it.”

He shook his head.

“It wouldn’t work. It has to be real or it’s nothing but silly make-believe.”

I wondered whether I had walked into a trap and what had been presented as a game was in fact his way of telling me he wasn’t completely satisfied in bed.

“Come here,” I ordered, needing to get my hands on him.

He moved slowly, his gait slightly impaired by his arousal.

When he was standing in front of me, I drank him in with all my senses and I thought not for the first time that losing him would end me.

Desire is infinitely more volatile than love and often shorter lived.

Did I really know the man I adored? Was I enough for him? These questions ricocheted inside my head, but underneath them ran the baser undercurrent of lust.

He pressed his hands to my chest, flexing his fingers to squeeze my muscles.

“I love this,” he purred, then reached down to palm my cock and balls, “Hmm, and this too,” he added, shutting his eyes.

I tugged him closer, clawing at his hips.
“We should use protection,” I intimated, before smearing my lips across his stomach.

“I am clean.”

“I don’t care,” I replied, brusquely. He trembled and his heartbeat accelerated. Maybe he was excited or he hadn’t expected I would be so strict. I had put a packet of condoms and a bottle of lube on the bedside cabinet.

“Don’t need any of that for kissing, I hope,” he murmured, already reaching for my lips.

“None of that,” I said, turning my head away.

“What, why?” he whined, and I had to stifle a smile.

“I am married too and I only do that with my husband.”

“Wait, so you are okay to suck me and fuck me, but you won’t stick your tongue inside my mouth?” he asked, seeming genuinely upset.

“You know that prostitutes charge extra for kissing.”

“You want me to pay you?”

“It wouldn’t make a difference. It’s not up for discussion.”

He was breathing hard, biting his lips, gazing hungrily at mine. I wanted to kiss him senseless, own his mouth for the rest of the night.

“I can do this though,” I murmured, and licked his neck from the hollow of his throat to his jaw.

He moaned and threw his head back, and I took as in invitation to do the same to his collarbones, his nipples and the tiny shell of his navel.

All the while, he held on to my hair and pulled it, dropping occasional open-mouthed kisses on my face and neck.

“What is it that you want?” I asked, inhaling the scent of his sex like a dense, foggy perfume. His cock was close to my lips, so close I could sense its twitches, and I wanted to go down on it until I gagged. He circled his hips, and his erection swung enticingly, slapping my chin and his abdomen.

“A good, hard fuck,” he husked, brushing his fingers through my hair, “Mount me and come inside me.”

I stretched him open with my fingers as he was on his hands and knees on the floor. I rolled on a condom, squirted dollops of lube on myself and on him. I was faint with need and yet, despite his cries and my grunts, a grave silence had descended on us.

What’s happening, I thought, as I entered him; the sensation was exquisite, although muted by the latex, but it wasn’t enough.

“Do it,” he shouted, and I drove into him, buried all of me into his body, sinking into hot flesh, over and over again. My palms were on his belly, which was taut and clammy. There was a tremor in his thighs and his back was shiny with sweat. It was the closest I’d ever felt to hell and I was on the verge of a mean, spiteful orgasm.
He must have understood because he turned to look me in the face.

“Oliver,” he called, his eyes blinking furiously.

Elio was crying.

“I’m here, I’m here,” I said, and a few moments later he was in my lap, his back against my chest, my hands and lips trying to be everywhere at once.

“I’m sorry, so sorry,” he kept saying, while I told him that he was all right, that there was nothing to apologise about.

“Let’s get under the covers and have some of that champagne,” I suggested, when he’d calmed down a little.

I gathered him up and carried him to the bed; he laughed when I tucked him in, but he let me do as I pleased.

“I’m such a pussy,” he said later, “I ruined everything.”

“I’m happy that you did.”

“I never thought it would feel so wrong.”

I took a sip from his glass and kissed the back of his hand.

“If I don’t give you all you need,” I started, but he silenced me.

“No, that was just... you remember that night in Italy when you were drunk and angry? I just wanted to try what it would be like. But then you said you wouldn’t kiss me.”

I took the glass and set it on the night-stand then slipped my tongue inside his mouth.

“Your husband,” I murmured, when we came up for air, “You could have warned me about him. What’s he like?”

“Tall, blue-eyes, fit, great hair, designer stubble,” he purred, rolling on top of me and touching my cheeks, “This was a surprise.”

“A good one, I hope.”

“My gorgeous husband,” he whispered against my lips.

“Your very horny husband,” I said, arching up and into him.

“No need for protection,” he smirked, as he moved down my body, slowly, like a sinful snake.

We drank the rest of the bottle, smoked Gitanes and afterwards we fell into each other with desperate hunger and a clear-eyed passion which tasted of life but of death too. When he fucked into me, I did feel like crying too, because I did not know how to tell him that he was every single thing in the universe to me.

“Elio, Elio,” he sobbed when he spurted deep inside me, shivering hot and cold.

We were one and the same and no game could ever come between us.
Chapter Summary

More shenanigans at the Chopin

A shortish chapter, but more to come...

A brief note about France in 1987: Mitterrand was President and his left-wing government entirely de-penalised homosexuality. More than that, the media were advised to not dwell on the connection between AIDS and the gay community so that gay people wouldn't be ostracised.

Chapter Notes

For those who don't know: tricks are gay one-night stands.

I really have to thank Edmund White for writing about his experiences as a gay man in Paris in the 1980s.

Thanks to all of you for your very kind and lovely comments.

We didn’t want to go to sleep that night; we were far too excited.

Oliver had ordered another bottle of champagne and for a while we sat on the window sill, naked but for the blanket wrapped around our shoulders, gazing at the view, drinking and exchanging smiles and sweet nothings.

“Marcel must be sleeping by now,” Oliver said, glancing at his watch. “Let’s go,” he urged, but I was reluctant.

“I wouldn’t want to disturb the other guests.”

“They should consider themselves lucky to be disturbed by you.”

“You’re drunk,” I chuckled.

“I only want to experience my husband’s mastery, here in Paris.”

“I thought we’d already crossed that one out,” I replied, licking my lips.

“Your mind is always in the gutter.”

“And yours—”

He wrapped the blanket more firmly around his torso, glaring at me.
“I’m the romantic one, you’re the hussy.”

“How – wait - did you just call me a hussy?”

Oliver threw me a mock disdainful look which made me question whether he was in the right line of work.

“I opened the door and there you were: naked. It could have been room service or some horny stranger.”

“It was a horny stranger.”

“I’ll have to teach you a lesson,” he said, and at once he started to tickle my sides. I writhed and tried to fight back, but as usual he overpowered me and we ended up in a heap on the floor.

“My ass hurts. You may have bruised my peach.”

“Let me kiss it better,” he said, and was about to do that when I wriggled out of his grasp.

“If I were a hussy, I’d let you do that. But since I am chaste and virtuous, I’m going to put on some clothes and head downstairs.”

He reached out to caress my ankle.

“Graceful as a ballerina’s and hairy as a lumberjack’s”

“You really are drunk,” I giggled, bending down to tousle his hair. “Do you mind my hairy legs?”

He shook his head.

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” he replied, kissing the spot he’d just touched.

“Same here, but then again you are a Greek god.”

“The V&A don’t know what they are missing.”

In the lift, which was luckily empty but for us, he stood behind me, his face buried in my hair, his hands on my hips.

“I’ve no intention of running away.”

“Better safe than sorry,” he replied, pulling me against his body.

“Safe won’t apply if you keep doing this.”

“Who, moi?”

“Oui, vous, Monsieur le Professeur.”

“Hmm, say it again.”

When the doors opened, he was licking my ear and I barely knew where I was.

Thankfully, the tiny lobby was deserted and so was the reception desk, except for Clarinette, who was sleeping on top of the piano, next to the framed photograph of Chopin.
“This is a terrible idea,” I insisted.

“Come on, live a little.”

“Alright, but if we get kicked out of the hotel, you’ll pay for it.”

“They can’t throw you out of the Chopin for playing Chopin, that’d be too silly even for the French.”

“You know that I’m part-French, right?”

“Yeah, and that’s why you’re still arguing with me instead of playing Van Der Something’s Requiem.”

“Van der Werve, you philistine. Okay, let’s see how out of tune this baby is.”

As soon as I sat down on the upholstered stool, the cat opened her eyes.

“She’s the guardian of this shrine,” Oliver said, as he caressed her shiny mantle.

It wasn’t perfect, but good enough for an audience of one captivated listener and one indifferent feline.

After the extract from the Requiem, I played the Chopin’s Nocturne op. 55 no, 1 in F minor, which was one of his favourites. Three minutes into it, a booming voice resounded from across the lobby.

“Mais c’est quoi ce bordel?”

Marcel, a burly man with grey hair and tired eyes descended upon us, meaning business. I immediately switched to a French song made famous by the film Jules et Jim. I apologised and explained that I was a pianist and had not been able to resist that magnificent instrument. I stared at Oliver, silently ordering him to keep his mouth shut. He smiled and went back to petting Clarinette.

“Jeanne Moreau, quelle femme!” Marcel said, when he realised I was tinkering with Le Tourbillon De La Vie. I agreed wholeheartedly and after a brief discussion about her many talents, we parted on amicable terms. Somehow, he had ignored Oliver’s presence, probably guessing he was American and therefore assuming he didn’t understand a word of French.

“That was sexy,” he said, once we were back in our room, tucked up in bed. “How did you guess about the song?”

“I didn’t, but I thought it likely that a Frenchman in his fifties would admire Jeanne Moreau and therefore know the song. I love that film and I was terribly sad when Truffaut died.”

“When was that?”


Oliver gathered me into his arms.

“I wish I had been there with you.”

“We had weeks of snow and sub-zero temperatures that winter. Pipes froze and burst and we had to use the wood-burning stove for cooking. I can’t recall having been that cold before or since; it was as though I could never get warm, no matter how many layers of clothing I’d put on.”
He looked stricken with regret.

“You can’t control the weather plus I left you not the other way round,” I said, to comfort him. He heaved a sigh and rubbed my back, as though he was trying to make up for the times when I had been shivering inside my lonely bed.

“I wonder if it’s going to snow,” I said, kissing his neck.

“I’ll be here to keep you warm.”

“Even though I am a hussy?”

“Hmm, yes, because you’re my hussy.”

I pretended to wrestle him, but I was too tired to put on a decent show. We fell asleep soon after and woke up with the sunlight streaking our bed-covers.

We got off the metro at Chemin Vert and ten minutes later we were standing by Mathieu’s front door.

“Should we ring or knock? Maybe it’s too early to disturb him.”

“It’s past eleven,” Oliver said, laughing, and rang the bell.

We heard the echoes of its silvery chime and after a moment, steps coming closer. The door opened, but the person standing on the other side of it wasn’t a man.

“Marzia?”

She kissed our cheeks and invited us inside.

My first impression of the house was olfactory: it smelled of patchouli, wood-polish and tobacco. There were dust motes dancing in the light, which flooded in from the tall casement windows. We were to find out that Mathieu possessed a vast collection of books which were disseminated all over the house; apparently, he had a predilection for stacking them up on the worn parquet floors. I was like being inside an extremely disorganised library.

“Mathieu has gone to stay with his partner on their péniche. It’s tied up near the Boulevard St. Michel.”

Oliver was puzzled.

“It’s a barge on the Seine,” I explained.

“In this weather? Won’t they freeze to death?”

“Oh no, they have a heater,” Marzia replied.

She led us to the kitchen, which was a pleasantly old fashioned affair with Provençal sideboards and display cabinets made of whitewashed oak wood. There was coffee on the gas hob and a tray of pains au chocolat on the table.

“Dad said Mathieu was happy to have us here,” I said once we sat down to partake of our second breakfast. “I hadn’t even realised you two knew each other.”
“My uncle lives five minutes from here. He and Mathieu go to the same pâtisserie. They are not close friends, but yeah,” she shrugged. “He said he’s delighted to have us here, and that he’ll be coming and going. Anyway, he left a note for you.” She took out of her pocket a blue piece of paper and handed it to me. In it Mathieu had written what Marzia had just relayed to us and added some instructions on how to operate the boiler.

“Are you staying here too?” I asked.

“I wasn’t up until today, but since Momo is coming and my parents are staying at my uncle’s,” she started to explain.

“Wait, I thought he was going to spend Christmas with his family and that he’d be here for Santo Stefano.”

Oliver was smiling and imitating one of Vimini’s ‘you are an idiot’ expressions.

“When did that happen and why wasn’t I told?” I whined.

“After you left and because it’s none of your business,” she joked, tousling my hair.

“At what time will he be here?” Oliver asked.

“I will pick him up from Charles De Gaulle after dinner. We should be back by ten tonight. Don’t worry, I have another set of keys. I’ll show you the bedrooms: they are on the first floor and you can pick the one you prefer. Mathieu said he usually sleeps in his studio anyway.”

We chose a room with peacock blue walls and a low Oriental bed.

“Imagine this room in the summer,” Oliver said, caressing the veined surface of the mahogany wardrobe.

On the desk were a number of books and one in particular attracted my attention.

“I remember looking for the French edition, but I couldn’t find it anywhere in London,” I said, as Oliver took the slim volume from my hands. It was Renaud Camus’ Tricks.

“I read it in translation when I started interning at the TLS. The narrator is gay and the novel chronicles his sexual encounters in several cities, including Paris and San Francisco.”

“I see,” he said, his gaze darting insistently between my lips and the open book.

“Roland Barthes wrote the foreword.”

“We could read it together,” he said, “My French is not good enough, but I want to share in the experience.”

I knew exactly what he meant: I had found it very arousing back then and had fantasised what it would have been like to have the man I loved next to me, someone who – in my mind - had looked just like Oliver.

I lay down on the bed, stretching my arms and legs; the mattress was harder than I thought, in pleasant counterpoint to the velvet feel of the coverlet.

“Yes,” I said, and he lay on top of me and kissed me.
The Moreau Museum

Chapter Summary

Elio and Oliver play a little game which, this time, ends rather well...

Chapter Notes

In 2012 the Armand Hammer Collection exhibited Moreau’s Salome Dancing before Herod. I didn’t even know this when I planned Elio & Oliver’s visit to the Moreau Museum. Let’s call it the random luck of the universe, lols.

Tricks by Renaud Camus is an interesting book and very graphic. Yep.

At lunchtime, Marzia took us to a Moroccan cafe just around the corner from the Fleishman synagogue in Rue des Rosiers.

We had mint tea - which they prepared with fresh leaves and a dash of lemon – and a large platter of colourful roasted vegetables couscous, for sharing. I loved the area, with its narrow streets and old building, but perhaps I also delighted in the knowledge that we were truly welcome here, that we belonged. There were menorahs in the shop windows, numerous kosher shops and Hasidim in their customary black attire walked briskly by, sometimes in the company of women wearing shayts. London’s Temple Fortune was comparable, but it wasn’t as welcoming to men in same-sex relationships, while here our two worlds intersected seamlessly. One of our friends had told us about the Duplex, a gay bar not far from Mathieu’s house, and I had imagined the Marais to be like Soho, but it couldn’t have been more different. Where one was gritty and modern, the other was mellow and medieval.

“What are you guys doing later?” Marzia asked, as we waited for our coffees.

“We haven’t decided yet,” replied Elio, “Oliver’s never been to Paris and I haven’t visited the Musée d’Orsay since its opening.”

“Jack’s suggested we visit the Moreau Museum,” I said.

“Did he?” she said, smiling.

“What? Is it not worth it?”

“Depends on what you like, I guess. It’s not very popular with tourists, so lovers usually go there to make out.”

“Oh, come on,” I said, “Who would conduct a tryst inside a museum?”

“Degas’ and Renoir’s favourite model, for example,” she replied, with a wink.

Elio was smirking knowingly: of course he’d been au fait, but had decided not to inform me.
“Very funny,” I huffed, but I wasn’t really upset. “Have you been there?”

She nodded while Elio pretended he’d not heard my question. He was chewing the inside of his mouth, trying hard to stay serious.

“All right, that’s settled: we are going there this afternoon. Is it very far from here?”

“You have to change lines at Madeleine then get off at Trinité,” she replied.

“You seem very familiar with the location.”

“I used to have a boyfriend who lived near Parc Monceau.”

“Did he like Moreau?”

She pinched my cheek and let out a throaty laugh. I was glad that we’d become so close and was hoping this holiday would contribute in cementing our friendship: Elio loved her dearly and I wanted to put behind me the bitter jealousy I had felt in the past, when I’d seen them together and had wanted to separate them.

“He’s never painted Judith, but there’s a beautiful depiction of Salome Dancing before Herod on the top floor,” Elio said, with a smug grin.

“I’m going to wipe that smirk off those lips, I thought.

“And I suppose the top floor is where the business is done?”

They exchanged complicit glances and chuckled; they almost looked like siblings.

“Yeah, there’s only one guard on each floor, and in winter they’re always dozing by the radiator. On the third floor, it happens to be the room without the Salome.”

“Goodness, you sound like robbers planning your next job.”

“I’m sure you’ve done the same when you were a kid, back home,” he said.

“Nope, never made out in a museum, but I’ve wanted to,” I replied, staring Elio in the eye. That time at the Dürer exhibition I’d so yearned to touch him it had hurt not to. He held my gaze and I knew he’d understood.

“Jack’s sense of humour still catches me by surprise,” I said later, after Marzia had left us to go spend some time with her parents.

“I’m not sure it was entirely a joke. Moreau’s women look a bit like your mother: tall, slim, long-legged. Maybe Jack, like Breton, was transfigured by them when he was a teenager, without even knowing it.”

“You seem to know a lot about this,” I said, “I wonder why.”

We were walking towards the metro, taking our time in the knowledge that we didn’t really have to be anywhere.

“Maybe I wasn’t as innocent as you thought I was, when you met me.”
I knew I had been his first man, but I didn’t mind playing along.

“Weren’t you?”

“You haven’t encountered my French alter-ego yet.”

“Do you turn into a different person when you come here?”

He tucked a loose curl behind his ear. “Peut-être,” he said, in a low, caressing tone.

I had noticed that passers-by sized us up in a brazen, open manner; men and women, without distinction, seemed to have no shame when it came to seduction.

Draguer, hitting on strangers, was not restricted to night-clubs and dedicated areas, but could happen anywhere: on a bus, train or even while one was shopping for groceries.

We could have held hands, but I sensed that he wanted me to see this other side of him which I had not yet experienced. Maybe this was a game we could afford to play.

The Museum was, as predicted, nearly empty. We met a couple of elderly Japanese tourists who were on their way out and looked disappointed and slightly bewildered, probably at the fact that taking photos was not allowed. I had my camera in the pocket of my jacket and I intended to use it, uncaring of the rules.

I paid for my ticket and he for his.

We loitered inside the various rooms of Moreau’s old apartment: Elio lingered in the corridor in front of the Burne-Jones photos, while I was admiring the collection of antiques in the Cabinet de Réception. I loved the black lacquered bureau with its shelves packed tight with precious books, the glass case with brass doors filled with ceramics and other objets d’art and even the William Morris-like wall-paper.

Together, but still without talking or touching, we visited the other rooms on the ground floor and eventually ascended the narrow spiral staircase to the studios on the upper floors.

After the stifling, over-furnished atmosphere of the apartment, the second floor museum seemed as vast and airy as a cathedral. The guard was ensconced in his armchair by the radiator and he blinked his eyes open for a moment, gazed at us and decided we weren’t worthy of his attention.

The most impressive canvas was a gigantic oil painting called Les Prétendents, The Suitors, which depicted the return of Ulysses and the massacre of Penelope’s suitors. The dead men were beautiful effeminates: languid, pale and androgynous.

I glanced at Elio’s profile and realized he could have been one of them. Even dressed in his padded parka, with his long neck hidden beneath the coils of his scarf, he was not of this century.

Still in silence, we climbed the stairs to the top floor where the Salome was.

It was in the second room, together with another beautiful painting entitled L’Apparition, The Apparition. I took the camera out and snapped a few photos.

“She’s also known as the Salome Tattooed,” he said, as though talking to himself.

It was a magnificent work, very reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite art. I suspected that London would
have taken to Moreau’s peculiar talent more than Paris seemed to.

“She’s stunning,” I said, with the same nonchalance he’d been sporting.

“Yes,” he agreed then he turned towards me and, wrapping his hand around the back of my neck, he pulled me closer and pressed his lips to mine. I let him take control and he went for it, shoving his tongue inside my mouth, licking everywhere. I moaned and he became even more aggressive.

“Tu aimes ça?” he growled, when we broke apart.

I nodded, afraid that my ruined voice would break the spell.

“Come home with me?”

Another nod, more kisses; they were breathless, lewd and biting kisses, and his hands on me were unrelenting, a narrative of fierce want.

I could hardly stand the long journey back to Le Marais, especially since I wasn’t allowed to show that I knew him, that we were together. I wanted to tell the world that he was mine, that they could not have him.

“Want something to drink?” he said, once we were back inside Mathieu’s kitchen.

The house was empty; it was only around six and Marzia wouldn’t be back with Momo until much later.

“A beer, if you have some,” I replied; he went to fridge and pulled out two bottles of Kronenbourg.

“Come,” he said, and guided me towards the blue bedroom.

“Is this too bizarre for you?” he asked, the bizarre uttered in a French accent.

We were lying in bed, side by side: he was in his boxers and I was naked.

“What, that you want to read me a smutty novel? No, it’s quite a turn-on, actually.”

“I will translate it for you,” he said, playing with the hair on my chest.

“You like that?”

“I’m like Renaud Camus: I love hairy guys. What about you?”

I didn’t know whether I was allowed to touch, but I stared him up and down, licking my lips.

“Pretty boys drive me crazy.”

He blushed and bent closer to suck and bite at my nipple. I was already hard, had been since the kisses at the Museum. I buried my hand in his curls and held him there. My heart was pulsing in my throat and I had started to shiver.

“I’ll read a bit,” he said, after a while, “Touch yourself if it excites you. I like to watch.”

The first story was set in Paris, where the author had picked up un mec at a club called Manhattan
and followed him home. There was little conversation between them; they undressed, kissed and immediately the narrator thrust his face between the other man’s buttocks and stuck his tongue in, as deep as it went. He started opening the man up with his fingers, but he had no lube, only saliva.

Elio read: “I have my head down against his balls, deep in the incredible forest of hair at his crotch,” and stared at my fist, as it pumped my painfully erect cock. His hand was still working my nipples and, as he went on describing the novel’s fictional carnal congress, I knew that I couldn’t wait any longer.

“I’m going to come,” I moaned, and he threw the book to one side and brought his face close to my groin.

“I want it all over my face,” he begged, and that was it for me. I spurted rope after rope of semen on his rosy cheeks, on his parted lips, his chin and even on his forehead and eyebrows. In the ecstasy of it, his eyes had rolled inside his head and he was licking my come off his lips, his tongue darting out as far as it could in order to capture as much of it as possible.

“Can I come on your chest?” he asked, his face and hair a veritable sticky mess.

I helped him take off his boxers, which were soaking wet at the front, and I wanted to grab his cock or at least fondle his balls, but he didn’t let me.

“Finger me,” he ordered, breathing hard through his nose.

My hand was still soaked with ejaculate, so it was easy to penetrate him. He was already so worked up that as soon as I breached him, he cried out and sprayed my torso with his come.

“Oh god,” he chanted, as his release gushed out of him, in great abundance.

When he was finally done, he collapsed on top of me and pressed his lips to my neck.

“That was amazing,” he whispered.

“Yes,” I agreed, caressing down his sweaty back.

“You liked the story.”

“The story and you.”

He snorted a laugh.

“Even my French alter-ego?”

“Bien sûr,” I replied, feeling his smile against my throat.
Chapter Summary

The boys meet the master of the house (and his partner).

Chapter Notes

Le Divan was a real bookshop which has now been replaced by a Dior boutique. I've invented Thierry.

Ginsberg and Glass met in New York in 1988, so I took a bit of a licence there.

Je-m'en-foutisme: ‘don’t give a toss’ attitude.

AIDES: French community-based non-profit organisation that was founded in 1984 by Daniel Defert, following the death by AIDS of his partner Michel Foucault.

We had chosen the room because of its spectacular blue walls but also for its adjoining bathroom, which reminded us of Italy.

It was tiny – containing only a sink, a toilet and a shower cubicle – but we had it all to ourselves.

When I walked in, Oliver was relieving himself: he was naked, dishevelled and barefoot.

Used as I was to seeing him like this, it had always been in a familiar environment: either our flat in London or my house in Italy. Yes, we had been to Brighton with friends, but the house had been full of other guests, so we'd had to be on our best behaviour.

Paris was different, another world. And this house, with its Second Empire sofas and Transavantgarde paintings, disseminated with books and reeking of culture and joss sticks, was an intoxicating blend of tradition and modernity, of restraint and je-m'en-foutisme.

I went up to him and embraced him from behind; I was undressed too, and grimy with semen and sweat.

“Not sick of me yet?” he asked, leaning slightly into me.

The bathroom tiles were cool and uneven under my feet. By contrast, his skin seemed even smoother and warmer.

“Jamais,” I replied, licking the outline of a shoulder-blade.

He flushed the toilet, turned around and kissed the skin between my eyebrows.
“You taste of me,” he murmured.

“And you of me,” I replied, licking my upper lip.

“Get in the shower, you devil!”

“Only if you join me,” I said, taking him by the hand.

He let out an exasperated sigh, but I knew he was only faking.

We sponged each other’s back and he insisted on washing my hair. When he rinsed it, he brushed the flattened curls away from my face and stared into my eyes. His were the purest cornflower blue and ineffably sad.

“What is it?” I asked.

His thumb was circling my cheekbone, pressing on it.

“You look so young like this, so fragile.”

“Like a drowned rat, you mean?”

He laughed.

“More like a washed-up kitten,” he said, closing his hand around my neck.

“Is that what I am, your human cat?”

“You purr and snore like one.”

“I don’t snore.”

He stroked the hollow of my throat then bent down to lap the water from it.

“You’re right: it’s a snuffle rather than a full-blooded snore. It’s very cute.”

I slapped the apricot, which he seemed to like, so I did it again, more forcefully.

“Did I offend you?” he said, biting my earlobe.

“Are you fishing for a bit of spanking?”

The water was spraying down between us, but we didn’t notice. He had that glassy, faraway gaze which denoted deep arousal and I was in the same boat.

“If we don’t get out of here soon,” he whispered.

“Later,” I said, even though the palm of my hand was still cradling the curve of his ass.

“Yes, please,” he replied, taking a step back.

I had not lowered my gaze farther than his chest or I would have seen his cock straining to get closer to my body. I knew it all the same, because mine had been mimicking his.

“Don’t wear anything underneath,” I pleaded.
He had put on a midnight-blue cable knit jumper with a shawl collar which he usually wore over a t-shirt. Without it, his hairy upper chest was very much in evidence; his cheeks and throat were unshaven since that morning and his hair artfully tousled. I was soon to regret what I had just requested of him.

“You are not wearing anything underneath those,” he replied, pointing at my black jeans, which were skin-tight.

“Why bother?” I said, turning round to show off my ass.

“Your French alter-ego is a menace.”

“You have seen nothing yet.”

We had left the door ajar ever since we’d come out of the bathroom, and at that moment we heard the muffled sound of footsteps.

“Usurpers,” I whispered.

“We are,” he said, smiling.

The voices came from the salon, a vast room we’d only caught a glimpse on as we’d gone up the stairs.

Mathieu and a dark-haired man were standing by one of the shelves, evidently looking for a book.

“Hello,” I said, clearing my throat.

“Le petit Elio et son copain,” he announced, before remembering that Oliver was American. “Elio and his friend,” he translated. I doubted his companion was listening, considering how entranced he was by Oliver.

“Thierry,” the man said, with a bright smile.

Introductions were made, cheeks kissed and hands shaken.

Mathieu explained that they had come to pick up some reference books he needed for an article he was writing.

“I thought you worked for that Italian newspaper Samuel always reads,” said Oliver.

“On a freelance basis, yes; I like to preserve my independence and you can’t do that if you are an employee.”

“I always tell him he should pack it in and work for me instead,” said Thierry. He spoke English with a very slight accent, part-French, part-American.

“Why don’t we sit down and have a civilised conversation,” said our host.

“He means we should get something to drink,” interjected Thierry, who was still ogling Oliver.

Mathieu wanted a martini and since Oliver was famously good at mixing cocktails, he was soon busy preparing drinks while the master of the house went to fetch the ice.
“I was told you are a composer and an accomplished pianist,” Thierry said, once we were alone. He had piercing grey eyes which would have unsettled me had I been interested in him. As it was, I returned his gaze with confidence.

“I’ve just started to compose, but I have been playing since I was a kid.”

“There’s a Pleyel in Mathieu’s studio. After dinner, maybe you could indulge us.”

“I’d certainly like to see the piano.”

He gave me a half-smile full of mischief.

“What, I mean, how, which one?” I babbled.

He laughed.

“I’ll tell you the story in a minute. Let’s just wait for the drinks, so that I can blame my indiscretion on the alcohol.”

We had our drinks while sitting on Bauhaus designer armchairs, which Oliver openly praised, caressing the buttery leather with devotion.

Thierry was clearly admiring him way more than the furniture, but his partner didn’t seem bothered. They were obviously very happy together: laughing at each other’s anecdotes, finishing each other’s sentences, always ready to compliment what the other had said or done. I liked that, and how tactile they were, a sure sign of a long, seldom-disguised intimacy.

After his second cocktail, Thierry embarked on his story. It turned out that he was the owner of a famous book store in Saint-Germain-des-Prés – Le Divan – which before Thierry’s time had published an eponymous review mostly dedicated to Stendhal’s oeuvre. At the mention of the author of Armance, Oliver gazed at me and I couldn’t help but blush. He remembers everything, I thought, as warmth spread through my body like wildfire.

Thankfully the phone rang, providing a diversion.

“Don’t mind me,” said Mathieu, as he left the room to take the call, “I already know how it ends.”

“I invited Ginsberg to Paris for a fundraising event and he told me that he’d met Glass in New York and spoken to him about it, asking him if he could help. Glass said yes, but he wanted to know the poem Ginsberg would read. The following day the composer phoned him and told him the music was ready, but if he wanted to hear it, Ginsberg had better find a way to fly him to Paris.”

“Because he doesn’t allow anybody else to perform his music,” I said.
“Yes, he’s very insistent about the copyright of his works. Ginsberg got in touch, I confirmed I would pay his expenses and got much more than my money’s worth.”

“How did you get this score,” asked Oliver, “Did you steal it or something?”

Thierry chuckled, seemingly delighted that my boyfriend had just accused him of theft.

“Nothing of the sort,” he replied. “He autographed a copy of the score for Ginsberg who gifted it to me as a memento of the event. I know that Glass will sue me if I so much as speak about it publicly, but I know you won’t betray me.”

“Our lips are sealed, “I said, “But you haven’t told us which poem it was.”

“Wichita Vortex Sutra,” he replied.

Oliver loved that poem, and so did I.

“Why haven’t we heard about it?” I asked, “Not even through the grapevine.”

“It was an AIDES fundraiser. We try to not beat that drum too loudly.”

We nodded, silently.

“And you have it with you?” I asked, because I couldn’t wait to get my hands on it.

“In the studio,” he replied, “Together with Ginsberg’s collected poems which he autographed for me.”

If he was boasting, he didn’t appear to be: he only seemed genuinely elated that he’d met two great artists and witnessed their collaboration. Oliver had his eyes fixed on me: they were bright and happy, as if he’d been the one to gift me with that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“It was your friend,” said Mathieu, when he returned. “It’s snowing in Milan, so the flight’s been delayed. She’s booked a room at the airport, they’ll be here tomorrow.”

“My parents will arrive too.”

“Can’t wait to show them around,” he replied, “Their room is in the attic. I have had it converted into a mini-apartment, with bathroom and a small kitchenette. That way, they can have their peace and quiet. This is an old house with very thick walls.”

“And what about you?” asked Oliver. “We don’t want to force you out of your own home.”

Mathieu shook his head.

“Thierry has a barge and an apartment above the shop: I usually stay with him unless I have to work, and I am on holiday now.”

“What about your article?” I said.

“Oh that,” intervened Thierry, “It’s something he promised one of our friends, but it can wait.”

“That’s you alright: mañana, that’s your philosophy in a nutshell,” Mathieu quipped, nudging his partner’s shoulder. The latter was unfazed, even a little bit proud.

“Pleasure first and foremost,” he declared, “Life’s too short, especially for our kind, these days.”
We drank to that, glad that we were healthy, happy and together.

After dinner, which consisted of spit-roast chicken, fries and green salad – all but the salad purchased from a local rôtisserie – we adjourned to the studio, where, at last, I was to tackle the latest work of my favourite living composer.

What I wasn’t ready for was the instrument itself, a shiny Pleyel Victorian grand piano, which was almost too magnificent to be used by the likes of me.

Thierry and Oliver were deep in conversation: they had been talking about literature all through dinner: the eventual French translation of Oliver’s work on Heraclitus and a possible collaboration on his next books. I had seldom seen Oliver so engaged and challenged by another person’s opinions, and certainly never by someone as attractive as Thierry.

Mathieu had noticed something was amiss.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered in French, pouring red wine into my glass, “He likes beauty, but only in a contemplative sense. He would never cross that line.”

I nodded, my gaze pinned to Oliver’s throat and the tuft of chest hair just underneath it. I gulped down the wine and with it the anguish I felt, imagining Thierry’s mouth on that throat, Oliver’s fingers in the man’s thick, wavy black hair.

Don’t be stupid, I’d told myself, but now all was forgotten in favour of that splendid piano.

“Here they are,” Thierry exclaimed, grabbing a large leather-bound volume and extracting a sheaf of music sheets from it.

I didn’t dare touch them, afraid that I would spoil them.

“Spread them out on the piano, please,” I pleaded, and he complied.

A hand cupped the back of my neck: I knew that hand so well; I never wanted to be parted from it.

“What do you think?” Oliver murmured.

“I don’t know what to say,” I replied, “This and the poem, those words and these notes,” I tried to explain, but my throat was closing down.

“Play it in the manner of Elio Perlman,” he said, and with that joke he took the weight of expectation off my shoulders.

I did my best, which was several rungs below the genius who’d composed the piece, but as my fingers touched the keys all that mattered was the transcendent beauty of the music. I knew Oliver’s eyes were caressing me, that his hands would have done the same had we been alone.

When it was over, there was a long moment of silence, which Thierry was the first to break.

“You are more than accomplished, my dear,” he said, looking at me in the same way he’d been gazing at Oliver until then. “You’re a real virtuoso.”
“That he is,” Mathieu agreed.

I didn’t know what to reply, but Oliver came to my rescue.

“Maybe we should have a nightcap to celebrate,” he suggested.

We drank vintage brandy and spent some more time talking about Ginsberg’s poetry and, of all things, the Clemente painting that was hanging in the corridor leading to our room.

When Mathieu proposed a second round, it was Thierry who said no.

“They must be exhausted,” he said, probably noticing how tired I was.

“A little bit,” replied Oliver.

We said goodnight and left them to their own devices.
The Sleeping Beauty

Chapter Summary

A bit of angst (because Elio will ALWAYS be a drama queen) and a museum visit.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all you lovely people for commenting on this story which is essentially just a bit of fun and games.

The Cowboy is trick no 18 in Renaud Camus' book (another instance of random luck of the universe - there will be more in the next chapter)

I wanted what Mathieu and his partner had: I’d been aware of it already, but the events of the evening had made it even clearer.

Our rented flat near Waterloo had been the locus of our reunion and I loved it, but it wasn’t ours, and besides it wasn’t spacious enough to invite friends over for longer than a few days.

It was time, I thought, to make a further commitment, another step towards our future together as a couple. If we couldn’t get married, we could still get a mortgage to purchase a house. I was sure that the Perlmans would have wanted to help, and maybe my mother too, but I’d rather we did it on our own, with no external interference. It didn’t make sense financially, but in this instance, sentiment overrode economics.

Obviously, it wasn’t only up to me and if Elio insisted, I’d let him have his way, because more than anything else, I wanted him to be happy.

The evening had been a resounding success: we had spent it with two interesting men who led a fulfilling life and who had appreciated Elio’s talent. Despite his tendency to brag, he was often insecure and even though he’d learnt to keep his self-loathing tendencies at bay, he still put himself down far too often for my liking.

We entered our bedroom and I was about to comment on his impeccable rendition of the Glass composition, when he pressed me against the door, pulling my sweater down on one side, baring my upper chest and shoulder. He buried his face into my breastbone, licking skin and hair, breathing rapidly through his nose. I felt his mouth move to the crease of my armpit and his tongue sliding inside, seeking the salt of my sweat.

“Cowboy,” he said, his voice already cracked with desire.

That was not what I’d expected him to say.

“What?”
“The book by Camus,” he replied, nibbling my collarbone.

I was caressing him, but keeping it light, letting him set the pace. I had an inkling that because of his excitement and tiredness, he’d want to use me for a while and I was more than willing to submit to him.

“Tell me about it,” I said, and he guided me to the bed, laying me down on top of it. He undressed me down to my underwear then he came to rest alongside me, his mouth to my ear, eager to tell his story.

“The cowboy is the most attractive trick in the book,” he said in hushed, urgent tones, “The narrator meets him in New York, in one of these gay book-stores where you go to have sex, in Christopher Street.”

Elio’s hand was on my crotch: I was wearing boxers and my cock was already pushing out of the slit.

“I thought of you when I first read that chapter.”

He shoved his hand inside and scooped my dick out before clutching it at the base.

“I imagined that you’d been there and some stranger had done this to you.”

He stroked it from root to tip, teasing the gland with his thumb. His jaw tightened with what could have been anger, lust or a combination of both.

“The way he described this man... his long, thick cock, his heavy balls, his muscled thighs,” he was almost biting out the words, and his other hand was in my hair, just above my ear; he tugged it viciously enough to make my eyes water.

“I’d let you go and I had never wanted you more.”

His eyes were all pupil.

“He touched the cowboy’s ass,” he continued, his hand leaving my dick, pushing my boxers down my legs then grabbing my behind, “The man’s buttocks were round and hard.” He clawed at my flesh and I turned on my side to grant him easier access. While I was at it, I got rid of my boxers and was finally naked. He was still clothed but had removed his shoes.

“The author was worried that the cowboy was too handsome for him, that he would not reciprocate,” he gritted his teeth and smacked my ass.

I moaned and my fingers closed around my erection.

“Don’t,” he ordered, and slapped the crease between my buttocks.

“Sorry, but please, please;” I no longer knew what I was saying.

“And I kept imagining you in that dingy shop, half-naked; this stranger’s hands and tongue all over you,” he bit my lips, pulled my hair, spanked the back of my thighs. My balls ached and I was leaking all over my stomach. I needed his skin on mine, his enveloping warmth where now there was only distant fury.

“Did you ever do that?” he asked, looking into my eyes. His gaze was sharp as a knife, but I could not read what he wanted to hear. I opted for the truth. Truth will set you free, said the man on the
cross we’d been taught to disbelieve. But the power of that concept had always prevailed over religious precepts.

“Not there, but elsewhere, yes. I let strangers take me.”

He had grabbed a fistful of my ass, nails digging into the flesh.

“Did that make you happy?”

A harsh laugh escaped me.

“Happy? No, not even close.”

“Do you ever miss that: the faceless men, the thrill, the mystery?”

I traced his lips with my finger.

“You can’t miss what you never wanted.”

His hand left my hair and travelled down to my jaw; he held it as though it were made of crystal.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he said, still with that blend of awe and anger.

“It never mattered, not without you,” I replied, and he nodded, perhaps concluding that I was telling the truth or maybe just because he’d felt the same about himself.

I couldn’t stand it any longer.

“I want your skin,” I said, and moved to unbutton his shirt, but he stayed my hands.

“Don’t,” he warned, and quickly shed all his clothes.

For a wild moment I imagined what it would have been like if he never allowed me to touch him again; if he teased and teased then denied me his body, his mouth, his tenderness. This was, had to be a game, but it scared me all the same.

“I’ll ruin you,” he growled, and threw himself on me, sucking bruises on my belly and hips. He avoided my crotch, but bit into the inside of my thighs.

“Pull your legs up,” he ordered and I obeyed him.

When his tongue pushed into me, I lost it.

“Fuck me, please, you have to, please,” I begged.

I was past caring, beyond shame, on the other side of abjection.

“You say this to all your men, cowboy,” he sneered, and drove his cock inside me, to the hilt.

“Elio,” I screamed, because I feared the pleasure was going to kill me.

He snapped out of his odd trance and brought his lips to mine.

“You do crazy things to me,” he murmured, before engaging me in a wet, sensual, never-ending kiss.

We made love slowly, his gaze locked with mine, his breath on my lips, his cock going deeper than even before.
I painted his torso with my release and he filled me to the brim.

“No more of this,” I whispered, and he nodded, as we caressed each other’s faces.

The last of the poison was finally out.

Later, before we surrendered to sleep, I got him to confess his troubles.

“Is there really a cowboy or did you just make him up?”

“Here,” he said, showing me the chapter in question.

“It was Thierry that got you all worked up, wasn’t it?”

He sighed and placed a kiss at the base of my throat.

“I know he didn’t mean anything by it, but he was ogling you and he’s so, I don’t know, perfect for you: grown-up, successful, funny, attractive-”

“It almost sounds like I should be the jealous one, especially considering that he’s friends with Philip Glass. By the way, after your performance, he completely forgot that I existed,” I joked.

“What were you thinking about, before I assaulted you?” he asked, pulling me into his arms.

“That I want a home for us,” I replied, nuzzling the underside of his jaw.

“Buying one, you mean?”

“I was thinking we could get a joint mortgage, but if you prefer—”

I couldn’t finish that sentence: it dissolved inside Elio’s mouth.

I woke up to the sound of a violent rainstorm.

Elio was already awake.

“Nothing like cuddling under the covers when the weather’s horrible,” he said, and with a little moan of satisfaction he sprawled on top of me, resting his cheek above my heart.

“I feel for your parents,” I said, combing my fingers through the mess of Elio’s curls, “Between the snow in Italy and the rain here, it’s not the most pleasant of journeys.”

“They are used to travelling in any kind of weather. Dad enjoys challenges.”

“Sounds familiar,” I joked.

I felt him prod a patch of skin on my belly.

“Sorry about this,” he said, referring to the marks he’d made the night before.

“Don’t be,” I replied, “It made me hard.”

“Was it the pain?”
“It was you.”

He snorted.

“We’ll be perpetually horny,” he said.

“Horny and hungry,” I countered, and my stomach rumbled in agreement.

“Message received, loud and clear,” he laughed and darted out of bed.

Downstairs, the house was quiet and dark.

We went to the kitchen and started to prepare coffee and toast some bread.

“Do you think Mathieu and Thierry are still asleep?” he asked.

“Could be, or maybe they left already. Still okay to go to the Louvre?”

“I can hardly wait.”

The phone rang, echoing in the silence.

“I’ll go,” he said, and came back five minutes later.

“It was Mathieu. They left early to go to the store, but he will collect my parents from the airport and drive them here. I told him about our plans and he asked if we could meet for lunch at the Voltaire at half past one.”

“Sounds great. I wonder what happened to Marzia and Momo.”

He winked.

“Hotel room, long time apart: you know how the story goes.”

“Yeah, that’s going to be the two of us when you’re famous and touring around the world.”

He clicked his tongue.

“That’ll never happen.”

“Trust me, it will.”

Thankfully, we had pre-booked our tickets, because the queue – even in that weather – was horrendous. Scaffolding was cocooning what was supposed to be an imposing glass pyramid at the entrance of the museum.

“It’s grander than I imagined,” I said, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the building we were about to enter.

We had decided to limit our first visit to the ground floor: we would return after Christmas, when it was less busy.

We had jotted down the names of the works we absolutely wanted to see, but as usual we were
Reclining on a billowy mattress sculpted by Bernini, in room 17 of the Greek Art section, was the Sleeping Hermaphroditus. I had seen a mediocre bronze copy of it at the Met and it had left no lasting impression, but this, I couldn’t take my eyes off it. The short curly hair and the graceful back were boyish while the front, despite the male genitalia, was exquisitely feminine.

Of all the statues I had ever seen, including the Venus of Milo of which we had just caught a glimpse through the dense crowd, this was the most entrancing. I wished I could caress its curves and maybe even press my lips to the cold stone.

Elio was - I knew it even without using words - as bewitched as I was.

“It looks so modern compared to the Venus,” he said.

“It’s the mattress. It’s stunning and very realistic, but at the same time it’s an ordinary object, not fit for the spawn of two gods.”

“Joe Orton meets Polycles,” he suggested, smiling.

I was sure he would get it.

“The folds of the sheet and the way it wraps around the calf and the forearm: it’s messy and sensual.”

“More sensual than that statue we dug up from Lake Garda?”

“Different.”

Elio was taking pictures with his new Polaroid camera: he showed me the close-up of the statue’s face. The medium and format made it seem even more timeless.

“It reminds me of you, how you were when I met you.”

We were being pushed aside by a group of Spanish or South American tourists, but we stood our ground.

“Swinburne in his poem said that only despair awaits the lover of an androgyne.”

“But he also said that strong desire would cast out despair.”

“Two things turn all his life and blood to fire,” he quoted, gazing down at the Hermaphroditus. I had to take a picture then, of their two heads so close together, one of marble and one of flesh.

“A strong desire begot on great despair,  
A great despair cast out by strong desire,” I replied, and he laughed.

“What?”

“I’m happy.”

We were done with despair, but the fire was boundless.
The Banquette de Fumoir

Chapter Summary

The Perlmans arrive in Paris and the boys try something new.

Chapter Notes

The Voltaire was once a very exclusive restaurant and its menu included a dish named after James Lord, who is the character played by Armie Hammer in Final Portrait. Random luck of the universe strikes again.

The Chez Jo Goldenberg restaurant attack was a bombing and shooting attack on 9 August 1982 carried out by the Abu Nidal Organization.

We were walking across the Pont Royal when the rain stopped and the sky cleared. For a moment it seemed as if we’d been transported inside a Turner painting only for it to be transmuted into a Constable. The mist had dissipated and the sun was trying to break through the banks of grey clouds.

Oliver stopped and turned round to snap a picture of the Louvre while I did the same with his profile: the photograph of a man taking a photograph.

“Am I really that interesting?” he asked, smiling.

“Have you ever heard of Eugène Atget?”

“Yes, oddly enough I have. I saw a collection of his photos at the MoMA two years ago; interesting man, as obsessed with Paris as Wilhelm Rudolph was with Dresden.”

“Think of me as the Oliver Perlman’s chronicler, your own private Atget.”

“As long as you don’t sell me off to the highest bidder,” he joked.

“Who knows, if you become famous then my photos will be worth a fortune.”

“I write books about ancient philosophers: I’m not the one who’s going to make it big.”

“Maybe you should start taking pictures of me then,” I suggested, in jest.

“What do you mean, ‘start’?” he countered, taking me by the hand.

We kept walking like this, fingers laced together, oblivious of the cold and of the traffic on the bridge.

“How did you get a reservation here is what I’d like to know,” I said, after we’d hugged my parents
and asked them about their journey. I’d been curious ever since Mathieu’s phone call, but had not asked him since it had seemed impolite.

We had been seated in one of the handful of secluded booths, away from the draughty front entrance. The Voltaire was a tiny but exclusive restaurant, so exclusive that it even snubbed the grading of the Michelin guide.

“Thierry knows everybody.”

“And you don’t?” said my father, slapping his friend’s shoulder.

Mum was talking to Oliver about Judith, asking him whether he’d had news of her trip to the States with Jack.

“They are staying at my aunt’s, that’s all I know,” I heard him say, and she smiled and murmured something in his ear.

“I know dusty old academics like yours truly, but he knows all the celebrities, don’t you?”

Thierry didn’t even pretend to be humble about it, treating his partner’s assertion as a matter of fact.

“Paris is such a small world and I’m a bit of a concierge; how do you say in English? A gossip,” he replied, while Mathieu contemplated him with amused admiration. The waiter brought as our menus while one of his colleagues poured us some Suze as aperitif. Either Thierry had ordered it in advance or, most probably, he was a Voltaire habitué.

Oliver looked at the list of dishes and frowned.

“Oeuf James Lord, what is this about?” he asked.

“Nothing special, just hard-boiled eggs with mayonnaise,” I replied.

“Yes, but who is this Lord person and why does he have a dish named after him?”

“He’s a vain, annoying man, but he used to know Picasso and Giacometti and he’s friends with Dora Maar. I think they wanted to take this egg dish off the menu but he made a scene so they had to put it back on,” Thierry explained.

“It’s a very cheap dish,” said Mathieu.

“I think I have read one of his books,” intervened my father, “He’s a good writer.”

“And a generous host, but when he drinks too much he becomes a bully, plus he can’t stand women.”

My mother laughed.

“Maybe I should try this egg of his,” she said, winking at dad.

“We can do better than that,” said Thierry, and Oliver agreed. He couldn’t stand that sort of vanity nor could he stomach gay men who disliked women.

In the end we opted for sea-food: moules marinières, bouillabaisse and seared salmon with mustard vinaigrette, all accompanied by Veuve Clicquot.

By the second bottle, we were all feeling quite festive; after all, it was Christmas Eve and even if we
did not celebrate it, we could still act like we did.

“Anything planned for the afternoon?”

“We should maybe buy some groceries for tomorrow and Santo Stefano, since all the shops will be closed,” said my mother.

“Don’t worry about it,” replied Mathieu, “I have taken care of that already, but you’re coming to Thierry’s dinner party tomorrow night surely?”

“We don’t want to disturb,” started my father, but Thierry interrupted, “I won’t hear of it. You have to be there, all of you. Boys?” he asked, arching his eyebrows.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind us there,” I replied.

“Mind? You’ll play for us and who knows, you might even get noticed by a certain someone.”

I tried to find out who the mysterious guest was, but to no avail. Oliver was laughing at my fruitless attempts and Mathieu passed his cigarette case around to try and distract us. We smoked and ordered coffee and Pernod.

“We could go to the Orsay museum or is it closed already?” said Oliver.

“They close at six, so you have at least three hours at your disposal,” replied Mathieu. “I would come with you, but I promised Thierry I would provide moral support. The store is very busy, what with people browsing and buying presents. Books are a very popular last minute gift.”

His partner grimaced as though he was suffering from a bout of indigestion.

“It’s like les invasions barbares,” he agreed, miming a full-body shiver.

“But surely it’s a good thing: it means people are still reading, despite all the modern distractions,” said my father.

“Or maybe they just use the books as bibelots, to decorate their homes.”

“Like Mathieu?” I said, and felt Oliver’s foot against my shin.

“What, I mean, sorry I didn’t want to-”

“Elio,” my father chided, shaking his head.

“He’s right: there are piles of books in every corner of my house. What can I say, I like being surprised by them, you know?”

“Yes,” replied my mother, “I often do the same thing: leave them around the house until I forget about them, so that when I find them again it’s like a pleasant discovery.”

“Précisément,” he agreed, raising his glass to her.

It was only three and yet already dusk when he emerged from the restaurant. The weather had gone from humid to freezing cold, but the chilly air was welcome after the copious amounts of food and alcohol we’d ingested.
Thierry and Mathieu walked down Rue du Bac, while we strode along Quai Anatole de France, gazing at the river and at the *bateaux mouches* sliding by, with their cargoes of tourists.

Oliver and dad were a few steps ahead, deep in conversation.

“Tell me about you,” mum said, wrapping her arm around my waist.

“We’ll be volunteering at a clinic in Soho, starting in mid-January. It’s just a reception job, but at least we’ll be doing *something.*”

“It’s a splendid idea, darling. Will you and Oliver be on the same shift?”

“Yes, it works better that way, since there’s no risk that we won’t get on.”

“Isn’t there?”

I shrugged.

“We argue sometimes, but it’s never serious.”

“Arguments are healthier than silence.”

“We tried silence once and it didn’t work.”

“Of course not, my dear; Oliver may be able to, but you couldn’t. Your face is an open book.”

“He’s not able to, not anymore.”

“Because he knows he can trust you completely.”

“I would never use it against him. I’d rather hurt myself than him.”

She kissed my cheek.

“I’m sure he’d say the same about you.”

“Yeah,” I replied, recalling that evening when my father had uttered these words and I had cried because Oliver was gone and I was sure I’d never see him again.

We were surprised and delighted at finding the museum half-empty.

I had read about the transformation of the old Gare d’Orsay into a museum, the difficulty of converting that unwieldy space - with the vast, empty vault about the old tracks - into three levels of art gallery. The result was magnificent, airy and bathed in natural light.

“I think the old station was the set of a film, but I can’t remember which,” Oliver said, looking into my eyes and beaming.

“Orson Welles’ version of *The Trial* by Kafka,” I replied, returning the smile.

“I was sure you’d know.”

He was echoing the words he’d spoken at the Brunswick Centre, when he was still with Tim, but this time it was a code between us which meant: ‘we can say this, because we own the past and it can no longer tear us apart’.
Three hours were not enough to appreciate the greatness of the Impressionists, the genius of artists such as Van Gogh and Cézanne, but we absorbed as much of that beauty as we could.

Towards the end of our visit, mum and I left Oliver and dad in front of Derain’s *Charing Cross Bridge*, while we admired Guimard’s *Banquette de Fumoir*.

“Looks like it’s sprouted that little table,” I said, “What’s Jarrah?”

“It’s Eucalyptus, I think. I love the curvy shape and the colour of the upholstery.”

“Mathieu has something similar in his salon, but without that shelf on top.”

“Maybe not very comfortable, *mon petit*, but a feast for the eyes.”

I’d never cared for that, distracted as I’d been by the presence of Oliver in our flat, by the sheer bliss of finding him there every morning and night, but things were going to change soon.

“Oliver wants us to buy a house.”

She turned towards me and caressed my face.

“We can help, if you’ll let us.”

“He’s only just mentioned it, but I think he’d like us to do it on our own.”

“Yes, I see. What do you think?”

“I agree with him. It will mean so much more that way. But you can always buy us some furniture, like this bench,” I joked.

“We’ll see what we can do,” she replied, chuckling.

“What’s so funny?” asked my father, wrapping us both in a loose embrace.

“You tell him.”

I looked at Oliver, who was standing next to my father.

“I want this bench for our new home,” I said.

“Oh? Are you moving into a new apartment?”

Oliver gave me a mock-scolding look and ruffled my hair.

After he’d explained our plans to my father - who was happy and a bit disappointed that he wouldn’t be allowed to participate in the expenditure - it was time to leave.

“If you could take one of those works with you, what would you choose?” I asked Oliver, as we walked arm-in-arm towards the metro.

He thought about it for a while.

“A Van Gogh, probably; he believed he was a failure and that nobody would ever care for his
“And you’d give him all the love he’d been denied?”
“I have a weakness for insecure artists.”
“Are you comparing me to Vincent Van Gogh?”
“Not yet, but he wasn’t the genius who painted Starry Night right from the start. He got there eventually, with a lot of practice.”
“You are not even kidding.”
“Thierry was impressed too and he’s heard Philip Glass play.”
“I’m only a competent pianist, nothing beyond that.”
“Like I said: insecure artists,” he repeated, pressing the palm of my hand to his chest. I was convinced that I could feel his heart beating through the thick layers of winter clothing.

That evening we had dinner at a Jewish Deli in Rue des Rosiers, a short walk from Mathieu’s place. It still bore the marks of the terrorist attack that had devastated it a few years before. Oliver recalled his parents talking about it and warning him against travelling to Europe the following summer, one of the many pretexts they’d used to try and hold him there, prisoner of the same unhappiness which had dogged their lives.

Mum and dad were exhausted and retired to their room as soon as we got back. There was no trace of Momo and Marzia, but it wasn’t surprising since unlike us, they and their families did celebrate Christmas Eve. We went to bed too, because it was cold and Oliver’s body was my favourite source of heat.

“I was thinking about long-distance relationships,” I said, once my legs were entwined with his and my head was nestled under his chin.

“We won’t have one. If you go on tour, I’ll take time off work, even a sabbatical if that’s necessary.”

“But if we have a mortgage, we’ll need a steady income.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Let’s assume we’ll be apart for a short time.”

He sighed and caressed my back.

“Where is this going?” he asked.

“We’ve never had phone sex.”

“What?”

I felt the reverberations of his laughter, from his chest to mine.
“When you talk dirty to-”
“I know what phone sex is, but it sounds absolutely ridiculous.”
“You can’t knock it till you’ve tried it.”
“We are in the same bed.”
“Okay, but we can agree not to touch.”
“Like that’ll work.”
“Consider it an essay in verbal seduction.”
I moved away from him and felt instantly cold. Well, it was my idea after all.
“Let’s skip the ‘what are you wearing’ part,” I said, and he hummed in agreement.
We were lying on our back, close but not touching and trying not to look at each other or give in to mirth.
“I would be in my hotel room winding down from the excitement of the concert and you would be?”
“Just come back from jogging, sweaty and ready to get into the shower.”
“How sweaty?”
“Soaking and dripping.”
I closed my eyes and saw him, all panting and dishevelled: I was already hard.
“What would you ask me to do?” I whispered.
“Stick two fingers in your mouth, get them wet,” he replied. His tone was firm and commanding.
“When you’re done, use them to stroke your nipple, the way I like to do it.”
He loved to circle my nipple with one finger while his thumb, slick with saliva, ghosted the tip until it was fully erect, straining for his touch.
“Pinch the other nipple, as hard as you can. Imagine it’s my hands, my desire.”
His voice was thick now and I knew that he was touching himself.
“Caress your stomach,” I begged, “Pull your chest hair a little, feel my tongue on your neck, your armpit, oh god,” I moaned, and just like that he was on top of me and we were kissing like the world was about to end.
We rubbed against each other and came almost immediately, my hands on his face and his on my ass.
“That was hot,” I gasped, breathing in the pungent smell of our combined release.
“You were right,” he said, licking off a drop of semen that had landed on my chin, “It wasn’t as ridiculous as I thought.”
Here I am, posting a chapter about Christmas day on Easter Sunday.
A mix of angst and fluff and, at last, Momo has arrived.
This is the first part of a two-parter about Xmas Day in Paris.
Enjoy

The two poems quoted are: 24, Rue Tournefort (an unpublished Celan poem) and Pont Mirabeau by Apollinaire. Celan was a fan of the poet and he committed suicide jumping off that bridge.
The song quoted at the start is Les Moulins de Mon Coeur which became The Windmills of Your Mind (soundtrack of The Thomas Crown Affair).

I sort of stole Drowning in the Sea of your Tears from Drowning in the Sea of your Dreams by Brian Irvine.

It was raining buckets, as the saying goes.
Clichés always irritate me, even at my most desperate; nothing’s more squalid than a mediocre figure of speech on a gloomy day.

Un tournesol dans sa fleur
Snatches of an old song cling to the walls of my mind, for no apparent reason. Until reason is found: tournesol, tournefort; the brain likes to play tricks.

Where am I? My studio, in Rue Tournefort: stacks of papers and books everywhere.

Brothers too, you stones,
image the word shut behind
side glances

Lines of a poem, meaningless, or is it the greenish, dishwater gurgle of the Seine under the Pont Mirabeau?

L’amour s’en va comme cette eau courante
L’amour s’en va

Comme la vie est lente
Et comme l’Espérance est violente

Love is flowing fast, slow as life itself flows by, and how violent Hope becomes.
Water, rain, mingle together and become one icy oppressive blanket closing above my head like a liquid coffin.

I can’t breathe, my fingertips still feel the curves of the bridge’s ironwork; cold, silent, peaceful; my lungs are exploding under pressure; my eyes are wells filling with grimy tears, tears of the sewer.

Worthless, weightless, already forgotten: how cheap is a human life?

*Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me,* I beg for one last embrace, or could it be I just want to suck the life out of you?

Your hair on my tongue, wet, slippery, sea-weedy, but you are not here; why aren’t you here?

I’m scared of the dark, even this green-yellow aquarium-like obscurity.

*We swam*

I wrote it and played it and I believed it, but it no longer means anything; the fault lies in repetition.

I can’t breathe, can’t, can’t, breathe.

The scream rips through the fabric of time, but space is shrinking until it’s nothing but a box of bones.

“Wake up, please, wake up,” the voice says, but what does it mean?

I was always awake, I will always be, what?

“Elio, please open your eyes, please.”

Pierce the surface, open your mouth, let the water dribble out.

Fingers, mouth, warmth,

“Hold me,” I said, but hadn’t really expected the weight of his body on me.

“Thank god,” he sighed.

“What happened?” I asked, when I came back from the dead.

Oliver was stroking my hair, my back, my neck.

“First you were screaming then your lips were turning blue,” he replied, “I was about to call down your parents.”

“I’m sorry that I scared you. I dreamt of Celan, I think. It’s probably just a sign that I shouldn’t be neglecting my music,” I said, with a weak smile.

His heart was thumping and he was musky with sweat.

“You were drowning,” he murmured.

“Yes.”

“Have you been thinking about his death? You didn’t tell me.”
I sat up and rubbed my eyes. It was still dark outside and the clock on the night table told me that it was barely six am. It was Christmas morning and I had been dreaming of a suicidal poet.

“I must have, but not consciously. I’d like to visit his locations.”

“And you’ve never been before?”

“I crossed the Pont Mirabeau once or twice, maybe.”

He kissed me on the forehead and along the bridge of my nose.

“He must have been so unhappy,” I whispered, “His life was a constant struggle.”

“He was still so young when his family was exterminated by the Nazis.”

“He was exactly my age.”

Oliver pressed his lips to mine and stayed there, breathing into me.

“I never realised that,” he said, when he pulled back.

“Lives can be ruined by a single horrible incident. If I had lost you last summer,” I started, but he silenced me by sliding his tongue inside my mouth. I responded languidly, letting my body relax against his.

“You never told me the title of your piece,” he said, his lips brushing mine.

“It didn’t have one.”

“Didn’t?”

“Drowning in the sea of your tears,” I replied, “What do you think?”

“I love it, but I’d rather you didn’t stop breathing in order to get inspired.”

“Anything for art’s sake,” I joked.

“Not that, never that,” he said, delicately stroking my jaw and throat.

We went back to sleep and this time it was uneventful and dreamless.

Christmas day was cloudy and mild, with spells of needle-thin drizzle.

Mum and Oliver prepared lunch, while dad and I listened to Bach’s Matthäus-Passion.

Marzia rang and we spoke to Momo, who couldn’t wait to see us again. We agreed to meet in the afternoon and go to see Lucien at his parents’ apartment on the Île Saint-Louis.

“I wanted to go to the Père Lachaise this afternoon,” I complained to Oliver; he was basting the chicken and smelled of olive oil and rosemary.

“We’ll go with Vimini,” he replied, “She would never forgive us if we went without her. Is Fede coming to Paris too?” he asked my mother.

“Yes, even though my sister insisted she remained at home for Christmas.”
“I thought they were Jewish.”

“They are, but also Italian, French and a lot of other things.”

Oliver beamed at me.

“I have heard that one before.”

“When was that?” I asked, pinching his backside.

“Stop it or I’ll baste you too.”

“Boys, boys,” was maman’s amused reprimand.

I left the kitchen but not before sticking my tongue out at Oliver, who mouthed “You’ll pay for it,” and went back to his duties.

Mathieu was not the only friend my parents had in Paris; in fact, they knew people I’d heard them mention but never met. It was one of those they went to visit.

“We’ll play cards, listen to old records and drink mulled wine,” dad explained, “You two have fun with your friends and we’ll see you later at Thierry’s. You remember where Le Divan is, don’t you Elly?”

I scrunched my nose at the soubriquet, while Oliver still found it hilarious.

“Yes, yes, we’ll see you there at eight,” I replied, guiding them to the door.

“My lovely Elly, will you help me wash the dishes?” Oliver mocked, once we were alone.

“Very funny,” I pouted, pushing him aside and striding towards the kitchen.

We engaged in a silly battle using the detergent’s foam as weapon; it went up Oliver’s nose and he wouldn’t stop sneezing and when I went to tickle him, he fought back. We wrestled and he tackled me on to the table, using his weight to pin me down.

“Beg for forgiveness,” he said, with a wicked smile.

“Never!”

I tried to push him off me, but he was too strong and heavy: I could feel his muscles flex against my bony frame. There was no chance I could win this without resorting to dirty tricks.

“Oliver, I can’t breathe,” I murmured, and looked at him with startled eyes and parted lips.

He rolled off me and undid the top button of my shirt.

“Oh god Elio, I’m so sorry,” he said, stroking my curls, “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Better now?”

I moved as fast as I could to force him on his back then straddled his chest and was about to immobilize his arms when I caught sight of his face: he looked sad and upset.

“It was only a game,” I explained; I tried to kiss his lips but he turned away.

“Well, it wasn’t funny,” he said, as he manhandled me so that he could stand up and leave the room.
I knew better than to follow him then, so I finished tidying up the mess we’d made and prepared some coffee. We were meeting Marzia and Momo at the Bastille metro in about one hour, so I didn’t have long to make it up to Oliver.

“I come in peace and bring espresso.”

He was in the salon, sitting on the bench which resembled the one by Guimard and smoking a cigarette.

“Near the end, George couldn’t breathe,” he said, avoiding my eyes, “At first he refused the oxygen, hated the feeling of being attached to a machine. He made this laboured, wheezing sound and he would close his eyes, because he couldn’t do two things at the same time. He’d been a strong, athletic guy; he’d used to go to the gym every day and we’d go jogging together, and there he was, in a hospital bed, unable to control the basic functions of his body.”

I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to touch him.

“I didn’t mean to-”

He exhaled smoke and a teary sigh.

“We are going to see a lot of that at the clinic,” he continued, “Some will come in only to get tested, but others will be already ill and looking for a shoulder to lean on. I should be prepared, but I don’t think I’ll ever will.”

“Would you abandon me if I was sick?”

He glared at me, but his lips trembled.

“What, no, I’d never, never!”

I set the coffee cup on the desk and went to him. I sat on his lap and he buried his wet face in my neck. We spent a while murmuring apologies and trading kisses and soft touches.

“I didn’t mean to take it so seriously,” he said after a while, as he was drinking his lukewarm coffee.

“I behaved like an idiot.”

“And what’s the penalty for that?”

He smirked, but said nothing.

It was the first time we’d seen Momo and Marzia together: they looked happy and a bit like brother and sister, like many well-assorted couples.

He had let his hair grow down to shoulder length and was not very unlike the teenage boy he had been when Oliver had first met him.

“You guys alright?” I asked, after we’d hugged.

“I’m full enough to burst,” Momo said, “I’m done with food till the end of the year.”
His girlfriend laughed.

“Give him a couple of hours and he’ll be asking for pizza.”

“You can’t find decent pizza in Paris.”

“I feel your pain,” I said, because I had the same problem in London.

“Are we taking the metro?” asked Oliver, who had been impressed and surprised that public transport was operating even on Christmas day.

“It’s not that far, we can walk,” Marzia replied.

We strolled down Boulevard Henri IV then turned right into Quai des Celestins.

“Is Viola still seeing Lucien?” I asked.

“Sort of,” replied Marzia, “She’s coming up with Chiara in time for your birthday and will stay at his place. By the way, is there going to be a party or what?”

“Oliver won’t tell me, but I suspect he’s organised something.”

“The birthday boy will have his surprise,” Momo said, patting my back. “And it’s going to be one hell of a night.”

I stared at him and so did Marzia.

“Wait, how do you know about it?”

“A certain someone phoned me.”

I looked at Oliver who feigned innocence.

“You said you didn’t know about him and Marzia: did you just pretend?”

“I never said I didn’t know,” he replied.

I should have been annoyed that he’d kept things from me, but I found his poker face rather hot. Marzia was not as understanding: she pulled Momo’s hair until he howled in pain.

“You hurt me!” he complained.

“Ça t’apprendra,” she replied, laughing.

I guessed she was done with boys lying to her and I couldn’t blame her.

We crossed Pont Louis-Philippe, passing a couple of boys and a girl; they were sitting on the bridge smoking pot and one of the guys was playing guitar, or at least trying to.

“He’s worse than you,” said Momo, knocking his shoulder against mine.

“You are talking to a composer who’s about to perform at the Royal Festival Hall, my friend.”

“Has London suddenly run out of musicians?”

“Somewhere in Northern Italy there’s an Orfei circus missing a clown.”
He pushed me and I pushed back and if it hadn’t been for the parapet we’d have fallen into the river.

Marzia and Oliver were pointedly ignoring us: they walked ahead smoking cigarettes and looking thoroughly grown-up and sophisticated.
The Blue-Haired Boy

Chapter Summary

Remember when I said it was a two-parter about Xmas Day? I lied ha ha
The evening party (and the night that follows) is still to come...

Chapter Notes

I did not invent the boy. Edmund White stayed in a house on the Île St. Louis and he spotted a boy with blue hair smoking pot under the eaves of the church.

The ENS is the École Normale Supérieure. Among those who failed the entrance exams is the current President of France, Emmanuel Macron, who at the time, he said, was too much in love to study. He didn't do too bad in the end though, did he?

The collective noun for fireflies is conflagration. You learn something new every day lols

The tall casement windows of Lucien’s apartment afforded a marvellous view of the church of Saint-Louis-en-l’Île, which was – according to my travel guide - dedicated to the same saint who gave his name to the eponymous town in Missouri.

“One of my aunts used to live there,” Elio said.

“Inside the church?” asked Momo, earning another slap from his friend.

“You’re joking but there is someone living there for real,” said Lucien, taking out a pair of opera glasses from the top drawer of a rococo cabinet.

He seemed indifferent to the luxury of his surroundings and utterly out of tune with them. With his stringy blonde hair and felted woollen sweater, he had the appearance of a reluctant locataire.

His parents, he said, had gone to visit some relatives in Neuilly and would be back for dinner.

Marzia took one look at the binoculars and gasped.

“T’es un voyeur!” she exclaimed, and he did not deny it.

“It’s not what you think tout de même,” he went on to explain, “I’m not spying on naked girls, and besides I noticed them spying on me first.”

“Who are they?” I asked, passing my packet of Gitanes around. Everybody smoked in Paris and those who didn’t were regarded with mild distaste, as though they were guilty of a social faux pas.

“I don’t know for sure, maybe they are related to the sexton.”
“Yes, but who are we talking about?” insisted Elio.

“You see there, under the eaves,” Lucien passed him the glasses. “Maybe they are not there now, but there’s this boy with blue hair and he’s frequently with a girl who looks a bit like Chiara but blonde. They are pot-heads.”

“They are not there now,” said Elio.

“Well, it’s a catholic church,” said Marzia, “It’s kind of an important day for them.”

“You look at them; they look at you then what?” I asked.

He reacted with the typical Gallic combination of a shrug and a pout.

“Rien quoi,” he said, “Sometimes they wave at me. I wave back, puis c’est tout.”

“It they really smoke pot, we could ask them if they can spare us some,” said Momo. “I really could do with a joint.”

“I finished my stash last night,” said Lucien, apologetically, “You can’t imagine how boring these family dinners are. I tried getting drunk, but it didn’t work.”

“We could buy some tonight,” said Elio, and before I could say anything, he added, “Le Drugstore.” I had no idea what he was talking about nor did Momo, but the others nodded. It was a mini-mall open all night that sold a bit of everything and outside which pills and light drugs were traded. Once it had been a pick-up spot for rent boys, but those days were long gone.

“How do you know about this?” I asked, but he only smirked in reply.

We spent the next hour or so talking about the rest of the holidays, our friends who were still due to arrive and our lives in general, but avoiding discussing Jack and Judith, even though it was obvious they would have liked to know what was going on.

We smoked, talked, listened to Tubular Bells and it almost felt like being back in Italy, except that we were resting on cool parquet rather than fresh grass.

“I think I can see him,” said Marzia. She had been looking out of the window for a while, perhaps hoping to catch a glimpse of the elusive ‘neighbours’.

Momo handed her the binoculars and she shrieked, “Yes, he’s there! His hair is really turquoise. He’s waving at me! Hello, what? What’s he saying?” she called Lucien and he took the glasses from her.

“I think he wants us to go there. Looks like he’s alone or at least without his girlfriend; if his parents are chieux like mine, I’m not surprised he wants some company.”

“I am not setting foot inside a church,” said Momo. “After my Cresima, I told my parents I was done with religion.”

“We are not going to Mass, you heathen,” Marzia argued, kissing the boy on the cheek.

“There’s a Fra Angelico painting of the Annunciation,” Elio said, but that didn’t seem to impress his friends. I smiled at him, to show him that he’d certainly impressed me.

“There’s a separate entrance to the parsonage, of course,” said Lucien.

“Shall we bring him something? It seems rude not to, considering,” said Marzia.
“We have crates of booze in this house. Let me get a bottle of Laurent-Perrier from the fridge.”

“Won’t your parents mind?” I wondered.

“They won’t realise it’s gone. They probably won’t notice whether I am there or not. It’s when they do that trouble starts.”

“What trouble?”

“Oh you know the usual: come say hello to your aunt, drive your cousin to her ballet lesson, that sort of thing. Boring,” he replied. I thought of how thoroughly young his problems were and how I’d maybe burdened Elio with more responsibilities than he deserved to bear.

It had stopped raining but the sky was still grey.

The door of the parsonage was as forbidding as the entrance to an old castle. It had nothing of the baroque grace of the church.

“What shall we say? We don’t even know the name of this guy,” said Marzia.

“Let me deal with it,” said Lucien, but as he was about to knock, the door opened and the blue-haired boy motioned us to come in and be quiet.

The interior stank of incense and cabbage and it was humid and dark.

We climbed a narrow staircase for several flights until we reached the summit: nobody had spoken a word yet.

The spell was broken when we entered the boy’s room, which was a mess of discarded clothes and underwear. There was a distinct cheesy stench of dirty socks and, mingled with it, the smell of weed.

“Enfin,” he said, smiling at Lucien and introducing himself as Bertrand.

He was twenty-one but looked much younger, had failed his entrance exams for the ENS and had been trying to overcome his disappointment by shunning society. He said all this in French, because his English wasn’t good enough, he admitted. Elio translated the gist of it for me, including some words which were in verlan slang.

Since Bertrand slept on a mattress on the floor, we all sat on it while the boy rolled a couple of joints. He didn’t seem to care for the champagne, but the empty beer cans disseminated around the low-ceilinged room testified that he wasn’t averse to alcohol.

“Where’s your girlfriend?” asked Marzia, who was sitting in Momo’s lap.

Bertrand scrunched his forehead.

“The blonde girl who’s often here with you,” said Lucien.

“Oh, you mean Léa. She’s another ENS reject, so we’ve bonded over that.”

“What do you do all day?” I asked.

He liked that I was American, loved my accent and kept staring at me, which didn’t please Elio in the least.
“I read, write, go out to see my friends,” he replied, handing Lucien one of the reefers.

“Do you not find that ideas flow more freely when you don’t have to worry about stupid stuff?”

“Amen,” replied Lucien, who had already lit the joint and was passing it around.

He told us that his parents wanted him to apply to the Sorbonne but that he didn’t care and that he’d rather move to London and try his luck there.

“We live there,” Elio said, “Oliver and I, together.” It wasn’t like him to be so outspoken with strangers, but I understood why he’d felt compelled to.

Bertrand started to ask questions about Elio’s university, but his glances kept returning to me; even Marzia had noticed and found it hilarious.

“Have you got a corkscrew? We can drink from the bottle, but we’ll have to open it first,” said Lucien, oblivious of what was going on.

“I’ll go fetch it and a couple of glasses, too,” the boy said, and was gone.

“Man, you’ve made another victim,” Momo joked, and Marzia tried to silence him with a kiss but it was too late.

“What’s he on about?” Lucien asked, puffing out a ring of smoke.

“Your new friend is hitting on Oliver,” Elio replied, primly. As he did so, he stole the joint from the young man’s mouth and planted it between my lips.

“Maybe he’s just never seen someone so huge,” commented Momo, and this time Marzia bit down on his earlobe, making him whimper.

“It’s all in your head,” said Lucien, “You think everybody is after Oliver.”

I tried my best not to laugh, but I was half-stoned so my attempts foundered.

“You like him too,” said Elio, with a wry smile.

“He’s alright,” I replied, shrugging. “His hair is the same colour as the walls of our bedroom at Mathieu’s.”

Momo burst out laughing and this time his girlfriend joined him. Elio was reluctant at first but then realised the absurdity of the situation and when Bertrand came back, he found us all in fits, except for Lucien who was placidly smoking his second reefer and staring into space.

“I know who you are,” the blue-haired boy exclaimed, after having relinquished his loot to Momo, who uncorked the bottle and poured the drink into three cloudy tumblers.

He dug out a well-worn book from a pile on the window-sill.

“It’s you, isn’t it?”

It was my book on Heraclitus, the first American edition which had an old photo of me on the inside of the dust jacket. It was the same photo I had sent to the Perlmans together with my application.

Elio couldn’t take his eyes off it, caressed it with his fingertips when he thought nobody was looking.
I wanted to ask Bertrand whether he’d understood the contents of the book despite his problems with the language, but I didn’t want to be rude. Lucien did it for me.

“I’m better at reading than at speaking English, like you with French, I suppose,” Bertrand replied.

I concurred.

“Why isn’t there a French translation?”

I told him about the proposal from Thierry without naming names, and they all congratulated me and drank to my health and success.

“You have to write something on it,” Bertrand said, handing me a blue biro.

Elio moved closer to me and I could feel his hot breath on the side of my neck.

_Zwischen Immer und Nie, for you in silence, somewhere in Italy in the mid-eighties_

I knew we were both thinking about the bookshop in Crema, Armance, our first kiss. The memory affected me even after four years, and I suspected it always would, because we’d been so close to losing our way back to one another.

_If at first you don’t succeed, try again. And again. Oliver Perlman, I wrote._

“Is that your real name?” Bertrand asked, contemplating my dedication with awe.

“It is now,” I replied, catching Elio’s misty gaze.

We left Momo and Marzia at Lucien’s and retraced our steps back to Mathieu’s, where we were going to take a quick shower before we headed to Le Divan.

I was slightly tipsy and pleasantly relaxed because of the combination of champagne and weed.

The lights of the _bateaux mouches_ danced along the river, like a conflagration of fireflies.

Next to me, Elio was lost in thought.

“You okay?”

“Me okay,” he replied, his lips quirking softly. “You’ve been planning a party for my birthday.”

“Elio Perlman’s own La Boum.”

He giggled.

“You hated that film.”

“And that is why we’ll be doing something completely different.”

“Like what?”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Give me a hint.”
“You’re too clever: if I say one word, you’ll guess then entire thing and ruin the surprise.”

He looked around to make sure no one was paying attention and slid his hand under my coat, placing his open palm on my ass.

“We’ll see about that,” he said, and squeezed.
The Dinner Party

Chapter Summary

At last, the dinner party.

Starstruck Elio and emotional Oliver. Because let's not forget that Oliver is not as strong as he pretends to be...

By the way, thanks to all of you for your support, it means a lot!!!!

Chapter Notes

Stéphanie of Monaco’s Ouragan (Storm) contains the lyrics:

You embraced me
Among the ruins of old Rome
Apart from us, there was nobody
That night in Rome
Your absence devoured me
My heart pounds too loudly
Am I right or wrong
To love you so strongly?

It was too much of a coincidence to not mention it, especially since the song was released in 1986. I wonder if Aciman is a fan ha ha

Pierre Bergé was Yves Saint Laurent’s business and life partner. He was a patron of the arts (literature, theatre, music, you name it) and produced the concerts of the likes of Philip Glass, John Cage, Ingrid Caven and many other classical artists. He was the President of the Opera in Paris and a friend of Mitterrand.

Ingrid Caven stars in Luca Guadagnino’s Suspiria.

The last thing I’d expected of a Christmas evening in Paris was to take the metro to go to a dinner party.

Elio was terribly blasé about it, like a true Parisian. It struck me not for the first time that he was imbued with the essence of this country, its boundless love of culture and its innate elegance.

“We can’t turn up empty-handed,” I said.

He shrugged.
“We can go to Le Drugstore and get a bottle of something.”

“Cheap wine is worse than nothing.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” he replied, “Besides, you haven’t seen the book or the cover.”

“I heard what you said earlier.”

“What if we got some grass too while we are there?”

“You sound more and more like Jack.”

“We are one big family,” he joked.

“That we are,” I agreed.

We got off at St. Germain and walked towards the Boulevard of the same name.

“That’s Les Deux Magots: every famous artist has been there at one time or another.”

“Come on, you can do better than that,” I goaded him.

“You want names, I’ll give you names: Sartre, Hemingway, Brecht, Joyce, Giacometti, Picasso and, of course, Verlaine and Rimbaud.”

“That’s truly impressive.”

“If only we could be transported back in time.”

He sounded wistful.

“I like the present: here and now,” I said.

“You wouldn’t want to have coffee with Hemingway?”

“I’d rather drink plonk with you.”

He giggled and gave me a half-hearted nudge.

“Bertrand was nice,” he said, as if the two things were in any way connected. In his head, they probably were. “He must have read your book loads of times.”

“Maybe he bought it second-hand.”

“And he had memorised your photo, but who wouldn’t, right?”

“Did you? When I sent my application to your father, I mean.”

Silence.

I gazed at him: he was frowning and biting his lips.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I have been so lucky,” he whispered, “I could have been another Bertrand: staring at your picture and never getting the chance to experience the real thing.”
“You would have met someone else,” I replied, and wanted to add ‘and would have been happy with them too’, but I did not want to tempt fate. “Besides, you will have groupies soon, avidly following every step you take.”

“I’m not some rock star!”

He raked his fingers through his curls, looking every inch the troubled, unkempt musician.

“You could be the new Liszt.”

“You’ve no idea what you are talking about.”

We were still laughing when we got to 149 Blvd Saint Germain. The building wasn’t as squalid as I'd thought, but the store was unremarkable to say the least.

We bought a bottle of Veuve Clicquot and two packets of Gitanes.

“While you pay, I’ll go see about the truc-machin,” he said, and walked out the door before I could stop him. There was a short queue for the till and I was done in about five minutes.

After the neon lighting of Le Drugstore, the street illumination seemed scant.

Elio was nowhere to be seen.

I turned into Rue de Rennes and almost bumped into a black Alpine GTA parked where it shouldn’t have been. My boyfriend was talking and gesticulating, but as soon as I approached, the car sped away with a loud screech of tires.

“No luck?” I asked, through gritted teeth.

“He wanted to buy not sell.”

Who knows what could have happened if I had been delayed?

“Did he touch you? What did he say?”

“Don’t worry,” he replied, with a hint of amusement in his voice, “He asked, I told him he was mistaken, but that I liked his car. I thought I had seen an identical one in a film recently. You remember-”

“You said the days of Le Drugstore as a rent boy hot-spot were long gone.”

“It doesn’t mean that some won’t try their luck.”

“It’s already started and you’re not even famous yet.”

He didn’t deny it: he’d been evidently flattered by that stranger’s offer.

I’d have to get used to it: to men and women trying to stake a claim on him, and hope that we’d be strong enough to withstand the pressure.

_Cette nuit à Rome_

_Ton absence me dévore_
“What the hell is this?” I asked Elio, who was chuckling in that breathy way of his, which denoted that he was trying to contain himself.

“That’s the Princess of Monaco singing. Trying to,” he replied.

Before I could think of a suitable repartee, the door was opened by Mathieu, who let out a whiff of smoked paprika and rosemary.

“Sorry about the horrid noise, but Thierry likes to listen to Euro-trash pop while we’re cooking.”

“We are not too early?” Elio asked.

“Not at all, we are just running a bit late.”

I gave him the champagne and he thanked us profusely.

He showed us into an airy salon furnished with an eclectic mixture of pieces. The Perlmans were already there, chatting to two other guests, a young man and a grey-haired woman. They were both very slim and chic, impeccably dressed and coiffed. The pre-Jack version of Judith would have loved them.

We were introduced to them - she was called Marie-Laure and he Gilles - but they only favoured us with a polite smile and soon drifted back into their conversation. They were talking about country homes, and I gathered the man was an up-and-coming architect, who was being employed by the rich and the famous.

The pop music had been replaced with something more oriental and peaceful, but the quiet was broken by the entrance of a robust man wearing a multitude of floating scarves and carrying a tray laden with champagne flutes.

His name was Jacques and he was an art dealer. He was the one who’d sold the Clemente painting to Mathieu.

We talked about the current art scene and he was impressed when we told him of the Latham exhibition at the Lisson Gallery. Elio told him about our visit to the Louvre and the Orsay Museum and he made a face.

“At your age, you should have better things to do than visit galleries and museums,” he said, inspecting us from head to foot, as though worried there was something wrong with us.

“Like what?” Elio asked, innocently.

“Clubs, bars, the bushes behind Notre Dame,” he replied, scratching his bristly chin.

“We have been there and done that,” I said, taking Elio’s hand in mine.

“Ah, l’amour, l’amour!” he exclaimed, waltzing out of the room in a cloud of silk and Habit Rouge.
It was starting to feel like we’d gone through the looking glass, but the most absurd part was yet to come.

We heard the bell ring then loud greetings and the smack-smack of kisses and a moment later Mathieu ushered into the room a short man dressed in a grey pinstripe suit accompanied by a red-haired woman in a floor-length black satin dress.

“Pierre, mon chéri,” said Gilles, and the two men embraced and kissed on both cheeks.

Next to me, Elio was dumbstruck.

“That’s Ingrid Caven,” he murmured, watching as his mother and father shook hands with the newcomers. “She’s a German actress, but she’s in Paris to perform as a singer. That must be Pierre Bergé, the director of the Athénée.”

Thierry at last emerged from the kitchen to greet his guests.

“Pierre, you must meet Elio. He’s going to be the next Philip Glass,” he said, winking at me, “And Ingrid, mon petit chou, you have to sing for us later. Elio will accompany you at the piano. My old Gaveau was waiting for you to inject some life back into it.”

“There’s no way out, my dear,” the singer said, patting Elio’s arm. “Thierry will not be dissuaded.”

“I have yet to meet the person who can say no to him,” agreed Bergé, with a warm smile. Although not physically imposing, he exuded charm and energy.

“Isn’t Yves coming?” asked Mathieu and Pierre sighed.

“Working,” he replied, but I could tell he wasn’t truly annoyed.

“On Christmas evening?”

“Something to do with a last minute fitting for the new collection,” he explained and then he turned to me and pierced me with his limpid, unflinching gaze, “Those who create beauty should be allowed to do as they please.”

“And what should our role be?” I enquired.

“Facilitators, protectors, loyal friends; above all, we should always be there when they need us.”

I intended to spend my life by Elio’s side, and there were still many roles which awaited me and that I’d hardly caught a glimpse of.

During this exchange, Elio had been staring from one interlocutor to the other, lips slightly parted and unblinking eyes.

Ingrid was touching his shoulder with a look of maternal solicitude on her chalk-white face.

“I think this boy needs another drink,” she said, in her deep, Teutonic-accented voice.

He came out of his daze then and offered her one of his wide, childlike smiles.

“Thierry had mentioned a surprise, but I never imagined,” he stuttered, “I love your work, all of it.”

“Maybe not all of it,” she replied, and Jacques, who had been talking to Samuel, uttered a shrill cackle.
There was a tacit allusion to something we didn’t know, probably of a salacious nature.

“I’ll tell you later, when I’m a little drunk,” she drawled. Pierre warned her that the alcohol would affect her voice.

“I’m singing Piaf not Doris Day.”

He conceded her point and offered her his arm as we filed out of the salon and into the dining room.

The dinner was as tasty as the conversation: onion soup, rabbit marinated in Dijon mustard with crème fraîche, chicken with smoked paprika, peppers and aubergines, roasted potatoes with rosemary, a tarte au citron for dessert and Calvados as digestif.

“I have seen something you might be interested in,” Jacques said to Mathieu. His rubicund cheeks were flushed and the buttons of his organdie shirt were straining.

“A new Rothenberg,” he added.

“Not another horse,” said Marie-Laure, curling her patrician nose.

“I like her style,” said Gilles, “But horses are not my thing either.”

I told them that we had seen an exhibition of her works at the Tate and that we’d loved the Vertical Spin series.

“This one is a raven. It’s stunning and it will go well with that Clemente self-portrait with bird you already own. It’s a good investment too.”

“Ravens are fascinating creatures,” said Ingrid, “The name is so evocative. What is it in French?”

“Corbeau,” replied Annella, “Which also means writer of poison-pen letters.”

Ingrid frowned, mystified.

“Malicious anonymous letters,” Samuel explained, “I believe there’s a French film about it.”

I knew Elio would chime in the instant before he did; his father knew too, considering the impish smile on his lips.

“I love that film,” my boyfriend enthused, “It’s probably the first French film noir; Pierre Fresnay is superb.”

“Produced by a German company during the Nazi occupation,” said Ingrid, with a grimace.

“Remarkable works of art transcend nationalism,” said Pierre, and to that we all raised our glasses.

After a soulful rendition of Non Je Ne Regrette Rien and the sultry notes of Je sais comment, Thierry had begged Ingrid for some Kurt Weill.

Elio had overcome his timidity and hero-worship and was playing as though his fingers were guided by a magical power. He had great chemistry with the singer, which went beyond their combined artistry. Where he was light, she was shadow and where he was innocence, she was sin.
We were all transfixed, even the haughty Marie-Laure, but I was not prepared for what was about to come.

Ingrid wanted to sing in English rather than in German, so she chose *Speak Low*.

I didn’t know the song and didn’t think much of it at the start, but then she intoned

> We’re late, darling, we’re late
> The curtain descends
> Everything ends
> Too soon, too soon

And I found myself on the verge of tears, and didn’t even know why.

When it was over, everybody clapped and asked for more, but I was choking and I needed to get out of the room.

> “Ça va mon ami?”

Thierry, ever the solicitous host, had noticed my discomfort.

> “I need a breath of fresh air,” I replied.

> “You know what you need? Darkness and books,” he said.

I was too dizzy to argue, so I followed him down the stairs and into his unlit, deserted shop. He switched on a blue security light and I could finally breathe freely.

> “I’ll come back for you,” he said, and left.

> “What are you doing here?” said Elio’s concerned voice, minutes later.

> “Trying to find the gay fiction section,” I replied, trying to waylay him.

> “It could take a while,” he replied, “The French don’t like to stick labels on their authors.”

> “Sounds reasonable,” I said.

> “Unlike you.”

He was close now; I could feel the warmth emanating from his body.

> “You took my breath away, literally,” I said.

I tried to laugh, but it came out as a sob.

His arms wrapped around me and he pressed his cheek between my shoulder-blades.

> “It’s been a long day and I had too much to drink,” I whispered.

> “You know that I will never leave you, right?”

> “Yes”

> “That I couldn’t even think about my music if you were not in my life.”
“Yes”

I turned inside his embrace and he took my face in his hands.

“My brother, my lover, my friend, myself,” he murmured, as he pressed his lips to mine.
The Painter's Studio

Chapter Summary

Smut, fluff and cats. Because I like to imagine Oliver with cats.

Thanks to all you lovely people for still putting up with me and my scribbles.

Chapter Notes

For those who don't know her, Leonor Fini was a badass, bisexual artist who would be as famous as her friend Salvador Dalí if she'd only been a man. I won't list all her achievements because there are too many, but one thing I would like to mention is that she designed the bottle for the Schiaparelli's perfume 'Shocking' which inspired Gaultier (read: he totally copied her).

It was after one in the morning when we got back.

My parents said goodnight and went upstairs and we weren’t sure whether Marzia and Momo had returned.

We started whispering as soon as got under the covers.

Oliver was naked, but I was wearing billowy.

When we’d packed, he’d taken one look at it and arched his eyebrows.

“Only bare necessities, we agreed,” he’d said.

“I’m not going anywhere without it,” I’d replied.

He’d not even pretended to mock me: he’d kissed my forehead and murmured something which had sounded a lot like I love you.

“You are tired,” I said, my hand curled around his neck.

“Yeah, but too excited to sleep.”

“How excited?”

I caressed the tuft of hair at the base of his throat then bent down and licked it.

He moaned, threaded his fingers through my hair to keep me still.

“Getting there,” he growled, one hand sliding down my back and gripping my ass.
“Let me take care of you,” I said, and the thought had just come to me, at the first contact with his flesh, “I want to lick you everywhere.”

He protested about not having bathed after the party, but I would have none of it.

“Sweaty, mussed, smoky, hmm,” I replied, lapping at the hollows of his ribcage.

“Three of the seven dwarves,” he joked, “After they went to the dark side.”

“You’re spoiling the mood,” I complained, but he was laughing and I couldn’t resist him when he was happy. I could never resist him.

I lay half on top of him and he resumed his caresses, this time over billowy.

“There’s no place I’d rather be than in bed with you.”

I nodded, kissing his chest, next to his nipple.

“Did Ingrid tell you?” he asked.

“Tell me what?”

“That thing that she would only talk about after having a few drinks.”

I nuzzled his armpit and he didn’t push me away.

“She dubbed a famous porn movie in German.”

“Please tell me it’s not that one.”

I grabbed his hand and sucked his middle finger into my mouth, down to the knuckle.

We stared into each other’s eyes then I closed mine and hollowed my cheeks.

“You never give up, do you?” he complained, but his voice was hoarse.

Nothing too heavy, I said; we don’t have to come, just let me taste you, I pleaded.

He raised his arms and clutched the headboard: he was all mine.

In the evening - if he’d only shaved in the morning - Oliver’s face and neck were already bristly.

That had always driven me crazy: it made my lips sore and swollen after we’d kissed, even redder than when I sucked him off. When he went down on me, front or back, the stimulation was amplified into ecstasy. It awakened a part of me that wanted pleasure to hurt a little, and made me simultaneously stronger and weaker, captive and captor.

That night I bent over him, my knees planted on either side of his torso, my buttocks hovering close to his face. He didn’t use his hands, but his tongue darted out and flicked at my balls.

“Yes,” I gasped, and he did it again.

From that moment on, I let myself go. My last conscious act was removing billowy and letting it fall at Oliver’s feet.
I threw myself on him and licked him all over, suckled him; teased him with my mouth, my breath, with the swish of my curls on his damp, hot flesh.

All the while, I rubbed my ass against his mouth and chin; he wanted to devour me, but without using his hands, it was almost impossible. Besides, he must have known I craved his near-passivity, that I wanted him mad and helpless with unslaked desire.

Soon enough, his cock was flat against his belly; his moans were turning into cries which vibrated through the ring of my anus into the core of me.

If he’d tongued me then, I’d have streaked his body with my semen in no time.

He was in pain and while I could stand mine, I could never be as cavalier with his.

“Here, I’m here,” I cooed, to comfort him, and turned the right way up; I covered him with my body, our dicks pressed together, slick and purple.

“Elio,” he sobbed, and I held them tight like a tourniquet, and stroked them fast and rough. He came first; the muscles in his abdomen twitching as he let go; when it was my turn, I gritted my teeth and guided the jets towards his neck, his chin, his parted lips.

“Have it, it’s all yours,” I said, and he did.

“You said we wouldn’t come.”

“You didn’t believe me, not really.”

He stroked my arm, squeezed it a little.

“I taste like you, inside out,” he said.

He must have felt my smile in his bones.

We woke up to the sound of yet more torrential rain. There was nowhere we needed to be: Fede and Vimini were arriving on the following day, and we had not planned anything specific ether with our friends or my parents.

Oliver was lying in his favourite position: on his stomach, with his face turned towards me and one arm flung across my waist. He didn’t open his eyes, but I knew he wasn’t sleeping.

“I’m indecently happy,” I declared, and he stroked my hip with the pad of his thumb.

“More sleep,” he muttered.

“I’ll just go get some juice,” I replied, “I’m thirsty.”

I bounded off the bed and strode to the door.

He reacted in record time.

“Where do you think you’re going like this? Put some clothes on,” he said, visibly annoyed.

I went back to him and kissed the tip of his nose.
“The day that doesn’t bother you, I’ll know something’s very wrong.”

“Scheming little devil,” he said, and pulled me down: my back on the mattress, Oliver on top of me, tickling my belly. Minutes later we were breathless with laughter and thoroughly dishevelled.

“I’ll get water from the sink,” he said, and when he returned and handed me the glass, I was still giggling and panting.

He sat on the bed caressing my thighs while I drank.

“Want something to eat?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Cuddle up with you,” I replied, “It’s still very early.”

Oliver snorted.

“What did I say?”

“I wasn’t tired then.”

“Child,” he said, but the rebuke held no heat.

I burrowed into his body, and he enveloped me like a cape.

“I have a surprise for you,” said my father, as we sat down at the kitchen table to sip our first coffee of the day.

They would have stayed in their rooms in order to leave us alone, had I not gone up to fetch them. Marzia and Momo didn’t make an appearance, so we assumed they had slept at Lucien’s or at her uncle’s.

“What surprise?” asked Oliver. His hair was still wet from the shower and his face clean-shaven.

I was starving, so I had two eggs instead of one. He had toasted bread with a thin layer of jam. Watching his diet, I thought. No gym, lots of rich food and alcohol: he would need more exercise, but not of the jogging sort. I smirked.

“You know about it already,” he said, catching my half-smile.

“No, no, just thinking about, never mind, go on.”

Mum gave me one of her cryptic smiles, which usually meant she’d guessed what was going on down to the tiniest detail. She should have been a private investigator or a professional fortune teller.

“The friends we met yesterday afternoon,” dad continued, overlooking the interruption. “One of them, Richard Overstreet, is house-sitting for an artist called Leonor Fini.”

I nearly fell off my chair.

“Edmund will die when we tell him,” I said to Oliver, who was waiting for my father to continue.

“She’s in Trieste for the holidays and he has to leave Paris for the day to visit a friend in hospital.
He’s given me the keys.”

“Are you sure we won’t be trespassing? An artist’s studio is their sanctum,” said Oliver.

“Oh, I agree with you, my dear,” replied my father, “But you see, she has a number of Persian cats that need feeding and looking after. He doesn’t want to leave them alone for an entire day. Elio told me you like cats.”

Oliver glared at me.

“I do, but I wouldn’t want to intrude where I am not wanted,” he replied.

“He assured me that Leonor wouldn’t mind. She prefers her cats to have company.”

“Do you know what she’s working on at the moment?” I asked him, but it was mum who replied.

“I didn’t want to say anything last night because of Jacques’s presence, but Leonor is illustrating Poe’s tales. Her latest work is called Visage le Corbeau,” she said. It was an absurd coincidence, considering the conversation we’d had at Mathieu’s about Susan Rothenberg’s Raven.

“When are we going?” I asked, stuffing my mouth with the last of my bread and butter.

“As soon as Oliver finishes his second cup of coffee,” said my father, laughing. “He looks like he needs it.”

The studio was close to the Palais Royal, in Rue de La Vrillière. It wasn’t too far, but we took the metro all the same. I had my Polaroid camera with me, because when would I get another chance to visit a surrealist painter’s studio?

We took an old-fashioned, rattling lift to the top floor and when we got out of it, we were assaulted by the smell of turpentine.

Her apartment occupied the entire floor, which was fortunate for her as not everybody was suited to be at such close quarters with an artist.

Dad had entrusted us with the keys and Richard’s directions; well, he’d given them to Oliver, which he considered more reliable than his own son.

“Stop pouting,” Oliver said, as he inserted the Yale key into the lock.

“You said you like it when I do.”

“When you speak French not when you are offended because your father treats me like family,” he countered.

I pinched his butt.

“Unfair,” I argued, “It’s just that sometimes they treat me like a baby.”

The lock clicked.

“They know you get distracted by shiny things.”

“When did I ever?”
He winked at me.

“You vain, vain man,” I chided, pushing him inside the studio.

The moment we closed the door behind us we heard the pitter-patter of feline paws and were soon being stared at by five pairs of eyes. With the typical cunning of their species, they quickly assessed that Oliver was their man and proceeded to ignore me. One of them, a black kitten with round copper-coloured eyes, sat on his foot and looked up at him with adoration.

“He looks just like you,” he said, crouching down to caress the soft fur-ball.

“He could be a she.”

“So could you.”

I stuck my tongue out and left him to deal with feeding and grooming his new friends, while I wondered around the apartment.

The best features were the gigantic casement windows which afforded a lovely view over the gardens of the Palais Royal and let in an enormous amount of natural light, even in the dead of winter.

I didn’t enter her boudoir or any of the bedrooms: it would have been a transgression and, honestly, I didn’t care for them.

What I wanted to see was the place where she created her art, where she was her true self.

It was a vast room dominated by an old fashioned wooden easel, all spattered with paint. The canvas resting on it depicted a black veiled figure with a crimson mask.

Poe’s The Mask of the Red Death, I thought, and shivered.

On the wall was an even scarier painting depicting a coven of witches on broomsticks suspended in a fiery sky, which could also be the flames of hell.

“This is magnificent and terrible at the same time,” whispered Oliver, catching me unawares.

I turned to look at him and immediately used my Polaroid camera to snap a picture for my ‘Oliver in Paris’ collection: he had the black kitten on one shoulder while a white, larger cat with sleepy blue eyes was trying to climb onto the other.

“Where did you leave the rest of the gang?”

“In the kitchen, eating salmon mousse.”

“Spoilt rotten”

“That’s what she feeds them.”

“I was talking about these two. They seem to think they own you.”

He laughed and the black kitten mewled, probably scared by the sudden motion.

“He’s sweet,” I conceded, and petted the little furry head.

“You were right: it’s a she not a he,” he said.
“I’m always right.”

“Child,” he said, as the white cat decided Oliver’s chest was good enough and gave up the pursuit of his shoulder.

We sat on the floor - which was layered with multicoloured rugs – our backs against the wall and contemplated the objects surrounding us: oil paintings, charcoal drawings, costume patterns, headdresses with horns and feathers, glass bottles, books, pots and tubes of paint, jars filled with brushes and crayons, lengths of fabric, two bald mannequins wearing black dominoes, a quantity of Venetian masks and masses of garments among which the most striking was a black and white striped cape with a silver clasp in the shape of a sphinx.

The cats had been fed and groomed and seemed content to just be. The black kitten was curled in Oliver’s lap, but the others were scattered around the room, on chairs and sofas, purring and seemingly ignoring us.

“Our flat in London seems so bare compared to this,” I said.

“It’s small and there’s two of us and a piano.”

“And you take half the space.”

He kissed me on the cheek and I let my head fall on his shoulder.

“We’ll buy nice things for the new house,” he said, “A fancy piano.”

“I like the one I have.”

“But it’s not a Pleyel or a Gaveau,” he replied, and he wasn’t mocking.

“You bought it for me and I will never, I could never,” I shook my head; the rest of the words were stuck in my throat.

“We could keep that one for the bedroom and buy another one for the living room.”

“You want me to play you to sleep.”

He laughed.

“I can be a scheming devil too.”

I took his hand and linked his fingers with mine.

The kitten snuffled and closed her eyes.
The Duplex

Chapter Summary

Oliver needs reassurance (our insecure baby) and the boys go dancing - at last!

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to @isitandwonder for suggesting the song by France Gall.

Yves Navarre's Le Temps Voulu (Our Share of Time) depicts the affair between a 40-year-old teacher and a boy half his age. 
I did not invent the part that I quoted and I wonder if Aciman read it too and was influenced by it, somehow.

We were supposed to wait for Richard Overstreet to return and we didn’t want to eat his food, so I went out in search of a bistro.

When I returned with a bagful of baguette sandwiches, Oliver was still in the same place I’d left him – sitting on the floor, with his back against the wall – but he was reading a book with a forlorn look on his face.

“Dinner’s on the way,” I said, depositing my purchases on one of the many coffee tables. “What’s that?”

He jumped as though I’d taken him by surprise. The black kitten was now sleeping on a shelf atop a pile of art volumes.

“I was looking for something to pass the time.”

It was Le Temps Voulu by Yves Navarre.

“Is it any good?”

“I’ve just skimmed through it.”

His voice wasn’t exactly tense, but he sounded cold, distant.

“Listen to this: ‘Duck puts Bernard’s necklace around his neck,’ and ‘Duck puts the medallion in his mouth’; odd isn’t it?”

I checked the lines in question.

“Your French is improving.”

He snorted, gestured that I should give him back the book; I didn’t.
“It’s a coincidence, so what? Why does it bother you?”

“It doesn’t,” he replied, as he stood up, “I’ll go fetch the plates and the rest of it.”

“Tell me,” I insisted, moving closer to him. He smelled of cigarettes; he wouldn’t have smoked alone and in a stranger’s house if he hadn’t been in desperate need of it.

“It’s the story of a teacher who falls for a much younger man. I don’t think there’s a happy ending.”

“You aren’t even seven years older than me: in less than two days I will be twenty-two and you are still twenty-eight. Here it says the protagonist is middle-aged. What are we talking about?”

He heaved a deep sigh and scratched the back of his head.

“It’s just that we have been doing all this grown-up stuff: museums, galleries, these cats! And I was thinking that maybe if you’d been with someone, I don’t know, someone like Momo, maybe, you’d have spent your holidays drinking, smoking pot and dancing till dawn.”

“What, instead of doing what and whom I like, I should go back to the time when I was trying to forget how unhappy I was because I wasn’t with you?”

I was close to shouting and one of the cats darted out of the room.

Oliver bit the inside of his cheek and looked away.

We stayed silent for a few breaths and he was the first to talk.

“Sometimes I see it again, the way you looked at me that morning after our first night.”

He spoke softly, but his hands were nervous, his fingers flexing and twitching.

“You were so disgusted by me,” I tried to interject, but he wouldn’t let me, “No, you truly were. And I know we’ve talked about this many times and that we’re past it, but then I found this book and the way this boy was chewing on his medallion,” he stopped and gazed into my eyes. I ran into his arms and covered his face with kisses until he started giggling.

“You’re an idiot,” I said, smiling. “I blame Poe and that Red Death skull. It’s creepy. Or maybe you should have had more than just toasted bread for breakfast.”

“I have to watch my figure. I know myself,” he started, but this time I didn’t let him continue.

“Maybe you do, but I don’t care. You’re going to eat and drink and be merry, because I say so. If you want exercise, you know where to find it.”

I licked my lips and rubbed his chest with both hands.

“You’re such a tease,” he chuckled.

“Tease is somebody who makes promises he won’t keep. Say the word and I’ll have you on that Kilim rug.”

“Trust you to know the name of that too,” he snorted, “Can’t have sex on any plain old rug.”

“Is that a challenge?”

He raised his arms in surrender.
“No, absolutely not,” he said, then he brought his lips to mine and we kissed each other’s smiles.

“Come on, show me what you got,” he said, indicating the food.

“This sauce béarnaise is delicious,” he exclaimed, devouring his steak and salad baguette as though he’d been starving for days.

I uncorked the two bottles of Kronenbourg and handed him one; we clinked them together before swigging directly from them.

“I’m exactly where I want to be,” I said, “I don’t want to dance until dawn or cruise the bushes behind Notre-Dame. I’ve done that and it was fun until it wasn’t. I’m not made for that life: constantly searching for something and never satisfied; interchangeable bodies, people adoring you for one night only, here today gone tomorrow. And it’s not only because it’s not safe, but because we are,” I took his hand, stroked the base of his ring finger, “Aren’t we?”

He stopped eating and set the bottle on the rug, carefully.

“Yes,” he husked, “We are, very much so.”

I was about to add something memorable and romantic, but I had to shut my mouth in order not to burp.

“I wish I’d taken a picture of that,” he laughed, “You looked like a prince about to turn into a frog.”

I kicked his foot.

“It’s your fault,” I said, “When I’m nervous, I tend to hyperventilate.”

“Let’s call it by its name: belching.”

“Shut up and eat or the cats will do it for you.”

In fact, three of the five felines had congregated around us and were sniffing the plastic bag where the sandwiches had been.

“It’s like being circled by furry piranhas.”

He contemplated the slab of steak inside his baguette.

“Should I?” he asked.

“We’ve been told what to give them and that’s not included in the list.”

“I’d better feed them again,” he sighed, and as if on cue, the cats made a beeline for the kitchen.

“I love this skyline,” I declared, letting out a comma of smoke in the frigid air. We’d opened one of the windows and were enjoying the view, while we puffed on our Gitanes. He had his arm around my waist and I was leaning against his side.

“The war could have destroyed everything, including the Eiffel Tower.”
“Who was that General who disobeyed Hitler?”

“It was von Choltitz, but I am not sure that he really was the saviour he claimed to have been.”

He stood there, pensive, and I wondered what it must have been like to live and love at a time when death was always waiting in the wings. Oliver in uniform, losing a limb, his mind, his life: the thought made me shiver.

“Are you cold? Come here,” he said, as he wrapped his body around mine.

“What were you thinking of?”

“Numbers,” he replied, resting his chin atop my head. “The pre-Socratic theory that beauty resides in harmony and that harmony can be measured numerically is very comforting.”

“A safe port in a storm,” I agreed then added, as a joke, “Dad fixated on Praxiteles, but I think you’re the Canon by Polyclitus: perfectly proportioned in every way.”

“Not where it counts,” he said, rolling his hips.

“Unlike you, the Canon isn’t a show-off.”

“I only perform for you, my dear.”

We finished smoking and closed the window; it was only then that we heard someone knocking at the door.

Richard Overstreet had insisted we stayed for dinner, but we’d decided against it: he was a friend of my father’s, but neither of us knew him and anyway he looked exhausted after spending the day with a sick friend.

He had not explained the nature of the illness and we had not asked. Oliver’s face had clouded over and I’d wanted to get out of there as soon as politeness allowed it.

Back at Mathieu’s, Marzia and Momo were waiting for our return.

“I want us to go to Duplex, just the four of us,” she announced, as soon as we set foot into the apartment. I looked at Momo and he rolled his eyes.

“I told her it’s a gay bar and we won’t be welcome there,” he said, adding, “Which is totally understandable, by the way.”

“You are just afraid you are going to be hit on.”

“I wish.”

“You wish what?”

“I mean that I wouldn’t mind. Back home, nobody ever looks at me.”

“Poor baby,” she cooed, yanking his hair, then shaking her head, “He’s lying, of course.”

“What about Lucien?” Oliver asked.
“He’s been forced to go to a family dinner. Viola arrives tomorrow, so they know they won’t be seeing much of him after that.”

“Okay, just give us time to shower and change,” Oliver said, looking at me.

“Yeah, sounds great,” I concurred, smiling. We agreed to meet in one hour and went our separate ways.

“Should we tell your parents?” Oliver said, as we entered our room, “I don’t want them to worry that we’ve been kidnapped by a gang of hungry cats.”

“Dad mentioned Thierry’s barge. I think they were going to have drinks there or something.”

“What an exciting life they lead.”

“If you don’t want to go to Duplex,” I started, remembering the conversation we’d had earlier.

“No, I mean, yes I do, it wasn’t what I wanted to say,” he hastened to explain, “I would like us to be like them, one day.”

“Dinner drudgery and all?”

“Maybe,” he said, starting to undress. “I will bore people to death with my philosophical nonsense and you’ll enchant them with your music.”

“They won’t be bored for long, not with that to look at,” I replied, indicating his bare torso.

“I’ll wait for you in the shower.”

He was already naked and I stared at him, at the perfect line of his spine, the bounce of his ass, the intimidating columns of his legs: numbers and symmetry, I thought, thanking Pythagoras, Vitruvius and all the gods that had made Oliver possible.

“Étienne, Étienne, Étienne
Oh! Tiens-le bien
Baisers salés salis
Tombés le long du lit, de l’inédit
Il aime à la folie
Au ralenti, je soulève les interdits”

We opened the green doors and were immediately engulfed by noise, heat and the combined smells of cologne, smoke and alcohol.

“Thierry would love this song,” Oliver said, grimacing.

“Come on, at least Guesch Patti can sing,” I replied.

“She can dance too,” said Marzia, “Have you seen the video clip of this song?”

Momo clearly had, because he was singing along, mimicking Patti’s moves.

A tall, black guy smiled at him, invited him on the dance-floor.
“We haven’t been here two seconds and you’ve already scored,” Oliver shouted over the din.

“He’s not my type.”

“What, not curvy enough?” quipped his girlfriend.

“Too tall,” he dead-panned, “I prefer to look down rather than up.”

“I’m sure that could be arranged,” I said, relishing my friend’s sudden blush.

We ordered rum and coke because we needed the shot of caffeine, but found it impossible to keep a conversation going.

“Let’s go dance,” I said, taking Oliver by the hand.

Many of the songs were French, but Madonna featured heavily and so did George Michael and, for some inexplicable reason, Samantha Fox.

We did full justice to I Want Your Sex: Oliver and I were practically glued to one another, our t-shirts drenched with sweat, hair en bataille, groins in need of a cold shower; Marzia and Momo were in no better state and seemed to be having a lot of fun.

“I’ll get beers,” Oliver said, when the song was over. He couldn’t walk straight, so he staggered towards the bar.

I joined my friends and we jumped around to the notes of Plastic Bertrand’s Ça plane pour moi, which I remembered having danced to at my birthday party at least ten years before. Boys and men were gazing at us, at me and Momo probably, but we were too caught up in our respective partners to pay them any mind.

When the next song started, France Gall’s Ella, elle l’a, I saw Oliver pushing through the throbbing crowd, holding the four bottles of beer to his chest. A boy who looked even younger than me – short dark hair, lean body, wearing an open shirt which displayed his hairless chest – stopped him and whispered something in his ear. I saw his tongue dart out and tease Oliver’s skin and it was as though I’d felt it too; sickening, but I was watching like one replays a nightmare in one’s head the morning after. Marzia caught me staring and walked over to them: she kissed Oliver’s cheek and said something which made both men laugh. The skinny boy moved away, looking for other bodies to sidle up to.

“What did he say?” I asked him, after I’d downed the beer.

“The usual,” he replied, tracing the length of my throat with his thumb, “I think, I don’t know, don’t care.”

“Did he ask you to fuck him?”

“Maybe,” he said, his tongue following the path of his finger.

“What did Marzia say?”

“I told him that he was fucking me tonight,” she shouted; Momo tried to gag her with his hand and she bit him, which he seemed not to mind.

“What’s happened to my friends?” I asked, feigning surprise.

“We’ve grown up,” said Marzia, shoving her tongue inside her boyfriend’s mouth.
Oliver and I looked at each other and laughed.
The Drunken Boat

Chapter Summary

The morning after the Duplex night...
Lots of banter and fluffy fluff in this chapter.
Vimini and Fede have landed and they have their own wacky plans...

Chapter Notes

The Drunken Boat is a Rimbaud reference (Le Bateau Ivre), but no poems were quoted (or maimed) in this chapter.

Thanks to you all for reading and commenting and apologies for being slow in replying.
I will do so asap, I promise.

When I woke up, the other side of the bed was warm but empty.

My mouth was dry and my eyes were glued shut.

I tried to recall what had happened the night before, but my head was throbbing so I gave up.

We’d gone dancing, had drunk too much, come home and passed out as soon as we’d hit the bed: that must have been it.

Elio was probably in the bathroom, I thought. Better leave him to his own devices. Why was he taking so long though? Maybe he was feeling sick and had his head inside the toilet bowl. I listened but couldn’t discern any sound of retching or of other bodily functions, coming from that direction. Now, if only I could have opened my eyes... no, that was mission impossible, apparently.

What if Elio had gone to piss and had slipped and hurt his head? He could have passed out or worse. For some reason, the notion that he could have gone down to have breakfast without me didn’t seem plausible.

I agreed with myself to wait a little bit longer and in the meantime I’d hatch a plan of action. The waiting consisted of weaving in and out of sleep, until I was too tired even for that. Enough, I thought.

“Elio, are you alright?”

No reply.

I’d have to speak louder.

“Elio, where are you? Elio, Elio, Elio.”
Somehow the shouting had devolved into chanting my boyfriend’s name.

His reply came in the guise of a grunt.

“Where are you?”

“Here”

He sighed.

“Are you sleeping?”

“I was.”

This time, I succeeded in opening one eye, but the light stabbed at me; why was it so bright? After a few botched attempts, I unstuck both eyelids, crawled to Elio’s side of the bed and looked down: there he was, lying on the rug, curled into a ball and naked but for billowy, doubling as a makeshift blanket.

“Why do you always end up on the floor when you’re drunk?”

His hair was like a tangled skein of wool.

“You kicked me out of bed,” he muttered.

“Impossible”

He uttered a snort, which was immediately followed by a string of lamentations and profanities.

That was the proverbial last straw.

Somehow, I got my unresponsive body off the bed and next to him, as close as it was humanly possible, considering his foetal position.

“Are you hurt?”

I caressed the jut of a shoulder-blade and he unfurled like one of Leonor’s cats.

“What is it, kitten?”

“You said no silly names.”

He tried to laugh, but gave it up as a lost venture.

“It was ages ago,” I replied, burying my face in his curls: they smelled of London pubs at closing time. Like mist and fish and chips.

“You’re thinking about food, aren’t you?”

“We didn’t have a proper dinner last night.”

He made a sudden movement and his skull collided with my front teeth.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry, just feeling a bit sea-sick.”
“You need a steady hand.”

He emitted a wheezy giggle and rocked back into my arms.

“Did I really throw you out of bed?”

His stomach twitched beneath my fingers.

“No, but you were tossing and turning.”

“You could have told me.”

“I tried.”

“What did we drink?”

“I lost track after the third tequila and Momo dancing to Never Gonna Give You Up with that boy in the red wig.”

“Was that a wig?”

“Unless it was a beret with pigtails.”

Memories were slowly resurfacing: Elio with his shirt unbuttoned, jumping up and down, trying to climb me, his legs around my waist; Marzia and Momo laughing and kissing; the press of bodies around us, the azure clouds of smoke, the pulsating lights.

“I hope we didn’t do it on the dance floor,” I said.

“You don’t remember going down on me while Tina Charles sang I Love to Love?”

I had a moment of blind panic, before I realised he was chuckling.

“We didn’t do any cock stuff.”

“That’s good to know.”

“I love cock stuff.”

“Not in front of your friends.”

He shuddered.

“No, absolutely not.”

“I had a great time,” I said, even though I only remembered snatches of it.

“How did we get home?”

“Taxi?”

I hadn’t the faintest idea.

“I wonder if Marzia and Momo brought red wig boy home with them.”

That brought back old memories which weren’t altogether pleasant.
“If that floats their boat,” I said, immediately regretting it.

Boat, oscillating, capsizing: bad, nausea-inducing words.

His hand reached out for mine.

“I need the toilet,” he said.

“You feeling sick?”

“I need to piss.”

“I’d offer to carry you, but we are in the same...” boat, I was about to say, but checked myself just in time. “I’ll scratch your back, if you-”

“Oh, shut up,” he huffed, as he tried to get on his hands and knees.

I sat up with my back against the side of the bed and pulled him by the hips until his bum was ensconced in my lap.

The shirt had fallen away and he was – like me – stark naked. His face was whiter than usual, his eyelids gummy and his lips flaky: I wanted nothing more than to cuddle him silly.

“You smell interesting,” he said, touching my stubbly chin.

“I stink like a sewer, you mean.”

He nuzzled my cheek, my jaw and then my neck.

“It’s sexy,” he growled.

“We can’t get hard now,” I moaned.

“Too late”

We were too spent and dazed to be able to do anything about our erections, so we just stared at them, willing them to go away.

The sight of my dick provided Elio with a distraction from his physical distress.

“I don’t tell you often enough, but your cock is a work of art.”

I pondered his assertion.

“Slightly vulgar,” I replied, “Yours is more elegant.”

He clicked his tongue.

“Smaller.”

“Not as hefty.”

“Thinner.”

“Less meaty.”

“Now I do feel sick,” he whimpered.
It took us an age, but in the end we hobbled to the bathroom and when we resurfaced from the scolding hot shower, we were almost human again.

“More coffee?” I asked and Marzia glared at me.

Momo was asleep and she’d had to check his breathing to make sure he was still alive. She had a pounding headache and had begged us to keep the noise to a minimum.

I poured her another triple-espresso and she downed it with grim gusto.

Elio was staring at his cup with a desolate expression, as though he’d been reading his future in its dregs and it had spelled death or disaster.

I was the only one eating: toasted bread with lemon curd was rather inoffensive, I thought, and offered it to Elio, who scrunched his nose and shook his head.

The Perlmans had come in only to inform us that they were going to collect Fede and Vimini at the Gare du Nord.

When Marzia left us, taking a jug of coffee and two cups back to her room, the speech embargo was lifted.

“The girls will be here soon.”

“They can go with my parents,” he replied, “They could even go on a bateau-mouche in this weather.”

It was a gloriously sunny day, which only made our indisposition worse.

“I doubt they will want to do something so commonplace.”

“What do you think they will want to do?”

The question had merit, considering one girl was Vimini and the other Jack’s sister.

“Museums, I guess; not the traditional ones, maybe.”

“The cemetery is definitely a winner.”

I laughed and he gave me a shove that nearly made me fall off my chair.

“What?”

“Sottovoce,” he murmured, rubbing his cheek against my shoulder.

“I’m sorry, kitten,” I whispered.

“Is that a thing now?”

“Hmm, unless it bothers you”

He pressed his face to my sternum.

“Only when we are alone?”
“Yes”

Later, we took a walk along the river and, when we finally felt up to it, ate *galettes bretonnes* with smoked salmon and Brie in a tiny bistro close to the Pont Neuf.

“I’d completely forgotten it was Sunday,” I said. We were sitting outside, braving the cold because of the sunshine, watching the world go by: the chic Parisians, the tourists with their maps and backpacks, the barges on the Seine and the last of the autumn leaves being swept away by the wind.

“I can’t believe we are here,” he replied, “Last year I was in Italy playing *dernier* with Vimini.”

“I bet she won.”

He chuckled, “All about speed and memory, she said. Mum told me the new cure is working.”

“I will never forget when she told me she was dying. I was terrified I’d come back to Crema and she’d be gone.”

“She wrote to you, when you were in London with Tim.”

“Yes, but she didn’t say anything about you.”

A pigeon was pecking at the crumbs of our lunch: we looked at it for a while, until it flew away.

“After you phoned me to wish me happy birthday, she told me you’d follow me anywhere, even barefoot in the desert, like the woman in Morocco.”

“Maybe not barefoot,” I joked, “I care about my feet.”

“I told her you loved your boyfriend.”

“And you were right,” I said, caressing his ear, which was bright red for the cold.

“I wish my birthday wasn’t so close to the day your father passed away.”

“Well, after all we are Jewish: our joys are always laced with sadness.”

“Always the philosopher,” he said, smiling.

“Like I said, you’ll enchant them with your music and I’ll bore them with my words.”

Fede in winter clothing and with rimless glasses was Jack’s uncanny doppelganger; Vimini had put on a little weight and grown taller, but was otherwise unchanged.

Elio’s parents had taken them out for lunch and when we got back, they were sitting on the floor in the salon, a map of Paris spread out before them.

They looked like generals planning an invasion.

“Oliver,” Vimini cried, running into my arms. “Salut Elio,” she added, as an afterthought.

Fede greeted us with her brother’s lack of ceremony and came straight to the point.

“We want to go to church for Vespers and we’d like you to come with us.”
“Oh god,” Elio sighed, throwing himself on the sofa like a Hollywood diva of the 1920s.

I couldn’t even begin to fathom why they’d want to go there, but I was sure it was nothing to do with piousness. Besides, Fede was partly Jewish, even though I didn’t know whether she believed in any deity.

“Tell us what’s really going on,” I said.

“What do you know about the Society of Saint Pius X?” asked Vimini. She was as excited as when she’d told me about Riccardo Malaspina, I realised. That didn’t bode well.

“That’s the fraternity founded by Lefebvre,” replied Elio, who had assumed a dramatic posture, one forearm covering his eyes, in full Garbo mode.

Since I had never heard of it, they explained to me that the fraternity rejected the reforms proposed by the Vatican and that they had occupied a church in the 5th arrondissement, expelling the parish priest and his assistants.

“They don’t sound very charitable,” I said.

“The Mairie of Paris has been trying to evict them since 1978,” said Fede, as she wiped her glasses with a white cloth.

“Are we on a mission to restore normality and bring the poor old parish priest back?”

Elio chortled and Vimini rolled her eyes.

“They celebrate Mass in traditional Latin,” she said.

“And the priest has been excommunicated, so it’s blasphemous as well as archaic,” added Fede.

“You are making it sound even less attractive than it did at the start.”

“Oh, it’s absolutely ghastly, which is why we want to go,” replied Vimini.

“And you want us to provide you with suitable company,” I said.

“Two young girls would attract attention. We want to observe without being observed,” Jack’s sister said.

“I’m not going,” said Elio, “That sort of thing gives me the creeps.”

I didn’t want to disappoint them and, besides, I was rather curious.

“Okay, I’ll take you. How far is it from here?”

“Less than thirty minutes by metro.”

“What?” exclaimed my boyfriend, “You’re leaving me here, on my own?”

“You’re not stranded on a desert island,” said Vimini, giving him the look.

“He’s had a difficult night,” I noted.

“I hope he’s not popping pills, like my brother,” said Fede.

“I’m here and I can hear you,” Elio snapped, like I knew he would, “Fine, if you really want to go
see these weirdoes,” he sighed.

“Don’t worry,” said Vimini, “It won’t take more than a couple of hours.”

“I’m not worried,” he replied, “Because I’m coming with you.”

I suppressed a smile, but I knew that I wasn’t fooling anyone.
The Past and the Present

Chapter Summary

The boys do something sacred and something profane then back to the sacred.
They are so in love it's almost indecent.

Chapter Notes

Ira Levin is the author of The Stepford Wives.

“Speciósus forma præ filiüs hóminum
diffúsā est grátia in lábiis tuis”

“Thou art beautiful above the sons of men
grace is poured abroad in Thy lips”

I knew the words of this Psalm, but I had never heard them recited in Latin. They held a power and a fascination I had never fully grasped before. Aside from their meaning, there was the added lure of the language, both lyrical and solemn.

The church of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet was classical in style: Grecian marble columns separated the nave from the side aisles. It was rather Spartan, with wooden chairs instead of pews and clear glass in lieu of stained.

The congregation was quite forbidding too: severely dressed in black, not a hair out of place, the serenity of their eyes unmatched by the tight line of their mouths.

Elio was as mesmerised as me, his gaze pin-balling from his prayer book to the priest’s grave face then to the profile of the elderly man next to him. Vimini and Fede were diligently listening and responding when appropriate: anyone would have thought they were avid believers, completely devoted to the cause.

The experience should have been futile at best and vexing at worst, but in between was the enticing concept of transgression.

I had often wondered why so many homosexual men were drawn to Catholicism when it was so rabidly opposed to them and the reason wasn’t simply to be attributed to a peculiar form of masochism. There was a vein of eroticism snaking through the formality of the ritual: the drag-like vestments, the overstated purity of the choir boys, the rigours of penitence; there was an obvious similarity with the practices of dominance and submission; words like punishment, expiation, ecstasy had a double connotation which encompassed the spiritual and the carnal.
Sacred imagery was rife with the naked bodies of saints being tortured or crucified or pierced by arrows: many of the artists had slept with their models, men with boys, boys with boys.

Elio was underlining each verse with his index finger, leaving a shallow indent on the vellum; his lower lip was trapped between his teeth and there was a lock of hair teasing the shell of his ear.

I felt a sudden stab of pain in my foot: the culprit was the heel of Vimini’s boot.

She’d caught me lusting after Elio, but all I could think of was: I just rhymed.

The memory of that afternoon - the bike ride after our first kiss, Elio’s ridiculous assumption that we’d never talk again - made me smile.

“Behave,” she hissed.

Elio turned towards us and I could have kissed him: he looked angelic and blissfully unaware.

“What was that about?” he asked, once the ceremony was over.

“He was smiling,” Vimini replied, while Fede stared at the crowd spilling out of the church.

“Look at them,” she whispered, “They are like the characters of an Ira Levin book.”

“I told you that they would give you the creeps,” said Elio and to me, “What were you smiling about?”

“Nothing,” I shook my head, “I thought of something and I rhymed.”

He didn’t comment, but he slipped his hand in mine.

“I wasn’t only smiling,” I murmured in his ear, “I’ll tell you later.”

Even after all this time together, he could still blush.

“Are we done here?” I asked the girls.

“I wanted to confess all my sins, but maybe another time,” said Fede, making her friend laugh heartily; it was a rare sight and one that filled me with joy.

“I want to show you something,” said Elio, sauntering ahead of us, with his usual balletic grace.

We followed him into the maze of the Quartier Latin, with its cobbled streets and bohemian charm.

“This is the narrowest alley in Paris,” he announced, as we strode into the peculiarly named Rue du Chat qui Pêche.

“Lie down,” Vimini ordered me, “I want to see if you fit.”

“He won’t,” the other girl intervened, “I read about it in my travel guide: the alley is only 6ft wide.”

Of course she knew about it; she was like the rest of her family: clever, curious and a bit of a show-off.

“I wonder whether there really was a fishing cat,” I said, waiting to see who’d get there first. There was no contest, since Elio was still slightly groggy from the previous night’s revels.
“It was on a shop sign,” his cousin replied, “Before the street was called Rue du Renard, but don’t ask me whether there really was a fox, because I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” I mocked, and Vimini couldn’t bite back a giggle, “This is a once in a lifetime occurrence, so I think we should celebrate.”

“You’re thinking of food again,” said Elio, with an exaggerated sigh.

I knew what he was thinking of: midnight, his birthday, the only other time we’d spent it together.

Vimini cast him an appraising glance, understanding everything in a flash.

“Maybe we could have dinner back at the apartment,” she said, but as if by divine intervention we’d stopped in front of the small restaurant named after the alley.

Elio looked at the black kitten which decorated the door then at me.

“This is definitely a sign,” he chortled.

While we sampled the delightful roast poulet farmier with spices and tarragon and a side of frites, I interrogated the girls about the occupied church.

“I don’t mind the Latin,” Fede said, “It can be fun, once in a while. But living in the past can’t be healthy.”

“It’s acceptable as long as the infection doesn’t spread,” Vimini chimed in, “But there’s always a risk, because the past can be like a black hole, if one is not careful.”

And of the four of us, she was the one who had every reason not to dwell on what had been and, thankfully, gone.

“Traditions act like a comfort blanket,” said Elio.

“Or a noose tied around your neck,” I countered, thinking of my parents and their dreary marital life.

“None of those people seemed happy,” said Vimini, infallibly hitting the nail on the head, “Even the young looked old.”

“I wish I’d been here when they hounded that poor priest out,” said Fede, adjusting the glasses on top of her nose, “I would have chained myself to the altar, like a suffragette.”

“Why do you care so much?” her cousin asked, scratching the back of his head.

“I don’t like bullies,” she replied, “Speaking of which, I have heard that Riccardo Malaspina is in the States. I hope he’s not going to try and contact my brother.”

“Why would he do that?” asked Elio, once again attracting pitying eye-rolls from the girls.

“He knows that Jack’s happy and he’d want to try and change that,” said Vimini.

“But Jack would never allow it,” I said.

“No, but could you say the same of your mother?”

Fede had a point, for I couldn’t claim that Judith’s mind and heart were familiar to me.
I could have replied that she was in love, but San Francisco had taught me that hearts can falter and bonds be severed. Maybe not forever, but long enough to wound and scar.

Elio read my silence and poured me a glass of wine.

“She’s like Oliver,” he said, as though that would close the case.

Perhaps he was right and Judith would follow her man like I had pursued mine, through metaphorical deserts, never letting go.

It was past ten o’clock when we left the restaurant.

“Sure you’re not tired?”

Vimini took my arm and linked it with hers.

“You want to get rid of us,” she joked.

“No, but I wanted to buy some champagne and there’s a place not far from here which should still be open.”

Le Drugstore was ten minutes away; not a long walk, but she’d had a long day.

As soon as she heard the name, the deal was sealed.

“I have heard about it,” she said, exchanging unsubtle glances with her friend.

“How could you possibly,” I started, but then I thought: Jack, of course.

This time we were luckier and when the three of us got out of the shop, Elio – who once again had sneaked out while I was at the till - winked at me and stuffed his hands in his coat pockets.

The girls had understood everything, but for once they didn’t say a word.

We left them with Momo and Marzia, who were playing Monopoly in the salon, and headed upstairs.

“You look like the cat that got the weed,” I said, pressing a kiss to Elio’s neck.

We hadn’t turned on the lights, but his skin glowed in the dark.

“Thy neck is as a tower of ivory,” I quoted, sensing his amusement.

“The Song of Songs, no less,” he chuckled.

“Seems appropriate.”

My tongue followed the path of my lips and he threw his head back, grasping my head with both hands, fingers twisting in my hair.

I was already hard and so was he, and we hadn’t undressed yet.

He palmed my erection, teasing my balls with his fingertips.
“You don’t play fair,” I gasped.

“It’s my birthday,” he whispered, “I want to show you.”

“Show me what?”

“That I belong to you.”

He fell to his knees, undid my trousers and pushed them and my boxers down to my thighs. My dick sprang out and hit his chin; he let out a mewling moan that evoked a tremor in my pelvis. His eyes glimmered in the blackness, his lips parted and I was in heaven. He guided my hand to his jaw, and I could feel him gagging on my dick, sucking it with an urgency born of hunger. I was too turned on to last.

After the first shot that sprayed down his throat, he let the rest dribble from his mouth, so I kissed him and kissed him some more, until it was all consumed and shared, like a sinful Eucharist. I offered reciprocation, but when I touched his fly, I felt a tell-tale wetness.

“I came in my pants,” he said, burying his face in my chest.

“Blast from the past,” I mocked, “As long as the infection doesn’t spread.”

“Idiot,” he said it in French, pouting.

I caressed his cheek and he leaned into my hand, fragile and soft like the wing of a dove.

“It’s almost midnight,” I murmured, and he closed his eyes.

We had removed our clothes and wrapped a heavy blanket around us as we sat by the window, looking at the bay trees which rose high from the private garden behind the building. They were swishing in the cold wind; the longer branches were grazing the masonry, scratching at it like powerful claws.

The clock was about to strike the hour and I had my speech ready, but he preceded me.

“I love you, Oliver,” he said, “I love you more than I have ever loved anyone in my whole life, and this is it for me. You are it.”

I wished to respond in kind, but all that I could manage were strangled breaths and wet eyes. He enclosed me into his arms and held me, as if I needed to be comforted. If I let it, the memory of that night would submerge me, but as sweet as it was, it could never compete with the present.

“I have something for you,” I said, and went to retrieve Elio’s gift from its hiding place. I switched on the night light and handed him the square box.

He clicked it open and stared at the object inside it then at me and back and forth again.

“It doesn’t bite,” I quipped.

He nodded, furiously.

“Where did you find it?”

“An antique shop in Pimlico,” I replied, stroking his neck and shoulders to relieve his tension. “It’s
made of burnished silver and the vine is the symbol—"

“The symbol of God’s chosen people,” he finished my sentence, because that’s what Elio was, the end to my beginning.

He held it to the light and noticed the engraving.

“It’s the date of your arrival in Italy,” he said, sounding mystified.

“From day one,” I said, and kissed him lightly on the lips.

“Pour la vie?” he asked, taking the ring out of the box and handing it to me.

I slid it all the way down his third finger, and he stared at it with his lips parted, like a kid watching a magician’s trick.
The Birthday - Part I

Chapter Summary

It's Elio's birthday and he's getting all sorts of presents...

Chapter Notes

"The blood of Christ or the beat of my heart," is from the song Forbidden Colours (David Sylvian & Ryuichi Sakamoto)

The Brahms piece is a blast from the past, quoted in my first story Daring to Desire You. For those who haven't read it/can't remember: it's a reference to the film Goodbye Again in which a middle-aged woman has an affair with a younger man but leaves him in the end because she thinks she's too old for him (she isn't).

Daniel Pennac's novel L'œil du loup was published in 1984.

“You said you’d tell me later, so tell me.”

We were smoking our second joint while quaffing champagne straight from the bottle.

Comme d’habitude, the pot made us horny and mellow. We were in bed and I was straddling Oliver’s thighs, playing with the tip of his erection with my newly be-ringed finger. I had every intention of taking my time, despite the gnawing in my veins, which demanded immediate possession.

He took a long drag and smiled as he exhaled: a louche, predatory grin.

“I was looking at you during the service and thinking of religious iconography,” he replied, placing the reefer between my lips. He kept it there long enough for me to inhale then brought it back to his mouth.

“All those naked saints and their pale bodies,” I said, curling my fingers around his shaft. His eyelids fluttered and his hips bucked, but I sensed his passivity, his desire to hand me the reins.

“Have you ever thought about the rite of confession?” I whispered, moving my hand away from his groin and letting it slide up his torso, until it was buried in his chest hair. I grabbed a fistful of it and pulled, lightly.

“What about it?” he croaked.

I disposed of the joint in the ashtray on the bedside table and took a swig of Veuve Clicquot. I let him drink his fill then set the bottle on the floor by the bed.

His eyes never left me: they were dark and famished.
I bent down: my mouth was inches from his ear and my abdomen was pressed against his cock.

“Imagine that you were a priest and I was a boy who came to confess his sins.”

I licked his neck with the tip of my tongue and I felt his pulse quicken.

“What sins?”

“Only one,” I murmured, “That I lusted after a man. You’d ask if I had acted on my desires.”

His cock was swollen and wet.

“I’d reply that I had only indulged in solitary pleasures, but that I wanted to share them with this man, that I saw his face when I peaked and imagined his mouth filled with my release.”

I sucked on his earlobe and grazed it with my teeth; he moaned and tried to touch me but I made it clear he should let me drive.

“You’d be jealous of this unknown man, but you’d pretend to be worried about my salvation.”

I played with his nipples until they were pebbled then tweaked them and flicked them, roughly.

“You’d ask me to pray for my absolution and abstain from lewd fantasies, but I’d reply that I longed to drink long and hard from this man’s cock, until he’d spent every single drop inside of me.”

Oliver was trembling and I was desperate to be one with him.

“I’d walk up to your side and fall down at your feet, begging you to finish me off.”

He groaned as I ravished his mouth, his tongue was everywhere at once. I held his face and the kiss deepened; it turned sensual, languorous.

When we parted, he kept his eyes closed.

“And I would reject you, because I’d be bound only to God,” he said, shaking his head.

“The blood of Christ or the beat of my heart,” I quoted, drawing the contour of his lips with the pad of my thumb, wanting to feel his spit on my skin.

He placed his hand on my sternum; his palm was hot and dry.

“I’d always choose your heart,” he said.

“And burn in hell?”

“Hell is for those who hate.”

I fiddled with my ring and he grasped my finger and put it in his mouth; as he hollowed his cheeks, he stared into my eyes.

I didn’t waste any more time, but rolled off him, found the bottle of lube and put it to good use. Oliver had folded his legs and pulled them to his chest: he was open and vulnerable, waiting for my body to enter his.

When my finger breached him it was – I realised – a carnal metaphor of his previous gesture, a ratification of it: he’d given me his heart and now he was surrendering his flesh.
This second ring tightened around the first, sending sparks to my groin.

I replaced it with my cock and when he had sucked it all in, I begged him to look at us. He did, and let out a string of moans and half-formed words, which I took as encouragement to ram into him. I wanted to brand him on the inside, plant my flag in his guts, a permanent tattoo of blood and semen.

His orgasm hit before mine, and it seized his entire being, which shook and convulsed, nearly dislodging me from my throne. I gave one final, brutal thrust and shot my load; after that, everything went red.

“Better now?”

I was lying on the bed with a cold, wet flannel over my forehead. My nose felt strange and when I licked my lips I tasted iron.

“Did I have a nosebleed?”

Oliver had covered me with a blanket and he was caressing my hair.

“Another blast from the past,” he joked, but his expression was worried, “Was it my fault?” he asked, touching my hand.

“Lie down with me,” I said. Sit with me, I’d pleaded that summer, after my first nosebleed in his presence.

He slid beneath the blanket and I cuddled up to him. He still smelled of sex and fresh sweat.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” he said, “But if a ring seems too binding—”

I shook my head and the cold compress shifted to the side.

“No, no, it’s not, no,” I replied, stroking the ring to make sure it was still there.

“I want you so much and sometimes I can’t handle it and it spills out, I suppose.”

“I thought that coming like a fire extinguisher would take care of that problem,” he sniggered.

“Look who’s talking,” I said, nudging his shoulder.

He kissed my cheek, my ear, along my jaw.

“I could never be a priest,” he said, as his hand trailed down my thigh, “If I met you, I’d break every vow to be with you.”

I laughed and he shot me an incensed look.

“What, don’t you believe me?”

“Yes, but I’ve realised that we’ve just enacted the plot of The Thorn Birds.”

“I was thinking more of Ficino, but you have a point,” he said, chuckling.

My silence told him that I had no idea what he was talking about.

“I can’t believe it! And on your birthday, after the fuck of a lifetime! At last, there IS something you
don’t know!”

I put the flannel back on my forehead and closed my eyes.

“Not so loud, I am convalescing,” I whined. I was behaving like a malingering drama queen, but he had no right to make fun of me.

“Sorry, okay, so I won’t tell you what Ficino wrote in his *Platonica Theologia*.”

I let him stew in his smugness for an eternity – probably less than a minute – before opening one eye too look at him. He was smiling, but with such tenderness that I couldn’t keep up the pretence of being offended.

“What did he write?” I sighed, but held out my hand, which he immediately took and kissed.

“And I quote: *this man has something in himself that burns me, while I myself do not understand what I desire.*”

“I love it, Oliver.”

“Yes, I thought you would.”

He let his head rest above my heart and I played with his hair, tousling it the way I liked it.

“Shall I get you something hot to drink?” he asked, after a while.

“I’d love some more champagne and more weed would help us sleep.”

“You’re still a *dissoluto assoluto*, even in your dotage.”

“I’m only twenty-two, you ancient relic.”

He pinched my tummy and when I shrieked, he did it again.

We smoked, emptied the bottle and laughed for no reason other than pure happiness.

It was mid-morning when we made our way downstairs.

My parents were waiting for us and if they saw the ring, they said nothing about it. *Maman* would certainly let me know her opinion at some point, either verbally or with one of her pointed looks.

“Happy birthday, my love,” she said, ruffling my hair.

Dad smiled at Oliver who looked sheepish and a little flushed.

Evidently, it was papà’s turn to drop hints; he was happy for us, he thought the world of Oliver.

“I prepared *crêpes* with Nutella,” mum said, “They won’t be as good as Mafalda’s, but they should do.”

Oliver sighed, muttering something about his diet, but one glare from me put a stop to all that nonsense: he was built like the Doryphoros and an entire tub of chocolate spread wouldn’t change that.

Underneath my plate was an envelope which contained tickets for a concert: I read the writing on
them and laughed.

“I can’t believe you remembered.”

“I remember everything,” dad replied, with a wink.

“The Symphony No. 1 by Brahms at the Salle Pleyel,” said Oliver, “Exactly like in the film.”

“But with a happy ending,” I said, and he nodded.

We sipped our coffees and chit chatted idly about Brahms, Sagan and the other composer listed on the tickets – Ludewig Spohr – whose name Oliver was hearing for the first time.

“Initially we’d thought about *Iphigénie en Tauride*, but then Sam heard about the Pleyel concert and his choice was made,” said my mother.

“I have heard that it’s really amazing,” I replied, “Liliana Cavani is the director,” I added, glancing at Oliver: *I do know things, see?*

“We can go to both,” he said, with a sly smile, “Are tickets still available?”

“There’s no time.”

“We’ll find time.”

Our pretend bickering was interrupted by Fede and Vimini’s entrance. They had just come back from a visit to the Shakespeare & Co bookshop and were red-cheeked and full of enthusiasm.

“Daniel Pennac was signing copies of *L'œil du loup*,” exclaimed Vimini, coming up to show us her prize. She sat down next to Oliver and handed him the book.

“See what he wrote? *Vimini, quel jolie prénom*. He even shook my hand!”

“Isn’t it a book for children?” I asked, earning a dirty look from my boyfriend.

“In a way,” she huffed, “But it’s about survival against all odds.”

“The Little Prince is a children’s book too,” said Fede, “And yet it isn’t.”

I felt thoroughly chastened. I leafed through the glossy book and praised the beautiful drawings.

“I got you something for your birthday,” Vimini said, after scoffing a crêpe and downing a glass of orange juice.

My parents had adjourned to the salon to read the papers and enjoy the peace and quiet. We had been invited on Thierry’s barge for lunch and a short river journey to the Quai Branly for the Tour Eiffel. It was another clear sunny day, so the view from the top of Tower would be unimpaired by clouds or mist.

Vimini came back from her room with a photo album; on the black leather cover was the gilt inscription *Year 1987*.

Oliver and Fede moved closer so they could see what was inside.

It took all my self-restraint not to sob like a baby; with the Polaroid camera I had given her, Vimini had taken several snapshots of my parents, friends, favourite places; photos of herself, Mafalda,
Anchise, the empty pool lined with dead leaves, the barren trees, the first snow flurries dancing above the river; she had written the dates on the back in red ink.

“I thought you and Oliver would like to see what happens when you are not there.”

“Yes, I, yes,” I stuttered and, taking her by surprise, wrapped her tightly in my arms. Oliver joined in the embrace and I heard him sniffle.

Fede - who was after all Jack’s sister - regarded us briefly with her Sphinx-like smile and said nothing.
The Birthday - Part II

Chapter Summary

The celebrations continue but they are not over yet.
Yes, there will be a part III.
This Parisian holiday will never end, lols

The music came from a jazz saxophone played by one of the young buskers congregating under the bridge: it was the unmistakable opening riff of Rafferty’s *Baker Street*.

“At least that’s better than the trash Thierry was listening to last time,” I said, and Oliver nudged me in the ribs.

“You agreed that it was awful.”

“What was?” asked Vimini.

I explained about our host’s weird tastes in pop music.

“The first summer Oliver spent in Italy, you listened to Gazebo all the time,” she said. Of course she would remember that.

“One shouldn’t be a snob,” said Fede, talking in the third person like royalty, “There’s always something to learn even from silly songs.”

It reminded me of a line of dialogue from a Truffaut film about love songs: how they perfectly described emotions despite, or perhaps because, of the banality of the lyrics.

“It’s here,” said my father, indicating a bottle-green barge on which was painted in coral red the name *Zadig*.

“Why Zadig?” asked Oliver.

Mathieu emerged from the bowels of the *péniche* to greet us.

“Tell Oliver about Zadig,” said *maman*, kissing the man on both cheeks.

“*Il n'y a point de hasard, tout est épreuve, ou punition, ou récompense, ou prévoyance,*” he quoted.

Oliver’s French wasn’t up to it, so I was about to translate it, but Vimini preceded me.

“There is no such thing as chance: everything is a test or punishment, or reward or admonition,” she said, glancing at Fede, who nodded sagely.

“The Hermit,” said Oliver, waiting for further clarifications.

“Thierry was looking for somewhere to escape his bookshop and one of his regular customers, who had come to purchase a luxury edition of Voltaire’s *Zadig*, was trying to sell his barge. There are no coincidences and in this instance, we chose to call this a reward.”
I thought about fate’s role in my relationship with Oliver: had our first spell together been a test for both of us? Possibly, considering the hurdles we’d had to overcome.

“What was its previous name?” asked Fede.

“B.B.,” replied Mathieu, “He was a fan of Bardot.”

She smiled at me, as if to underscore the point she’d made before: high and low culture, everything mattered, nothing should be discounted.

“Happy birthday,” shouted Thierry, who’d suddenly appeared on deck; he was wearing a striped poncho, which reminded me of the one Vimini had used to sport when she was a ten-year-old kid. He had a bottle of champagne and proceeded to pop its cork, spraying Mathieu in the face.

“He does this every time,” the man said, wiping his cheek on his partner’s shoulder.

“I could get used to champagne for lunch and dinner,” I said.

“Maybe when you’re rich and famous,” quipped Oliver.

I rolled my eyes.

“We got you a present,” said Mathieu.

“You already did,” I replied, referring to Glass' new composition.

“This is something for you and Oliver,” Thierry said, as he guided us below deck.

The interior of the barge revealed the same idiosyncratic taste as the Marais house: Scandinavian vintage furniture and Thonet chairs mixed with Chinese spreads in shot silk, colourful bowls filled with gardenias and plump magenta poppies, masses of books lining the unadorned white shelves. I was immediately intrigued by the paintings on the walls of the main living area.

“Who’s the artist? He reminds me of Hopper,” I said.

“A Scottish man named Vettriano,” replied Mathieu, “Jacques introduced us at a party. He doesn’t like his paintings, but he’s convinced one day they’ll be worth a fortune.”

“I like this one,” said Vimini, inspecting a small canvas which depicted two young women walking along a beach.

Oliver’s attention had been attracted by the portrait of a woman in sexy lingerie sitting in front of a mirror. We could see her back and her naked buttocks, but not her face. She had shiny dark hair, a few strands curled at the nape.

“Nice isn’t it?” I asked, and he hummed in assent.

In the meantime, Thierry was pouring the champagne into long-stemmed glasses and handing them round.

“I could be that for you, if you wanted me to,” I murmured in Oliver’s ear, while the others were thus distracted. Under his coat collar, his neck flushed. When he looked at me, there was a question in his eyes to which I replied with unblinking certainty.

“Is the birthday boy abstemious?” asked Mathieu, who’d evidently been trying in vain to give me my
drink.

“He’s many things,” replied dad, with a wide smile, “But certainly not that.”

They toasted my santé and wished me cento di questi giorni.

“So what about the present,” said Thierry, who no longer ogled Oliver but seemed to have come to the conclusion that both of us should be his new protégés, “Shall I give to you now or after lunch?”

“I’m too curious,” I said, and heard Fede and Oliver chuckle in stereo.

“Here,” said Mathieu, placing an envelope in my hand.

I looked inside and broke down laughing: they had bought us tickets to Gluck’s Iphigénie en Tauride. I explained the reason of my mirth and Thierry clapped my father on the back.

“Great minds think alike, my friend, but these are like gold dust. I only got them because of Pierre’s intervention. He liked your Elio so much he’d have given him the moon if he’d asked for it.”

“Maybe he could book Elio for a concert at his theatre,” Oliver said.

“You see? He’s got a pushy agent already,” joked maman.

“Invite him to your performance,” Thierry said, “He may surprise you by actually turning up.”

“It would be very presumptuous of me,” I muttered, and Vimini shook her head.

“He’ll do it,” she said, taking Oliver’s hand. He smiled at her and she beamed in return.

“I surrender,” I said, raising my arms.

After I thanked our host for the present, we sat down to lunch.

Thierry had chosen to order the food from one of his favourite restaurants: we were treated to a giant platter of shell-fish and to lobster thermidor with a side dish of stuffed aubergines and pan-fried courgettes. The girls were offered burgers with frites, but they gladly tucked into the fruits de mer.

The conversation flowed as freely as the wine and by dessert – which consisted of crème brûlée served in dainty pale green ramekins – I was pleasantly tipsy.

I vaguely heard the engine rumble and, as I opened my eyes, realised the barge was moving.

“You okay?” murmured Oliver, on whose chest I was reclining. He was warm and comfortable and I had trouble staying awake.

“Me okay,” I replied, stifling a yawn, “Where are the others?”

He wrapped his arms around me and buried his nose in my hair.

“The girls are on the roof terrace with Annela and your dad is with Mathieu and Thierry at the tiller, discussing the merits of self-propelled barges. We are almost there.”

“Should we go on the terrace too? The view must be amazing.”

Oliver kissed the crown of my head.
“The view is not so bad in here,” he whispered.

“Boats always make me sleepy.”

“Better than queasy,” he said. “Some people get motion sickness.”

“You’re thinking of someone in particular.”

He let out a soft sigh.

“Yeah, Alice couldn’t even set foot on a rowing boat without heaving.”

The image was oddly endearing.

“I wish she could have come to Paris,” I said.

We had invited her, but she had found a job as soon as she’d returned to New York and didn’t have any extra days off for Christmas.

“She’d love what I have in store for you tonight,” he said, teasing the shell of my ear with his fingertips.

“Stop taunting me, you sadist. I pouted, feigning to push him away. He held me tighter to him and I relaxed in his grasp.

“I want it to be a surprise, something you’ll never forget.”

“Whatever happens, we’ll always have Paris,” I replied, assuming one of my dramatic poses.

“Goose,” he laughed, and it felt as though time had folded over and my younger self was watching Oliver and thinking, “You’re the best person I have ever known, I chose you well.”

“L’attrait du vide,” said Fede, peering through the latticework at the limitless sky, “If there was no protection, many would be tempted to jump into the void.”

At her side, Vimini was speechless, with the bug-eyed amazement of an agnostic witnessing a miracle. She held her friend’s hand tight and walked slowly, as if afraid that the Tower might list and topple at any sudden movement.

My parents had decided to stay on the barge with Thierry and Mathieu, since they’d visited the Tower many times already.

Oliver had brought his camera and was taking pictures of the view and of the Tower’s structure, while I was adding to my ‘Oliver in Paris’ collection.

“It must be an exhilarating sensation,” I agreed, “Maybe you should try parachuting.”

“Jack did it,” she said, “Once, near Venice.”

“Without training?” asked Oliver.

She made a face.

“He convinced the pilot and the instructors that he’d already trained in the States.”
“But it wasn’t true.”

She shook her head, but there was a hint of pride in her eyes.

“He’d studied it in his usual obsessive way. The day he jumped, I was waiting for him at the drop zone. He hugged me, so I knew that he’d been scared.”

“I’d love to try,” I said, and saw the brief shudder that traversed Oliver’s body.

“Look at the sunset,” cried Vimini, pointing at the orange-streaked horizon.

She asked a fellow tourist to take a picture of the four of us against that filmic backdrop. Oliver had his arm around my waist while I had slipped my hand into the back pocket of his jeans. After it was done, he squeezed my wrist, ferociously. I thought: why?

“I’d rather you didn’t throw yourself off a plane,” he hissed in my ear. “Our lives are risky enough as it is.”

This wasn’t like drunken unprotected sex at Subway, I wanted to reply: we could do it together and it would be fun. But then it struck me as selfish, after all the privileges fate had conferred on me already. And if fate did not exist, like Voltaire posited, was I being profligate with my rewards and would I be punished for it?

“I won’t,” I said, brushing a lock of hair from his eyes, “Can’t risk my precious fingers anyway, not if Pierre Bergé is coming to hear me play.”

“Can’t risk your entire body,” he said, giving me a scorching look.

The wind was too cold now that the sun had gone, so we left the observation deck; we went indoors and bought hot chocolates with whipped cream from the champagne bar.

Vimini and Fede were making plans for the following day: the Musée Picasso and maybe Montmartre or the Statue of Liberty inside the Jardin du Luxembourg; they had a list they had agreed on, but Oliver insisted they should leave something to chance.

“There is no such thing as chance,” quoted Fede, and we all laughed.

As the evening drew closer, the atmosphere changed.

We left our friends - who were going to have dinner at the Brasserie Lipp with my parents and the two girls - and headed back to the apartment.

I was expecting a surprise: lights being suddenly switched on, boys and girls jumping out of their hiding places, music pumping and alcohol flowing; what greeted us instead was a dark and empty house, shrouded in silence.

We went up to our room: on the bed was a black military-style coat with silver buttons.

“What does this come from?” I asked, but Oliver didn’t reply. We took a shower; he kissed me under the spray but did not take it further. I knew then that he wanted me to follow his lead and that made me even harder.

We got dressed and he helped me put on the new coat: it fit like a glove and smelled expensive.
“Time to go,” he said, tracing my lips with his thumb, “Ready?” he asked.

Without taking my eyes off his, I bit down on his finger.
Chapter Summary

What has Oliver planned for Elio's birthday? What do you give to the boy who already has everything?

Sorry for the short delay, but this chapter is longer than usual.

Chapter Notes

Avalon by Roxy Music, songs quoted: Avalon, While my Heart is Still Beating, To Turn You On, True to Life

The rest of the quotes are from Théophile Gautier.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Un soir de décembre... j'arrivai dans un quartier lointain, espèce d'oasis de solitude au milieu de Paris, que le fleuve, en l'entourant de ses deux bras, semble défendre contre les empiétements de la civilisation, car c'était dans une vieille maison de L'Île Saint-Louis que le club bizarre dont je faisais partie depuis peu tenait ses séances mensuelles, où j'allais assister pour la première fois.

One December evening... I arrived in a remote quarter in the middle of Paris, a kind of solitary oasis which the river encircles in its arms on both sides as though to defend it against the encroachments of civilisation. It was in an old house on the Île St Louis, where the strange club which I had recently joined held its monthly séance. I was attending for the first time.

Théophile Gautier - Revue des Deux Mondes, 1 February 1846

The limpid sunny afternoon had been replaced by a dense, milky fog which became almost tangible once we approached the river.

“Are we going to Lucien’s?” I asked, but Oliver did not reply; he was holding my arm just above the elbow and his expression was inscrutable. We crossed the Pont Marie and on the other side of it the Île Saint-Louis appeared deserted.

“Put this on,” he said, pulling out a piece of silk which turned out to be a blindfold.

“Seriously?” I asked, on a knife-edge between scared and excited.

“I told you it was going to be a surprise,” he replied, “Don’t worry, we won’t have to walk far.”
The thrill of the unknown made my heart beat faster, but I trusted him and knew he would never lead me into danger.

“Do it for me,” I said, staring him in the eye. He nodded and a moment later I was in darkness.

Oliver wrapped his arm around my waist and held me so tight against his side I was almost walking on air. He must have been telling the truth and we had not gone a long distance, but since I couldn’t see and was anxiously trying to figure out what was going on, it was impossible for me to tell for certain.

I wondered what passers-by would think, seeing two men in a virtual embrace, one of them blindfolded, but all around us was only muffled silence.

When we finally reached our destination, Oliver inserted a key in the lock and opened the door: I did not hear the squeaking of hinges but felt warmth on my face and the smell of burning candles.

He ushered me inside and waited a few moments, letting me imbibe the atmosphere of this unknown house.

“Are we inside a church?” I asked, thinking of Bertrand and his room under the eaves. There was no stench of cabbage or humidity, but that meant nothing.

“See for yourself,” he murmured, removing the blindfold.

At first I couldn’t get my bearings in the suffuse candlelight and when I finally did, I was speechless.

“This isn’t possible,” I said, “The Hôtel de Lauzun is closed to the public. We have tried, dad tried, but even he couldn’t, how is this real?”

Oliver’s wide smile made dimples in his cheeks; I wanted to kiss them, kiss him.

“Turns out Lucien’s relatives are not so useless after all,” he joked.

Afterwards, he explained that Lucien’s uncle was friends with the Mayor; they had been to the same school, which had also been attended by Voltaire and the Marquis de Sade.

“Why the coat?”

He laughed, “It was the closest I could get to a frock-coat without giving the game away.”

“If you’d bought me a frock-coat, I’d have thought about a masked ball.”

I still couldn’t quite believe that we were in the same house where Baudelaire had lived, where he’d penned Les Fleurs du Mal.

We were at the bottom of a majestic marble staircase; at the side of it was the statue of a chimera whose claws were used as candlestick holders.

The burning wax smelled of incense and patchouli.

This had been the place where the Club des Hashischins held their drug-fuelled meetings. They had eaten the opium in the form of green jelly and described its effects in great detail.

I had started climbing the stairs without being aware of it: on the walls were many frameless paintings; every inch covered with carved and gilt eagles, shells, sheaves, painted quivers stuffed with arrows, three-dimensional cupids; above, in the shadows, was the frescoed ceiling, whose
garlands and pink roses were scarcely visible.

The salon was like the interior of a baroque cathedral, with tall casement windows looking down on the Seine. As I walked up to that side of the room, my footsteps on the parquet floor resounded loud as thunderclaps.

Candlelight made everything mysterious, shimmering velvet like the inside of Aladdin’s cave.

The river was only a dark mass adorned by transient lights, devoured by the mist.

Oliver’s shadow was projected onto the glass panels: it was large and elongated; a monstrous ink-stain.

“This must be a dream,” I said, when he embraced me from behind, “You must have given me some hashish earlier.”

He nibbled the lobe of my ear, eliciting a shiver.

“I’d never do that,” he replied, “But these candles may not be entirely what they seem.”

“Wait, what?”

I turned around and caught him mid-giggle.

“Your cousin wishes you a happy birthday,” he said, placing a kiss on the tip of my nose. “Since he couldn’t be here, he kindly provided part of the entertainment.”

“Cannabis candles?”

He nodded, slowly, while chewing his lower lip. I knew most of Oliver’s tells and this one usually meant that there was more to come.

I wasn’t yet in the state that Gautier had described as *kief*, but I was on my blessed way there.

“I wish there was music,” I said, taking Oliver in my arms and initiating a dance move, “Wasn’t there a harpsichord?”

“If Sir wouldn’t mind following me,” he said, striding towards the open door which led to the next room. I tried to run after him, but my legs had other ideas. It was as if Leonor Fini had painted us inside this dreamscape: the pier glass mirrors captured and reflected every polished surface, every glimmer and tremor, until the surfeit of sensations was almost unbearable.

“Would you like me to carry you?” Oliver asked.

I was tempted to say yes, but at the same time I wanted to glide along, like a magic galleon on a silken sea.

In the next room everything was fire and gold and in the one after that the air was a bluish haze, like the inside of an azurine grotto.

The clavichord appeared suddenly in front of me, as though it had emerged from the floor. I sat on the stool, but when I tried to play, my fingers wouldn’t respond to my orders.

“Oliver, I am so high,” I whined, and he laughed, “Where are you, why can’t I see you?”

“Here,” he replied, and he started to massage my shoulders.
“That’s not a good idea,” I said, leaning back into him, “Unless you intend to follow through.”

“I’m not sure that I can feel my legs,” he chortled, “What did Jack put in those damn candles?”

Suddenly, music leaked from behind a door covered by a velvet tapestry which was too worn and frayed to belong among all that luxury.

“Wait, wasn’t this where...?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“Yeah, you go and open it,” I replied, making him laugh, “It’s my birthday and I am very comfortable here.”

“If you don’t stand up, I’ll make you,” he said, tickling my armpits. I fought him half-heartedly, laughing until my stomach hurt. I slid down on the floor and he picked me up and kissed the wetness from my cheeks.

More music, and now I recognised it: it was Agatha’s air from von Weber’s Die Freischutz; dear, dear Oliver, how painstaking his planning must have been.

“I can’t believe you did this,” I muttered against his collarbone.

“It gets better, or it would if you opened that blasted door,” he replied, and that set us off again.

“My heart’s going fast,” I gasped, and he held me to his chest, pouring sweet nothings into my ear.

“Shall we?” he asked, when I’d quieted down.

I nodded and, like Carroll’s Alice, went through the looking glass.

“Surprise!” they all shouted.

I hugged them and kissed them all: Chiara and Yvan, Viola and Lucien, Momo and Marzia.

The room was rather bare, aside from the giant cushions carpeting the floor and an oval walnut table on which they had placed the turntable. The wallpaper was covered with red and black branches. There were faint discolourations left by the lithographs which had been removed: it was Baudelaire’s room and those had been Delacroix’ drawings of Hamlet.

The music had changed from classic to pop: I recognised Roxy Music’s More Than This; an apt commentary.

On the mantelpiece of an extinguished fireplace, Jack’s candles were burning their sweet scented opiates.

“Happy birthday,” said Oliver, uncorking a bottle containing something greenish.

There was much raucous laughter, clapping of hands and Marzia invited everybody to sit or lie down on the cushions.

Now that I could look into their faces, I saw that they were already high and ready for more.

“We are going to recreate the Club of the Hashish Eaters,” Oliver said, “But with a twist.”
“I like twists,” declared Chiara, who’d cut her hair short and died it platinum blonde. Yvan was even more inconspicuous than I remembered, but I supposed that fit nicely with his girlfriend’s lively character.

“What were you doing before we arrived?”

“Getting drunk and stoned,” replied Momo, who had his head on Marzia’s lap. She indicated the empty bottles of wine and the overflowing ashtray which I had failed to notice.

“What’s the twist?” asked Viola, who was braiding her boyfriend’s long hair. Lucien let her do what she wanted, hissing in pain when she tugged too roughly.

Oliver handed me two glasses than sat down next to me.

“The Club partook of green hash jelly while we’ll drink the green fairy instead,” he said.

“Absinthe?” Marzia said, smiling, “Mais c’est pas grand chose. I had it once at a party; it made me vomit, but apart from that,” she shook her head.

“Jack may have tinkered with it a little,” Oliver said, gazing at me, “He really wanted you to have a night to remember.”

“That’s the wrong way to do it,” commented Lucien, “Tomorrow he won’t even remember his name. Ouch,” he cried, but even then he didn’t push Viola away.

“He will remember that he’s forgotten it,” said Momo. I threw a cushion at him and it landed flat on his face. Marzia pressed down on it with her hands, as though to mock-suffocate him.

Oliver poured the green liquor in our glasses then passed the bottle to the others until they did the same. They toasted my health - and other things which for several reasons I won’t mention – and we downed the first of many doses of our chosen poison.

“What do you think about this song?” I asked, slurring my words.

I was slow-dancing with Oliver, both my arms wrapped around him and my head tucked under his chin.

“No idea,” he muttered, “But it smells good.”

Somewhere in the room, someone agreed with him.

I pondered his reply but was distracted by a swirl of smoke that I tried to capture with my hand.

“What you doing?”

“Songs don’t smell.”

He hummed and I felt the rumble in his throat. His chest hair tickled my chin. His hair.

“Why are you naked?”

“I am not,” he sighed, “I have my boxers and socks.”

“Am I naked?”
I was still trying to decipher his reply about the song.

“You won,” said Viola, floating by like a feather, or at least it seemed the way.

And then it came back to me: the game of strip poker, the absinthe, the joints; the winner got to keep their clothes on but would drink and smoke double the ration of the losers.

“Where’s it all leading?
Walk on air, am I still dreaming?
Where’s it all leading?
Words to spare, lost in their meaning

“I wish I had written these lyrics,” I whispered, and Oliver yanked my head back so that he could put his lips on mine.

I didn’t know what it all meant: the throb of tenderness in my throat, the enigmatic melody, the mysterious house with its hidden secrets. I felt like sobbing on his shoulder or licking his belly.

It came to me then that we were not alone, but it was a detail I didn’t care to dwell upon. I wanted to tell him things, if only I could speak.

“Did you let me win?”

That wasn’t what I’d wanted to say.

“Maybe,” he replied.

“Yes, he did,” said Momo, who was dancing an imaginary tango with Marzia; she was wearing his shirt and high heeled shoes. Sexy, I thought, but distantly, without desire.

Chiara and Yvan were making out on the cushions, same as they had done in Italy, as though time had stood still. Maybe it had.

Eternity is threadbare; it needs to be brought to a finish
Time is dead.... and we are going to the funeral.

Don’t believe in chronometers.

“I feel like eating a peach,” I said, and for some reason Oliver spluttered and nearly choked.

“Peaches and cream,” said Viola, whose impeccable logic had always struck me as remarkably sound. Lucien’s hair was a mess and he was wearing Viola’s skirt. I could have worn it too, since we were the same size; or were we?

“Am I fatter than Lucien?”

Oliver’s hands slid down my hips.
“You’re as thin as a rail,” he replied, “But in an attractive, non-metallic sort of way.”

“That’s an odd compliment,” I said, grabbing a fistful of his hair and pulling. He groaned, but not entirely because of the pain.

“Essaye-la,” Lucien said, unbuttoning the skirt and letting it fall to his unshod feet.

It’s so easy, believe me
When you need fun

I do anything to turn you on
Anything to turn you on

The songs kept taunting me with their scientific accuracy. Maybe Roxy Music had a secret conduit into the mind of the drug-addled, I mused. Yet they seemed so inoffensive.

“Are you going to try it on before or after the end of the year?” asked Momo.

As I came back to my senses – whatever was left of them – I saw my friend sitting in a circle, cross-legged, waiting for me to perform like a circus act.

I tried to undo my trousers, but I’d forgotten the combination.

“The combination,” Oliver repeated, dissolving into giggles.

I had not said it out loud, had I? In the end, I sort of jumped into the skirt, trousers and all. It was long and tight and when I tried to walk over to Oliver, I stumbled and he caught me at the very last second. It was all very well executed, I thought, so I curtsied and they all applauded, which I absolutely deserved.

Times have changed
In days of old
Imagination’d leave you standing

They were doing it again! This was one coincidence too far.

“I think Roxy Music know,” I said, “They just know. Maybe that’s what déjà vu means.”

“Nah,” said Momo, “That’s when you keep doing the same shit and can’t even remember it; happens to me all the time.”

Marzia slipped her tongue in his mouth to silence him and he didn’t seem to mind.

I turned to Oliver to ask his opinion, but he wasn’t there.

“Oliver’s gone, disparu, sparito,” I shouted, proving that I could still master three languages even in this less than lucid condition.
“I’m down here, you ass,” he said, pulling at my ankle.

He was reclining on two cushions, his head tilted to one side. I joined him and after a while, we were all lying down and singing, forgetting the words and laughing. When Avalon came on, I was certain my theory on Brian Ferry’s band was sound.

_Now the party's over_
_I'm so tired_
_Then I see you coming_
_Out of nowhere_
_Much communication in a motion_
_Without conversation or a notion_

“You know what this means, right?” I said to Oliver, who was so out of tune he was practically singing a different song.

“This party never will be over, my love,” he said, and kissed the ring on my finger.

Chapter End Notes

The Hôtel de Lauzun was closed to the public in the period in which this story is based. Baudelaire used to live there and there he wrote part of Les Fleurs du Mal. The Club des Hashischins was active from about 1844 to 1849 and counted the among its members Dr. Jacques-Joseph Moreau, Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, Eugène Delacroix and Alexandre Dumas. Monthly "séances" were held at the Hôtel de Lauzun.
The Encounter

Chapter Summary

The day after... another blast from the past.

Thanks to all of you for sticking with my strange story...

Chapter Notes

Okay, I think this is maybe the most absurd bit of coincidence yet: on his long walks to and from Paris, Satie would keep a hammer in his coat to defend himself against potential assailants (he was a destitute composer, so who knows why he feared that). He basically always had a hammer on him everywhere he went.

It was close to dawn when we left our friends at Lucien’s doorstep.

Elio had insisted that he wanted us to walk home, maybe stop somewhere for fresh *pains aux raisins* and coffee. I should have known that it was much too reasonable a proposition considering his state of mind. Not that I was any soberer or I wouldn’t have agreed to any of it. Well, at least that what I’d like to believe.

His fixation with déjà-vu, serendipity and the vagaries of chance had subsided, but he had the haunted look of a wolf scenting his prey.

“Why are we going the opposite way?” I asked, as we reached the Pont Saint-Louis.

He’d been holding my hand and now he tightened his grasp.

“How do you know it?”

“Because we are going towards Notre-Dame,” I replied, “I haven’t gone blind: it’s there, right in front of us.” I pointed at the cathedral, which was still draped in fog.

He squinted, pretending not to see it. I started to laugh and he elbowed me in the ribs.

“Jacques,” he said.

“That’s not my name.”

Another poke, this time he got me in the solar plexus. That’s enough, I thought.

I picked him up and feigned to throw him in the river.

“Stop it,” he shrieked, “It’s my birthday!”

“That was yesterday, kid. Today is already tomorrow.”
More hysterical laughter followed. I carried him as far as the square Jean-XXIII then I had to put him down. We sat down on a bench facing the Fountain of The Virgin, Elio informed me with a smirk. I pulled out two cigarettes and between the two of us we managed to light them without setting our clothes on fire. They tasted the right kind of vile.

“Renaud Camus,” he said.

“Weren’t you talking about Jacques?”

“Let me finish or I won’t remember what I was thinking.”

“Momo was right.”

He blew smoke in my face, making me cough.

“Okay, I surrender.”

Now that I was listening to him, he hesitated.

“You remember what Jacques said that night, about the bushes behind Notre-Dame? The same happens in a chapter of Tricks.”

“You brought me here to cruise strangers as a birthday treat?”

That woke me up like a splash of icy water. He rolled his eyes.

“No, but I thought we could, you know,” he made an eloquent gesture with his hand, “And now you’ve ruined it.”

His dejected pout was irresistible.

“I’m sorry, kitten,” I said, taking him in my arms, “Tell me how you’d imagined it.”

He threw away his cigarette and buried his face in my neck.

“I’d take you there and I’d hide behind the shrubs in the gardens. I’d undo my shirt and my nipples would be hard because of the cold.”

I wrapped my free hand around his throat and stroked it then took the last drag from my cigarette before disposing of it.

“You wouldn’t talk, just lick my chest and bite and suck my nipples.”

“And you’d like it.”

“Hmm, I’d love it. I’d encourage you to be as rough as you like while I’d unzip your trousers and play with your dick.”

I had been at least half-hard all night and we’d not once ventured ‘south of the border’. I pressed my thumb on his Adam’s apple and felt him swallow.

“I’d go down on you, suck you deep and hard while I’d finger your balls.”

My head started to turn, non-metaphorically. Fairy lights garlanded the skeletal trees; if I closed my eyes, they were still there, dancing madly like will-o’-the-wisps.
His hand was on the fly of my trousers: it worked the zip down, found the opening in my boxers and slid inside, cool and insistent.

Imagine you’d come here just for this,” he said, breathing hotly in my ear.

I started to unbutton his shirt, from top to bottom; I stopped when I saw his rosy, peaked nipple. I rolled it between my fingers then brought my lips to it and felt it stiffen in my mouth.

“Imagine you’d come here just for this,” he said, breathing hotly in my ear.

I started to unbutton his shirt, from top to bottom; I stopped when I saw his rosy, peaked nipple. I rolled it between my fingers then brought my lips to it and felt it stiffen in my mouth.

“You were in bed with your girlfriend,” he continued, “She was asleep, but you needed something she couldn’t give you.”

“What?” I asked, before biting down on the hardened flesh. He moaned and started to stroke my dick, slowly.

“The body of another man, the way it feels and smells,” he was pushing my head down, offering me his flesh. I sucked bruises on his pale skin, growling like a beast with a chunk of meat.

After a while, I needed his lips and his tongue more than anything else.

He was waiting for it, panting like he often did, thirsty for my kisses.

We spent eternities just savouring each other’s mouths, until our hands found their way back to our bodies.

“I love this,” he gasped, as he caressed the wiry hair at the root of my dick.

“No shaving then?”

He shook his head, smiling, and quick as lighting, replaced his hand with his mouth; he swallowed me down, his lips brushing the patch of hair he’d just praised. It didn’t take long and when he felt that I was ready to come, he let some of my load trickle down so that he could lick it off my shaft and groin. He even mouthed at the fabric of my boxers, which we had pulled apart so that he could get as much of me as he could.

“Your turn,” I croaked, but he kissed my lips to silence me.

“This was just for you,” he replied, caressing my cheeks and neck, “Only for you.”

“It’s your birthday,” I protested, as he cleaned me with my own scarf; he tucked me back in and I buttoned up his shirt.

“Today is already tomorrow,” he said, tousling my hair.

The mist was clearing, but still clung to the surface of the river like a stubborn lover.

“You were right,” Elio said, emitting a string of groans and whimpers, “I really am decrepit. Everything hurts, even my eyebrows.”

My face was mashed into the pillow, so whatever I’d managed to mumble died there. I never wanted to see the light again. I’d live the rest on my life in the dark, like a bat or a mole. I could teach night courses and move to Scandinavia for the winter.

“You said you didn’t want to go to Denmark.”
Elio could always understand me.

“What time is it?” I asked, hauling my head up and to the side then collapsing back again like a dead weight.

Brief shuffling noises were followed by a sigh.

“Almost noon,” he replied, with a note of reproach.

“How close?”

“Don’t believe in chronometers,” he quoted.

“Shut up.”

“So you don’t want to know?”

“Your tongue doesn’t hurt then.”

“You can open your eyes and actually look at the alarm clock.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever do that again.”

“Open your eyes?”

“Drink your cousin’s home-brewed absinthe.”

“He’s the devil, there’s your answer.”

“It was my fault, I asked him.”

He made kissing noises.

“It hurts when I purse my lips. We’ll have to brush noses, like Eskimos.”

I tried to laugh, but my throat ached.

“It was the best night of my life,” he added, “Well, after the first time we slept together.”

That was something worth braving the malignant daylight for.

I opened my eyes wide enough to see Elio’s precious face: pale, tired and dry-lipped.

“I hope you don’t hate me this time,” I said, cupping his cheek.

“I could never hate you,” he replied, resting his head on the palm of my hand.

“Would it hurt too much if I kissed you?”

“I’ll risk it,” he replied, with a soft smile.

Later that day, something happened which Voltaire’s Zadig would have considered a test or perhaps an admonition. It was one of those unexpected things which provide the drama in fiction and that, as readers, we scoff at, protesting: “that would never happen in real life”.
We had a late breakfast with Elio’s parents, waiting for the girls to return from the Picasso museum, where they had spent the entire morning.

The Perlmans had taken one look at us and had hidden behind their newspapers. I was certain they would want to be told about the previous night, but only later, when we’d recovered.

That evening we were going to the Salle Pleyel for the Brahms concert and we were too hung-over to spend the afternoon inside a cemetery. Besides, it was a grey and drizzly day, consistent with our post-celebration gloom.

Had we been at home, we’d have played cards or read, but since there were only a few days left we felt like we’d have to make the most of every second.

A few ideas were considered then discarded until Vimini came up with what seemed an acceptable excursion.

“It’s not even a real museum,” she said, “Only the tiny room he lived in. And after that we could go to the Musée de Montmartre, if you feel like it; it’s only next door.”

“A well-behaved day,” Fede added, with a slight ironic tinge.

She must have known what her brother had provided for us and how stoned we had been, because she – like Jack – had a knack for finding things out without having to ask.

Elio had winced as he’d sat down to eat, so I wasn’t convinced he’d endure a train journey and a walk in the rain and the cold.

“I am fine,” he said, sounding anything but, “I only wish it was summer and that I could wear sunglasses.”

“You look like you’d just come back from the dead,” said Vimini, who’d recently taken a fancy to horror movies. He made a face and poured himself another espresso.

His complexion was almost green and he was livid around the eyes; I wasn’t in better shape, but I could disguise it better.

“We don’t have to go anywhere,” I said, but he overruled me.

“The concert lasts only a couple of hours,” he replied, “We’ll have an early night.”

The mere evocation of our bed made me groan, but a walk and a breath of fresh air would only do us good, I thought.

We took the metro to Montmartre and when we got off at Lamarck-Caulaincourt the rain had stopped.

The house was a plain white building on three floors, with no visible frills aside from a plaque commemorating his most famous dweller, the composer Erik Satie.

“He owned dozens of umbrellas,” Vimini said, “Because he hated the sun. I wonder why he needed so many though.”

“He hoarded objects,” explained Fede, “It’s a compulsion, like washing your hands when you don’t need to.”
The space was limited, so only a few people were allowed in at one given time, but since it wasn’t a particularly popular attraction, we had expected to be the only visitors. We were therefore surprised when a couple – a young man and an older woman – opened the door to make their exit, almost colliding with us.

I apologised and registered their Italian accent. I also heard Elio let out a cry of surprise.

The woman, enveloped in an old-fashioned fur coat and hat and with hair the fiery red of a Rossetti muse, was as striking as the youngster by her side was unremarkable.

“Elio,” she exclaimed, “It’s been such a long time! I can’t believe we’d meet here, of all places.”

His cheeks took almost the same shade as her hair, but he didn’t forget his manners: he introduced one party to the other, and even though he called him an old friend, I knew that Umberto had been his partner and that Elio had played Satie for the boy’s mother, Cleopatra.

And here they were, dispensing hugs and handshakes, treating Elio like a long lost family member. Well, at least she was. Her son – grey-eyes, dark blond hair, slim but not skinny – looked stunned and spoke in monosyllables. He stared at me then at Elio, and his gaze contained a million unspoken questions.

When she proposed to get something to drink and have a nice chat, I saw Elio hesitate: he wanted to say no, but didn’t know how to decline her offer in a polite manner. She wasn’t the type to take hints or realise anything was amiss.

Naturally, it was Vimini who had the last word.

“I would really love a hot chocolate,” she said, with her pretend little girl smile.
The Conversation

Chapter Summary

They sit in a cafe and have a nice chat...

Chapter Notes

La Bonne Franquette, where famous artists including Pissarro, Sisley, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir, Monet, Zola and Vincent Van Gogh used to gather, once bore the insignia “Olivier et Pieds de Mouton”, the names of its original owners.

Auvers-Sur-Oise has an absinthe museum and Van Gogh lived there for a few months before his death.

Jacqueline du Pré died in October 1987

Personal note: The Gnossienne 1 is my favourite too...

We had indulged Vimini's choice of La Bonne Franquette: she told us she wanted to go there because of its connection with artists like Monet and Van Gogh; later, she confessed that it was because this venerable institution had once been named ‘Olivier et Pieds de Mouton’, Oliver and the Mutton's Feet. Pieds de Mouton had been the name of one of the owners, but she didn’t care about that detail.

“I wish they still had that old insignia,” she’d said, “I’d have taken a picture of you standing in front of it.”

“I don’t have mutton's feet.” I’d replied, pinching her nose, and she’d laughed and thrown her arms around me.

Inside the café, sitting primly, straight-backed and serious-eyed, she was a different girl. She was acting a part, as we all were, except for Cleopatra, who was delighted with everything: with the cosy atmosphere of the café, with the Ladurée macaroons they had served with her tea, and most of all with Elio.

I could tell that she loved him and that he loved her in return.

Umberto was glancing at me out of the corner of his eye: he was studying me, neither with warmth nor malevolence, but with intent. It wasn’t idle curiosity: he had a puzzle to solve and he was probably wondering whether I was the missing factor in the equation.

Initially, we talked about Satie and his myriad eccentricities, the absurdity of placing two grand pianos one on top of the other, and the contrast between the dinginess of his surroundings and the composer’s immaculate appearance.

“Was it true that he only ate white food?” asked Fede, whose role was that of the eager ingénue.
“That’s what he said in his memoirs,” replied Cleopatra, with a pleased smile. She had small, even teeth and wore matte lipstick in a rich garnet shade. When she removed her fur coat, she revealed a svelte figure clad in a grey-green cashmere dress that matched the colour of her eyes. She wouldn’t have looked out of place in a black-and-white David Lean movie, but her Pre-Raphaelite hair, thick, wavy and artificial dispelled the illusion.

Her son had her eyes and slimness, but no other discernible physical similarity.

“Speaking of white,” he said to Elio, “You look very pale. You okay?”

Elio nodded, biting his lips.

“We had a bit of a party last night,” I started to explain.

“Oh my god, it was your birthday, wasn’t it?” interjected Cleopatra; she took Elio’s face is her well-manicured hands and kissed his cheeks.

“Twenty-two, like Umberto,” she said, “His birthday is in May.”

“So is mine,” I said, wondering if it was time to speak or whether I should forever hold my peace. Again, she preceded me.

“You make such a lovely couple,” she exclaimed, sipping her Ceylon tea, “I’m so glad he’s found someone who makes him happy.”

“How do you know he’s happy?” I found myself asking.

She threw me a chastising look.

“My dear boy,” she replied, “His eyes are shining and he’s no longer at war with the world, that’s how.”

I didn’t know what to say. Surely she must have realised how damning her verdict sounded, even if one took into account the trademark Italian candour, which sometimes verged on rudeness.

Her son didn’t seem to mind: he smiled and asked whether we lived in France. Fede explained the situation without entering in too much detail; she mentioned that she and Vimini were on holiday, that Elio and I lived in London, but not that I’d changed my name or that my mother was dating her brother. Elio was staring at her, afraid lest she might drop one bomb or the other. We should have known better: she could be fiery, but she was never cruel.

“What about you?” I asked.

“On our way to Auvers to visit Isabelle,” replied Umberto, breaking a pink macaroon in half, “My girlfriend.”

“That’s where Van Gogh is buried,” cried Vimini.

“They also have an absinthe museum,” Fede added, smirking at me.

“Wow,” said Elio, whose eyes were as round as Giotto’s perfect red circle, “That’s great, that’s, yeah, what is she like?”

“Very serious, very quiet,” Cleopatra replied, “She’s a violinist. Maybe one day you’ll perform together. I will never forget that rainy afternoon when you played the Gnossienne 1: it was like being dead and going to heaven,” she added, patting Elio’s forearm and caressing his wrist.
I took a sip of my coffee with cream; it was already lukewarm.

“Does Isabelle play for you?” he asked. Did I detect a hint of jealousy?

The woman’s lips curved into an eloquent moue.

“Sometimes,” she replied, “It’s a completely different experience, less involving.”

Elio nodded; his expression had brightened. Umberto chose that moment to pour more tea into his own cup. His face was blank, it told me nothing.

“Perhaps I see what you mean,” said Vimini, “You can lean on a piano and even sit on the bench with the performer. You can’t get too close to a violinist.”

“Clever girl,” said Cleopatra, “Yes, that’s precisely what I intended to say. Besides, I’ve always loved the piano. I wanted Umberto to learn, but he has no musicality.”

“I prefer to listen,” her son said, looking pointedly at Elio, who went slightly pink.

I wished for a stouter drink than coffee, but at the same time I needed to be sober to decrypt the coded signals between Elio and his ex. He never spoke of him, had barely told me anything at all, aside from the fact that they had been friends before becoming unenthusiastic lovers. I knew that it had been Umberto who’d called time on their relationship and that Elio had been okay with the break-up, missing the mother more than the son.

I’d had no reason to doubt his words, but they had been together for a while and Elio had not had any other long-term boyfriend after him. The two of us were the only men Elio had lived with: Umberto had watched Elio while he was sleeping and woken up next to him, curled behind him, feeling his heart beating under the palm of his hand. They had attended Eco’s lectures, eaten take-away pizza from Altero, browsed in the Rizzoli bookshop: those were the things he’d told me about his time in Bologna, and they had probably included Umberto too.

It shouldn’t have hurt, but it did.

I felt a hand on mine: it was Vimini’s.

She made a great show of looking at my watch.

“We should let you go,” Umberto said, “The museum will close soon.”

“I wish we could invite you out to dinner, but we have a train to catch,” said his mother, obviously disappointed. “When are you going back to London?”

Elio’s reply didn’t please her, since they were returning to Paris the day after our departure. I guessed what was about to happen same as one knows that thunder follows lightning.

“Come to my concert,” Elio blurted out.

He cast me a look, apologetic and conciliatory, before explaining about his Royal Festival Hall debut.

Cleopatra jumped at the chance and it was agreed she’d be in touch with us: Elio wrote our phone number on a paper napkin, in true French lover style.

It wasn’t clear whether Umberto and Isabelle would be of the party, but I doubted they’d pass up the chance of a London vacation.
I paid the addition, we said our goodbyes, but I knew that it couldn’t be over: not so soon or so easily.

“Do you mind if I have a word with Elio,” Umberto asked, taking me aside as we made our way out, “Only for the time it takes to smoke a cigarette.”

“Sure,” I replied, with the same fake nonchalance of my old ‘later’.

We walked ahead of them, talking about music, literature, Paris: I said my piece, laughed and made the appropriate gestures and noises, but all the while I was trying to capture snippets of the conversation going on behind me.

They were talking too fast and their voices were low, like those of conspirators.

Umberto kept his word and by the time we’d reached Rue Cortot, he’d already let Elio go.

Cleopatra hugged us again, but her son only said a few perfunctory words; his grey eyes were as impenetrable as stone.

It was after dinner, in our room, when I asked him about it.

We were dressing for the concert and his curls got tangled into the gold chain he wore around his neck, the chain that once had been mine.

“Was he angry with you because of me?” I asked, while I tried to free the lock of hair without breaking it.

He sighed.

“Can we talk about it later?”

Normally, I’d have agreed, but the Brahms concert was a symbol of our unity, of how we’d overcome every obstacle in order to be together.

“I would think about it instead of enjoying the music,” I replied, caressing the Star of David nestled on the hollow his throat.

He bit the inside of his cheek and scratched his neck.

“He didn’t know about us, about you. Back then, I was not ready to talk about you; it was too soon. He accused me,” Elio drew a deep breath and let his head rest against my chest, “At the time, he said he never knew what I was feeling.”

“What were you feeling?”

I stroked his back, gently.

“That’s the thing,” he replied, “I didn’t want to feel much at all. I loved being with him and his mother, playing their piano, being part of their life. It made me feel safe: everything was calm, peaceful; no ups and downs, no possessiveness or excessive passions.”

“No age difference,” I added.

“That was always your problem, not mine,” he countered.
He pulled back and looked me in the eye.

“He thinks that I used him to get over you and maybe I did, a bit. Mostly, I needed a refuge after the storm.”

“And he was that.”

“They were that, both of them. We were content, and I thought he was all right with that.”

“But he wasn’t.”

“He never let himself go because he saw that I was holding back.”

I didn’t want to ask, but I had to.

“In bed too?” I whispered.

He traced my lips with his thumb.

“You mean, would it have been spectacular had I allowed it to be?” he chuckled, “No, that was never an option. You can’t force sexual chemistry, and Umberto and I never had it.”

I opened my mouth and he slipped his finger inside it.

“If you don’t stop, we’ll miss the concert,” I chided.

“I want you all the time,” he said, echoing my feelings, “But when I was with him, I thought I could do without passion for a while. I believed it made me stronger, more in control.”

“And if he hadn’t broken up with you, would you still be with him?”

“No, that couldn’t have lasted. It was only a matter of time.”

“Thank god that time was on our side.”

“God and my parents, who sent me to London,” he added, laughing.

I would be lying if I said that I’d already forgotten about Umberto and his mother.

The Brahms symphony would always remind me of the film Goodbye Again, of the desperation of a woman feeling she had no right to claim a younger man as her own.

It was perhaps fair that I should be under its spell, try as I might to shake it off.

We entered the Art Deco building holding hands and took our seats in the front row; I listened while Elio told me everything he knew about the Orchestre de Paris and his conductor, the pianist Daniel Barenboim; we spoke about his wife, the cellist Jacqueline du Pré, who had just died after a long battle with multiple sclerosis; it was a tragedy that put all my silly preoccupations to shame. Elio had tried to get over me and I had tried to get over him: neither of us had succeeded and surely that was all that mattered.

He took my hand and held it in his lap for the duration of the concert: I listened to the music and to Elio’s pulse, entranced by the similarity in crescendos and diminuendos, at times turning to catch a glimpse of his profile, his skin so white as though limned by moonlight.
**The Lost Friend**

Chapter Summary

Our boys go to the concert and have an interesting, revealing chat with Elio's parents and their friends Mathieu and Thierry.

Chapter Notes

Once again, thanks for being such lovely peeps.

Brahms was never my favourite composer, but his music that night acquired layers of meaning it had never held before. It was our code language, harking back to a time when nothing had been decided yet between us, when life had been on the brink of change and could have gone either way.

The day had been eventful and I should have been exhausted; the adrenaline kept me going, together with the relief of realising that Oliver knew who I was; he had seen inside of me: my cowardice and selfishness had been fully exposed to him and he’d not been disappointed. How I had behaved with Umberto wasn’t fair or noble and I wasn’t proud of it, but Oliver had not judged me.

By the end of the concert, I was dazed and ready to go home.

“We’ll grab a taxi,” he said, “And I won’t take no for answer. You look done in.”

We were waiting for some of the crowd to dissipate before making our way out.

“It’s been an interesting couple of days,” I agreed, leaning against him.

“You could say that,” he chuckled.

“There’s only one thing I need to know,”

“What?” he enquired, warily.

“Who cleaned up our mess at the Hôtel de Lauzun?”

His amusement turned to laughter.

“When have you ever worried about housekeeping matters?”

“We are buying our own place.”

He sighed, but I could tell he was pleased that I had mentioned it.

“There’s a custodian and a cleaner,” he said, “I paid them both handsomely.”

“They won’t mind about the candles?”
“Trust me, they have seen much worse than pot candles and a few empty bottles of liquor.”

The auditorium was almost empty, so we headed to the exit.

“We didn’t have sex, did we?” I asked, in a normal tone of voice.

The man walking ahead of us winced slightly; Oliver noticed and glared at me. I shrugged my shoulders and mouthed, “Quoi?”

“Stop doing that.”

“What.”

“Pouting in French just because you know I love it.”

“There’s no such thing as pouting in French,” I retorted, “You’re only evading my question.”

“No,” he answered, but did not sound convincing.

“You are not sure.”

“If you can’t remember, why do you expect me to?”

“I was more stoned. You let me win at strip poker.”

The man winced again.

“Let’s talk about it later,” he said, giving me another dirty look.

I took his hand and kissed the knuckles, one by one, making loud smacking noises. For some reason, the man wasn’t in the least bothered by that.

Leave it to the French to be more fastidious about language than troubled by actions.

There were plenty of taxis outside, so a few minutes later we were being driven back to the Marais. The Algerian chauffeur wasn’t paying us any mind, distracted by the Maghrebin music pouring out of his radio.

“Did we have sex?” I asked again, caressing Oliver’s leg.

He was hesitating, surely pondering whether he should shut me up; I was certain I’d already won.

“I’m almost sure we didn’t.”

“Maybe we didn’t come, but we fooled around a bit,” I suggested, “You were almost naked. I must have at least tried to pull your dick out of your underpants.”

My fingers trailed up the inner seam of his trousers.

“Shall we ask Marzia?” I murmured, “I’m sure she’d remember if I did that.”

I had reached his groin and felt up the tender bump of his balls; he put his hand on mine.

“Stop that,” he hissed, “What’s gone into you?”

“That’s what I am trying to find out.”
He snorted.

“And thus dies our romantic evening.”

“You don’t think this is romantic?” I asked, glancing at his crotch.

“Yes, I guess it is,” he replied, “In a way.”

“You like the way I say things.”

He smiled and shook his head then he pulled me closer and held me to him.

We heard Mathieu and Thierry’s voices; they were in the salon with my parents.

“Should we say hello?” I whispered.

“It would be rude not to.”

I was looking forward to going to bed, but he was right.

“How was the concert?” dad asked.

“You couldn’t have chosen a better present,” I said, “Aside from what Mathieu and Thierry got me, I mean,” I added, a bit embarrassed by my faux pas. Thierry had a mischievous grin on his face.

“What about Oliver’s present?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows, “I heard it was something special. Aside from that, I mean,” he indicated the ring on my finger.

The four of them were quite tipsy while Oliver and I were stone-cold sober, so I forgave him. Mathieu offered us cigarettes and we welcomed the interruption. While we were smoking, Oliver explained about Lucien’s uncle and the Hôtel de Lauzun; he left out the part about the hash and the one with the home-brewed absinthe.

“We did that once,” Mathieu said, looking at my father, who smiled shyly and adjusted his glasses, like he always did when emotions caught him unawares.

“The week after we graduated,” he went on, “Six of us decided to have a proper séance, Ouija board and everything. We went to someone’s country house...”

“It was Florian’s,” dad said, “The gardens looked like those in Last Year in Marienbad.”

Thierry groaned, “That must have been depressing.”

“And it was raining. Can you believe it? It was July and absolutely pouring down.”

“One of the wettest summers on record,” commented Mathieu, gleefully, “And we were cooped up in this humid mausoleum in the middle of nowhere.”

“Did you summon the spirits of the dead?” asked Oliver.

“Maybe we did,” dad replied, “But we were too far gone to remember.”

“That drunk?” said mum, looking thoroughly pleased at dad’s past misdemeanours.

“We went through the drinks cabinet like a hurricane, leaving only devastation,” declared Mathieu,
“I remember that I woke up dressed in a sheet with make-up on my face and, well, on other parts of my body.”

“Come on, don’t be shy,” urged Thierry, “There are no convent nuns present.”

I suspected we were about to get to the ‘too much information’ stage. Oliver was greatly enjoying the story and as for mum, she was bubbling over with excitement, as though she was hearing the anecdote for the first time.

“I had two black lines drawn around my nipples and,” Mathieu hesitated for a moment, “red lipstick on my penis.”

“Who among you was wearing lipstick?” asked his partner.

“It was ages ago!”

“Oh come on, you are spoiling the fun,” exclaimed my mother.

“We all did, as far as I can recall,” said dad, “which is why we couldn’t reconstruct the crime despite being on the scene.”

“Were there any girls?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“Florian couldn’t stand girls,” replied Mathieu, “You remember what he used to say?”

My father nodded.

“They steal my limelight,” he quoted, with a wide smile, “He was supremely vain.”

“Was he handsome?” asked Oliver, who was already on his second cigarette.

“You’ve never seen Annella with short, curly hair,” Mathieu replied, with a glint in his eye, “That’s how Florian looked.”

“That’s true,” mum said, gasping with laughter. “I met him only once at a birthday party and someone came over and asked if I was his sister. You should have seen his face.”

Mathieu put on a supercilious, disgusted expression, which made mum laugh even harder. I lit a cigarette from the butt of the one I’d been smoking.

As much as I loved my parents, this reminiscing could only end one way: I was going to get much more that I’d bargained for.

“Are you still in touch?” asked Thierry, pouring more brandy for the four of them. He’d offered some to us, but we were not up for drinking spirits yet.

There was a brief, uneasy silence.

“We don’t know what happened to him,” said dad, “One day he said he was moving to a Greek island and we thought he was joking. He was always coming up with the most preposterous ideas.”

“Like when he wanted you to write his biography?” Mathieu suggested.

To my surprise, dad turned pink.

“He said I was to be his chronicler,” he said, clearing his throat, “I was to follow him everywhere
and write down his adventures.”

“I bet that would have made for interesting reading,” said Thierry, sipping his drink.

“He tried every new drug under the sun, usually before they hit the market,” said Mathieu.

That reminded me of my cousin and Oliver was probably thinking of him too.

“Did he go to Greece?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” our host replied, “One minute he was there and the next he was gone. His family couldn’t help us: he had a large trust fund instituted by his grand-father, so he could do pretty much what he liked.”

“You must have tried to find him,” I said, looking at my father, who let out a long sigh.

“We did what we could,” he said, “But we didn’t have his kind of money and we had other obligations,” he took mum’s hand and squeezed it.

“Who was there besides you?” enquired Thierry.

“I told you about Esmé.”

“Oh yes, the one who moved to Mexico and spray-paints what he calls post-pop-art.”

“Then there was Hugh Chadwick, and with a name like that he could have only become a lawyer. Is he still in Philadelphia?”

“Boston,” said my father, “And he wasn’t that strait-laced back then.”

“No, I guess not,” said Oliver, with a smirk.

“Last but not least was Serge.”

“Who married the queen of canned tuna and moved to Vietnam.”

There followed a discussion about the couple in question, of whom Oliver had read about in the papers. It was such a disparate group of people and it seemed impossible my own father could have been close friends with them. Would the same happen to us? Twenty years from now, would we be talking about Lucien, Momo and Petri in the same manner?

“But we have strayed from the topic,” Thierry interjected, “You haven’t yet told us what happened at that party.”

“That was the point of the anecdote,” replied Mathieu, “We were too intoxicated to remember, just like Oliver and Elio. That’s the hallmark of a successful night out: waking up in the morning utterly oblivious of what went on.”

We agreed and stayed to chat a bit longer before taking our leave.

In bed, I lay in Oliver’s arms, unable to sleep.

He was awake too, his hand moving up and down my spine.
“What are you thinking of?” he asked.

I caressed his chest and softly pulled at the hair on his sternum.

“I got the impression that they knew what went on that night, but they didn’t want to say.”

He hummed.

“And that Florian,” I continued, “They kept something back about him too.”

“Sam did seem uneasy.”

I clicked my tongue.

“Of course he was uneasy,” I replied, “There must have been something between them.”

“You think?”

“He looked like my mother.”

“Whatever happened didn’t seem to bother her.”

I pressed my lips to his throat.

“My dad has a type.”

He giggled.

“Like father, like son.”

His hand came up to my hair and started playing with it.

“Now I know how you felt about Judith and Jack.”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s a little unsettling to know about the past sexual escapades of one’s parents.”

“Or in my case, the present ones,” he quipped.

“I don’t want to think about dad wearing eye-liner and making out with Florian.”

I shuddered, which made him laugh.

“They had a good time then he met your mother.”

“He must still think about him,” I said, before another light bulb went off, “What if dad knows where Florian is; what if they are still in touch?”

“You’d never heard his name before.”

“No, isn’t that odd? Dad always talks about everything, you know how he is.”

“Maybe he just wants to forget.”

“Should I ask him?”
“Better leave things alone. He will tell you when he’s ready.”

He buried his nose in my hair and inhaled.

“I hope nothing bad happened to him.”

“Perhaps he changed his mind about girls.”

“Like Umberto, you mean? He never said he was gay and neither did I.”

“Nothing is set in stone.”

I kissed him on the neck.

“We are,” I said.

I felt his pulse jump beneath my lips.
The Feminine and the Masculine

Chapter Summary

Revelations.
Elio's POV first, then Oliver's.

Chapter Notes

Arabesque is France's Murder, She Wrote.

Dalida was a French/Italian/Egyptian singer/actress and gay icon who committed suicide in 1987. Her life was blighted by horrendous misfortune.

I woke up sensing Oliver's gaze on me.

“What?” I asked, without opening my eyes.

I anticipated his touch, knowing that he was just waiting for me to stir so that he could put his skin on mine.

“Nothing,” he replied, bringing his hand to my face and stroking the outline of my jaw, “You are so delicate.”

“You mean feminine, like the androgyne at the Louvre or the suitors in the Moreau painting?”

“No, I mean that everything about you is fine: the grain of your skin, your bone structure, the curve of your lips.”

“What have I done to deserve such poetry before breakfast?”

He flicked my nose.

“Prosaic boy,” he said, his breath now on my lips. I waited for the kiss, but it didn’t come. I opened my eyes to find out why.

Oliver was studying me, unsure whether to speak or die.

“Tell me,” I said.

“Did you really mean the thing you said on the barge?”

I feigned ignorance.

“What thing?”

“You know what thing,” he said, curling his hand around my neck, “About the Vettriano painting.”
“Oh, that thing!”

He stroked my throat with his thumb.

“If that’s what you want,” I replied, trying not to sound like one of those convent nuns Thierry had mentioned the previous evening.

Oliver shook his head.

“It isn’t what you are imagining,” he whispered, caressing my cheek.

I did what he called ‘pouting in French’ and he smiled.

“I’m not missing women and wanting you to dress like one.”

“What if I wanted that?”

“Do you?”

“Not because I need to, but because I’d like us to play.”

He swallowed visibly, like on our first night when he’d asked me to call him by my name.

“I wouldn’t want you to shave;” he said, “anywhere.”

“Not even there?”

“Especially not there: I want to see the hair pushing through the lace.”

I was already fully hard and going by the state of his pupils, so was he. For some reason, his lower body wasn’t touching mine. When I tried to move closer, he kept me at bay. His defiant expression made me harder.

“I’ll want to look, but that’s not the main thing,” he said, his voice trickling with desire.

I kicked off the bed-covers to show him the state I was in.

“Of course you’d want to feel me up,” I said, cupping my balls.

“Hands off,” he intimated. I could smell his cock even through the blankets. Despite my intention to resist him, I obeyed.

“First I’d want you to tell me how it feels.”

“The fabric would be soft, but the elastic would mark my skin,” I said, arching my back and stretching my arms over my head in order to grab the headboard. My dick sprang out, stiff and wet.

“Here?” he asked, tracing a line across my lower belly then down, his fingers skimming my inguinal crease.

“Hmm,” I replied, as my eyes rolled inside my head. “There and on my ass.”

I managed to finish the sentence, just before Oliver’s tongue snaked its way inside my mouth. I let him lick and bite as he pleased, but still he wouldn’t go further.

Enough was enough.
“Why are you torturing me?” I whined.

He gave me a wry smile.

“Trying to figure out what it’s like to not want you,” he said, and anticipating my question, he went on, “I can’t imagine a living creature not having sexual chemistry with you. Hell, I bet even inanimate objects would give it a try.”

I burst out laughing.

“That’s because you are attracted to me,” I said, staring at the bulge of his dick beneath the sheets.

Finally, he set it free and it was as red and hungry as mine.

“You could say that,” he growled, rolling on top of me; his strong body pushed me into the mattress; he was everywhere, all over me. I wanted him to fuck me, but we were already too close to the edge; we ground against each other and when I came, my chest and neck were already spattered with his semen.

“If you met someone who looked like you, would you want to fuck him?” I asked him, after the fact.

“Not particularly,” he replied, brushing a hand through the rat’s nest in my hair.

“What about before you met me?”

“Maybe, but only if he begged,” he joked.

“You see? It’s only a matter of taste. I could be on my death-bed and I’d still want to suck your dick.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why, it’s true,” I said, hissing as he untangled knot after knot, “You have no idea how many dirty dreams I had about you while we were apart.”

“After we met at the Blitz?” he asked and I said yes.

I’d had dreams about him ever since I left San Francisco, but I wasn’t going to drag that slice of the past out into the light again.

“Tell me one.”

I put my head on his chest and his smell enveloped me.

“I had a recurring dream of ramming my tongue up your ass.”

His spent cock twitched.

“You have such a filthy mouth.”

“Not so delicate then,” I said, and grazed his nipple with my teeth.

“You’re everything I need,” he replied, and moaned as I crushed the other one between my fingers.

After he’d made that dream come true, we showered together.
Oliver was towelling my hair dry when we heard a knock on the door.

“You decent?” shouted Vimini.

We were, but our bed was a battleground.

“I’ll go,” he said, wrapping the towel around my head like a turban.

“They want to go to the Montmartre cemetery first,” he said when he came back.

“We could have gone yesterday, since we were in the area.”

“Lucien is coming too,” he replied, “Chiara, Viola and Marzia have gone shopping with Momo. There’s a sale somewhere called Galeries Something or Other.”

“Lafayette. And I still don’t understand why Montmartre and not Lachaise.”

“You’ll have to ask him: he’s downstairs having breakfast with Mathieu and your parents. Thierry has gone to work.”

“She did tell you a lot in such a short time,” I said, as I put on my underpants.

“Have you met her,” he replied, slipping a finger under the waistband of my boxers.

“What are you doing?”

“Too rough,” he muttered.

“Maybe you should buy me silk underwear.”

“Maybe I will,” he replied, smacking my bottom.

Lucien was reclining on the chaise longue - which he informed us was in fact called a duchesse brisée - in the pose of a patient pouring his heart out to his Freudian analyst.

He was sipping his coffee with a mournful air, glancing every now and then at Vimini and Fede who sat cross-legged on the carpet, reading from the same book.

“Why are you in here?” Elio asked, “I thought we were going out.”

“Bad luck,” the French boy said, with an exaggerated sigh.

“What about it?”

“I believe in it.”

“Why, what’s happened to you?”

“It’s complicated,” he replied, eyeing the girls.

Like many before him, he’d underestimated them.

“He’s fallen in love with a boy,” said Fede, without missing a beat.

“And he doesn’t know how to tell Viola,” added Vimini, the two of them resembling a Greek
chorus.

“In love,” Lucien scoffed, “I never said it was, *quoi*, how do you know?”

“You were talking to Mathieu and Thierry and stopped as soon as we sat down at the breakfast table,” said Fede.

“Annella was looking at you the same way she used to look at Elio when Oliver came to stay the first time,” added Vimini.

“What way?” asked Elio.

“You know,” she replied, doing a near-perfect imitation of Annella’s expression, “Like she knew something was going on and was waiting for you two to catch up.”

“Hey, I knew from day one,” I said, tousling her hair. Elio fiddled with his ring and said nothing.

“It’s like an episode of Arabesque,” muttered Lucien.

“You haven’t murdered him, have you?” asked Fede, with something like hope in her eyes.

“I blame my parents,” he replied, inviting us to sit at the far end of the chaise. I did, but Elio perched himself on the padded armrest, stretching his legs in front of him.

“Because they wanted a daughter instead of a son?” he suggested.

Lucien mumbled something in French which I didn’t understand.

“They force me to stay at home for longer than I wish to. It’s not normal to live with one’s parents at this age.”

“I thought you lived in Milan,” I said. He went to university there; he could hardly go home in the evening.

“Yes, but there are too many holidays,” he spat out.

“I’ve absolutely no idea where this is going,” Elio said.

“Most of my friends have moved out of Paris, so I get bored.”

“And you slept with this guy as a distraction.”

I kicked Elio’s foot, to remind him about the girls.

“We already know most of it,” said Fede.

Lucien sighed again and tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. His gesture sparked a chain of associations which led me straight to the solution of the mystery.

“Bertrand,” I said, immediately realising that I had hit the target.

Elio was stupefied.

“Is that why you spied on him?” he asked.

That information seemed to excite the girls, so I gave them a brief précis of our visit to Lucien’s house and what had happened while we were there.
“No, ce n’était pas comme ça,” he replied, “I didn’t care for him at all. I invited him to mine to share some of my... stuff.”

“You were stoned,” Elio said.

I kicked him again, this time hitting his ankle.

“Ouch, that hurt!” he cried.

Fede reminded me about her brother and Vimini glared at me, so I agreed to stop playing the censor.

“Nothing happened then,” Lucien replied, affronted.

“You might as well tell us,” I said.

“We smoked, listened to some music, drank a few beers,” he explained, “He likes to do his own thing, you know, different, but in a good way.”

“And did he or did you?” Elio enquired.

“I may have kissed him or he might have, but I can’t remember.”

“Right, sure,” I said, not believing a single word.

“Elio was right: Bertrand likes you.”

“Did he speak about Oliver?”

Lucien nodded.

“He thinks the world of you.”

“If he’s sleeping with you to get to Oliver,” Elio didn’t get to finish his sentence.

“He knows Oliver’s off limits, but he wouldn’t anyway. It’s a question of roles,” he added, arching his eyebrows.

Elio looked baffled again.

“Remember what we talked about earlier?” I asked him, guessing that Bertrand was not versatile. He’d probably had assessed my proclivities based on my personal appearance: a mistake the very young often make.

Elio’s face was traversed by a multitude of expressions, settling on the bewilderment of having just found out, unwittingly, that his friend was a bottom.

“When did you?” he asked.

“After the party,” Lucien replied.

“Didn’t you go home with Viola and the others?”

It was my turn to be puzzled.

“We did, but I couldn’t sleep and I saw that Bertrand was awake too, so I slipped out and went to his place.”
“You were stoned and drunk,” Elio remarked.

“We only talked then I fell asleep. The morning after was when it happened.”

“If he took advantage of you,” I said.

“I jumped... I initiated it.”

“And it bothers you because you cheated on Viola or because you did it with a boy?” Vimini asked, brusquely.

Fede stood up and took her friend by the hand.

“Let’s go,” she said, and to us, “We are going to visit the House of Victor Hugo, you can meet us there in about one hour. It’s five minutes from here.”

Vimini didn’t argue, but she looked daggers at Lucien as she left the room.

“She had a point,” I said.

He took out a cigarette and lit up then handed us the packet and the lighter.

“It’s not that I have a problem with it,” he said, “It just took me by surprise, that’s all: I woke up, he was still sleeping. I kissed him, and he sort of... took charge.”

His pale face went crimson.

“And you liked it,” said Elio, puffing out a ring of smoke.

“Yes.”

“And you did it again.”

“Yes.”

“And again.”

“Hm.”

We smoked in silence for a while.

“And you talked to Thierry and Mathieu before talking to us?” Elio asked.

“I didn’t say anything about Bertrand and me; I just asked them when and how they found out that they liked men.”

“Are you conducting a survey?”

It was Lucien’s turn to kick him.

“Was it a one-off?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“I don’t think so.”

He sounded defeated.

“What was the bad luck about?” Elio enquired.
“And you have to ask?” Lucien groaned, “Now I will have to spend even more time at home.”

We laughed and in the end he did, too.

“And the Montmartre cemetery?”

“Dalida is buried there,” he replied, “She’s the patron saint of the unlucky. So I thought I would bring her flowers.”

“Another mystery solved,” Elio said, wrapping his arm around his friend’s shoulders.
The Judas Kiss

Chapter Summary

Betrayals and cemeteries...

They had been safe, Lucien said. Bertrand had insisted on using condoms, even when Lucien had said that, surely, they were both clean.

“You don’t know that,” I argued, “He may be more promiscuous than you.”

He grimaced, but conceded the point.

“Cheating is bad, but risking one’s life because of it, is inexcusable.”

“Sounds like one of Oscar Wilde’s epigrams,” Elio said, making us laugh.

We were walking towards the Place des Vosges, where Vimini and Fede were supposed to be waiting for us. It was a cloudy day and the sky was the colour of trampled snow, but it was unseasonably mild.

The girls were standing outside the museum Victor Hugo, a beautiful Louis XIII-style building.

“It could be Italian,” said Elio, “It wouldn’t look out of place in Bologna.”

Lucien scoffed.

“Have you seen the upper floors?” he asked, with typical Gallic disdain, “The slate roof with dormers is quintessentially Parisian.”

“In fact Louis Treize architecture was heavily influenced by its Italian counterpart,” said Fede, staring him in the eye.

She was annoyed with Lucien and it certainly wasn’t because of cultural differences. He wasn’t stupid, so he caught her drift.

“I will tell her,” he said, “It’s only just happened.”

Viola and Fede were friends, though not close ones, but she was loyal all the same.

“You’ll go back to Milan and pretend it never happened,” remarked Vimini.

“I won’t.”

“Didn’t she ask you questions the... morning after?” Elio enquired.

Lucien was getting flustered.

“I said I’d gone for a walk,” he muttered.

“You lied.”
“It’s not like you never did it yourself,” he spat out, “You kissed la ravissante Lena, didn’t you? Yvan told me that he saw you.”

The girls gasped and Vimini clung to my arm. For a moment the breath was knocked out of my lungs, until I realised what Yvan had been referring to.

“Maybe he forgot to tell you that I was there,” I said, getting between him and Elio, who was red-faced and tense.

“Not that it is any of your business,” I continued, “But all that happened that night was consensual and agreed between us. Elio did not sneak out to meet Lena.”

“What about Malaspina,” Lucien said, with a tight smile, “I bet Elio didn’t tell you everything about Riccardo and what he and Elio used to do together.”

I assumed that Danilo must have gossiped about his brother’s past adventures, but this wasn’t the time or the place to continue a discussion which could easily devolve into name-calling or worse.

“That’s none of your business,” hissed Elio, both hands closing tightly into fists.

“Maybe you should reflect on why you are so angry,” I said, “Because I’m pretty sure it’s nothing to do with any of us.”

Lucien’s fury waned and without it he was like a deflated balloon.

“I better,” he said, making a gesture with his hand, “I should go. I bet they are still shopping and I can catch up with them.”

We said our goodbyes and went our separate ways.

Since Lucien was no longer with us, we skipped Montmartre and went straight to the Père Lachaise. Our first port of call was Wilde’s tomb, so we got off at Gambetta which – Fede assured us – was the closest stop to the northern part of the burial grounds.

We passed the Columbarium, turned into Avenue Aguado and we saw it: the winged demon-angel hewn by Epstein from an enormous block of limestone.

A small group of people was standing in front of it: they were Japanese tourists and their guide soon walked off, taking them to Piaf’s grave.

I took the camera out of Elio’s backpack and spent some time taking pictures of the monument on its own then of Elio and the girls standing in front of it. Vimini took one of me and Elio: we were smiling and I had my arm around him, but what she couldn’t see was his hand on my ass.

I shook my head at him.

“What? Wilde went to prison because what I just did wasn’t allowed in public,” he said then in my ear, low, “I should suck you off while you lean on it.”

I was saved by the presence of our friends, who had guessed the turn things were taking and engaged us on a discussion about the deceased writer.

“He wasn’t always buried here you know,” said Vimini, whose eyes were glistening with tears. She’d not been far from death herself and I wondered whether it had been a good idea to take her to
a graveyard. I touched her back and she relaxed against my hand. In the meantime, Elio had taken out his Polaroid and was pretending to be distracted by the inscription on the stone, while he was in fact taking stealthy photos of Vimini and me. His lower lip was trapped between his teeth, which signalled to me that he was up to no good. At once, I felt such a conflagration of emotions in my chest I could hardly breathe: love for him and for our life to come, for our friends and their acceptance, the fundamental goodness of their hearts.

“His friends didn’t have enough money for a proper funeral,” said Fede, frowning at our sudden descent into sentimentality. Her stiff upper lip made me grin, which in turn elicited a glower from her that had Jack written all over it.

I realised then that I missed him, despite the fact we were far from intimate. It could hardly be said that we had fun together or proper conversations, but there was a certain quality in him that I was drawn to: he was always true to himself. Unlike my older self, Jack would never dissimulate; he’d never accommodate his surroundings, trying to blend in with them. He was the opposite of a chameleon: he stood out and forced the world in which he operated to shape itself around him.

And Elio was like him, in many ways. When I’d met him, he’d been unsure, but never cowardly. I could believe that he would never have been happy with Umberto, because that muted, colourless boy was not my Elio. My Elio was bold, fearless and brimming with life; and determined to snap as many unflattering pictures of me as he could.

“What’s the French word for brat?” I asked him.

“Gamin,” Vimini replied, while he feigned to be affronted.

“I’ll hide that camera, while you’re sleeping,” I said.

“I’ll put it under my pillow.”

“What pillow?”

He knew only too well that his pillow was usually some part of my body; he chewed the inside of his cheek and mumbled to himself.

“Does it really bother you?” he asked, softly.

“Of course not,” I replied, caressing him all over with my gaze.

“Stop flirting you two,” said Fede, and upon seeing that Elio was about to speak, “Don’t even dare to deny it. I wasn’t born yesterday and neither were you.”

Duly chastised by a teenage girl, we went back to more serious topics.

“Where was he buried?” I enquired.

“In a leased gravesite at the Cimetière de Bagneux, south-west of Paris; it took nine years before they had enough money to transfer his remains to their permanent resting place,” she explained, while Vimini nodded along, her lips pressed together.

“It’s a pity that they didn’t keep the old inscription,” she quoted, “To my words they durst add nothing, and my speech dropped upon them.”

“But this one is a verse from his Ballad of Reading Gaol,” argued Elio.
“They could have kept both,” said Vimini.

“There’s an interesting story about the private parts of the statue,” I interjected. “But I’m sure you know it already.”

As I’d predicted, the girls nodded, but to my surprise, Elio appeared to be ignorant of it. Was he acting? I couldn’t say for sure.

“You tell it,” I said to Fede. At least, I couldn’t be accused of corrupting the innocents since they knew more about this than we did.

“The genitalia were wrapped in tarpaulin until Epstein agreed to have them covered with a bronze butterfly. He had to give in, but he was furious.”

“I bet,” said Elio.

“They unveiled it in August 1914, but a few weeks later the butterfly had flown away,” said Vimini, with a smug grin.

“Aleister Crowley removed it and wore it around his neck on a chain, like a pendant,” Fede concluded.

“And where are they now?” Elio asked, visibly nonplussed by the mention of the notorious occultist.

“Removed by vandals over twenty years ago,” I replied, and saw him shudder.

“Terrible act,” he murmured, “Terrible people.”

“At least they didn’t hurt him while he was alive,” countered Vimini, “Unlike his boyfriend, who betrayed his trust and repudiated him.”

“He did worse than that,” said Elio, “He repudiated his own nature.”

“Each man kills the thing he loves,” I recited and he chimed in, “Some kill their love when they are young and some when they are old.”

This would have been the perfect epitaph for Lord Alfred’s grave, but Wilde’s precious words didn’t deserve to be wasted on one so unworthy.

And yet Wilde had loved him to the end, and through him, Douglas had gained a form of immortality.

“He was like Judas,” said Fede, who once again proved she had her brother’s uncanny ability to read people’s thoughts, “His betrayal made Jesus’ sacrifice possible and their lives will be forever intertwined.”

I touched the cold stone, tracing the lines of the statue’s bent legs, wishing I could reach up to its enigmatic face.

Vimini looked tired, so we went back to Mathieu’s house for lunch.

She wasn’t too happy about it and called us fussy, but she was not completely out of the woods and it had been a long and tiring morning.
Thankfully, Fede backed me up, so the case was quickly closed.

We’d barely stepped inside the front door, when Marzia swooped down on us.

“What did Lucien do?” she demanded.

“Could we at least take our coats off?” asked Elio, as we strode to the salon.

Momo was already there, reading L’Équipe; obviously, he was trying to stay out of trouble for as long as he could.

“What happened?”

“Viola slapped him in the middle of the Galeries Lafayette,” Marzia said, “Twice and so hard his head turned to the side. After that, she left and he went after her. We lost them in the crowd.”

“Maybe they went back to Lucien’s.” I said, feeling Vimini’s incredulous gaze on me.

Fede took her by the hand and led her out.

“What about Chiara and Yvan?” Elio asked.

“They were meeting his brother, the one who had rented a farm in Italy last summer,” Marzia replied, before she understood that we were digressing on purpose. “What are you not telling me?”

Momo cleared his throat; when I met his eyes, he shook his head.

“It’s not our place to tell you,” Elio said, “Not our secret.”

“He slept with another girl,” she blurted out.

The silence that followed was more eloquent than a rebuttal.

“Not a girl, a boy,” she concluded then turning towards her boyfriend, she added, “If you are thinking of doing the same, let me know in advance.”

“Okay,” he replied, “But it could only happen if I was very drunk or stoned, so I wouldn’t be able to... never mind, pretend I didn’t say anything” he stopped talking, but it was too late.

“You knew,” she accused him.

“I only heard him get out of the house. We were in the same room and I woke up because I had to go to the toilet.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I thought they were just friends, he and Bertrand.”

Marzia looked at Elio and me.

“Now, where have I heard this one before?”

Elio was the first one to crack, but I soon followed then Momo started laughing too.

She sat on his lap and joined in the fun.
The Spice of Life

Chapter Summary

Elio and Oliver nearly get caught.... doing stuff.
And they decide what to do on New Year's Eve ;)

Chapter Notes

First of all, thanks to you all for being the best fandom in the universe. I love your comments, which are often more intelligent than my scribbles.

Andy Warhol died in February 1987. Fred Hughes was his business partner.

La Goutte D'Or is a predominantly North African area of Paris. It has always been working-class and both Foucault and Genet frequented it and loved it.

Thanks to Edmund White for describing the contents of Warhol's Parisian flat.

Our plans for the New Year’s Eve celebrations had been scuppered by Lucien’s antics: since his parents were leaving for Neuilly, he’d invited us to party chez lui. Aside from the church, there were no intrusive neighbours, so we could have made as much noise as we wanted.

Elio’s parents - and the two girls- were having dinner with Mathieu and Thierry on the barge, after which they would go on a night cruise on the Seine.

“The house is empty,” said Elio, “we could just stay here. We could go to Le Drugstore, stock up on booze and weed and have our own private party. I could play the piano for you in the nude.”

It was a tempting offer, but not what we would end up doing.

Not quite.

While Marzia was relating what had happened at the Galeries Lafayette, the phone rang and Elio went to answer it.

He soon came back to get Momo: “It’s Lucien: he wants to talk to you.”

The gist of their conversation was as follows: Lucien had spoken to Viola and she’d calmed down. She was mad at him, but what had hurt the most was the manner in which it had happened, not the act itself. She’d have to think whether she wanted to stay friends with him, but the in the meantime, she’d rather spend some time away from him and from us. Since Yvan’s brother Patrice was in Paris with his wife, they’d go and stay with them for a couple of days at least.

“He sounded upset,” said Momo, giving Marzia a look which she decrypted immediately.
“Okay,” she sighed, “You want to come with us?”

I gazed at Elio and saw the answer in his eyes.

“We’ll take a rain-check,” I replied, “We’ve spoken to him earlier and he was... let’s just say that he needed to think things through.”

They left, after we’d made provisional dinner plans.

“Let’s go raid the fridge,” I said, “I’m starving.”

Elio nodded and followed me into the kitchen.

We found evidence that Fede and Vimini had been there making sandwiches, which they must have taken away with them.

While I prepared a cheese omelette, Elio was cutting the tomatoes for the salad. It was like being at home, if it hadn’t been for the unusual silence.

“You okay?” I asked, expecting the usual answer. I didn’t get it: he merely shrugged. I scratched the back of his head and he smiled, but it was a tight, joyless affair.

“What’s wrong?”

He threw me one of his oblique looks, which always maddened me because they signalled reticence and sensuality in equal measure, so I was never sure how to respond.

“If you don’t tell me, I will have to assume you are criticising my cooking skills.”

He let out a short, shrill giggle.

“You’re not Mafalda, but you’re decent enough.”

“You’re full of praise today, aren’t you?”

I kissed his cheek and he turned swiftly, offering me his lips instead.

“And now you’re trying to distract me,” I whispered into his mouth.

His tongue searched for mine and we were lost to the world until the pan started spitting oil all over the cooker.

“Maybe we should not set the house on fire,” I said, and this time his grin was open and sincere.

It was when we sat down to eat that he finally spoke of it.

“What Lucien said about Riccardo and me,” he hesitated, lowering his gaze.

“You told me some of it and you don’t need to say anything more. The past is past, and we’re done with it.”

He played with his food, stabbing a cherry tomato with unbidden fury.

“He told his brother, because he wanted you to find out and not from me. He’s devious that way.”
“I don’t care about him,” I insisted, “He can’t hurt us.”

“He forced me to watch,” he blurted out, and his cheeks flushed bright red.

I waited in silence, chewing on my food but not really tasting it.

“You remember I told you that he liked to challenge me,” I nodded and he swallowed twice before continuing. “That girl he went out with, the one I’d invited first: he slept with her. He dared me: I should hide in the room and she should not find out I was there. I said no at first, but he insisted and he could be very convincing.”

“I bet, and I bet you liked it, too.”

“I was so hard and couldn’t do anything about it lest she'd hear.”

“What happened after that?”

“They’d shower together and I'd sneak out and go back home. Well, usually I’d stop on the way and jerk off.”

“In the poppy field?”

“Sometimes.”

“God, I wish I’d been there.”

He took my hand and pressed the palm to his hot cheek.

“It was wrong of me, a violation of her privacy.”

“Maybe she knew all along.”

“No, she was in love with him; she absolutely worshipped him.”

“You did it more than once,” I guessed.

He nodded, letting my hand slip out of his grasp. I placed it on his thigh, and felt his leg twitch beneath my touch.

“Yeah,” he admitted, “he said he’d tell her if I refused.”

“But that wasn’t why you continued.”

“No,” he murmured, “I’m a horrible person.”

“You were what, fifteen?”

“Yes.”

“It was only normal.”

“Would you have done it?”

“Maybe,” I replied, stroking the inside of his thigh, “If the girl had looked like you.”

He fidgeted on his seat, thrusting his pelvis in the direction of my hand.
“But I don’t think I would have been able to just watch.”

“No?” he whispered, and I brushed my fingertips along the line of his erection.

“I’d have tried to get in on the action and see whether,” I stopped and he whimpered in frustration.

“Whether?” he moaned as I directed my attention to his balls.

“Perhaps I’d have been greedy and wanted that... girl all to myself.”

A moment later, Elio was straddling me, desperately trying to unbutton my shirt, undo my trousers and lick into my mouth at the same time.

“Let me help,” I said, but he would have none of it.

We were rubbing and grinding like animals in full rut when we heard voices and steps approaching.

“No, no, no,” he sobbed, and it took all of my self-control to stop him and myself. Thankfully we were not undressed, so we succeeded in being at least presentable when Mathieu and Jacques came in.

They had been in the middle of an animated discussion which ground to a halt when they saw us.

“I hope we didn’t interrupt anything,” said Jacques, with a greedy expression on his face.

“We’re just having a late lunch before heading out again,” I explained, while Elio cut his omelette in tiny pieces.

“Is that what you boys call it these days?” he asked, and burst into sonorous peals of laughter.

“Leave them alone,” Mathieu said, patting his friend’s back “You’re just jealous.”


There was really nothing we could say or do, except for smiling and hoping that they’d get on with whatever they were there to do.

“I’m planning to buy a painting from Warhol,” Mathieu explained, while we were all sipping coffee ten minutes later.

“One of his works?” asked Elio.

Jacques grimaced.

“Cans of soup and portraits of film stars,” he said, dismissively, “Now that he’s dead, their value is bound to increase, but I’d keep them some place where I didn’t have to look at them.”

“Jacques is not a fan,” said Mathieu, making us laugh, “No, it’s a work by Sert, and it is currently in Warhol’s apartment in Rue du Cherche-Midi.”

“Fred - that’s his business partner - wants to sell so he’s getting rid of the furniture and some of the paintings. Sert specialised in murals, but this is one of his rare oils. It’s a magnificent depiction of a circus; the composition and the colours are stunning.”
“I want it for my bedroom, but I didn’t know whether it would fit.”

“I told you it would,” said Jacques, tugging at one end of his turquoise silk scarf.

“We should go there now and have a proper look at it. Fred has given me the keys.”

Elio’s eyes went wide.

“You can come with us, if you like,” Jacques said, “Unless you have better things to do. I know what I’d chose if I were you,” he added, ogling me shamelessly.

I was getting used to it: what wasn’t considered acceptable in London, and even less in the States, was common currency in France. People flirted all the time, and it was considered prudish to take offence. As long as no one touched me or Elio – especially not Elio – everything was fine.

The apartment was reached by crossing a formal French garden, mainly of gravel, dominated by the statue of a sphinx with the head of the celebrated writer Colette.

“She had an affair with her teenage stepson when she was in her fifties,” explained Jacques, who seemed very proud of the fact, as though it was a noble achievement.

I thought of my mother, but found that I wasn’t even remotely bothered by her relationship with Jack. I was done with judging people’s love lives, I thought.

Elio’s gaze caught mine and we understood one another.

The main salon was as large as a ballroom, all plush leathers and precious fabrics. Sert’s painting was resting on the polished marble floor and was out of place among that algid luxury: it depicted a group of funambulists forming two human towers inside the circus enclosure. The peacock-blue tent was partially folded up, its panels billowy as though inflated by an invisible wind.

“I’m trying to imagine Warhol buying this painting,” Elio said, “It’s so different from his own style.”

“He seldom came here, unless he was in town for business,” replied Jacques, “Beside, he would have seen this as decoration not art.”

“I love it,” said Mathieu, inspecting it from every side, “I wouldn’t mind setting my eyes on it the moment I woke up.”

“What about Thierry?” I asked.

“He doesn’t like clowns, but there are none here.”

“I never met anyone who liked clowns,” said Elio, “They are scary.”

We had a look around the house: the kitchen was stylish and modern, almost clinically so.

“The designer’s store is close to Mathieu’s house,” said Jacques, “Her name’s Andrée Putman and she looks like a man in drag.”

Mathieu shot him a chastising look.

“Mais quoi?” exclaimed Jacques, “She does it on purpose and you know it. Her clientele is almost entirely gay and she doesn’t mind a bit of play-acting to promote her business.”
On the wall was a framed poster of Warhol’s film Chelsea Girls.

“Where have I seen this again?” I asked Elio.

“Felt,” he replied, “It’s the cover of The Splendour of Fear.”

Jacques asked us to explain: he’d never heard of the rock group, but he was curious. Despite his frivolous manner and his salacious comments, I realised that he was a shrewd judge of character, which was apt considering his occupation.

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” Mathieu enquired, perhaps wanting to find out whether we’d be joining them for dinner.

Elio explained our situation without entering into details and I caught a devilish glimmer in Jacques’ eyes.

“I have an idea,” he said, “I thought of it when I told you about Andrée Putman. Why don’t you go to Madame Arthur?”

“It will be impossible to get in unless one booked in advance,” said Mathieu, and then to us, “It’s a very famous transvestite cabaret. Bambi used to perform there. Never mind, you wouldn’t know who I am talking about.”

“I’d love that,” Elio said, “But if you,” he added, mistaking my astonishment for reluctance.

“Yes, absolutely,” I hastened to reply, and Jacques smiled at me like the cat that got the cream.

“Don’t worry about booking,” he said, “I have a table reserved, just give them my card. There’s room enough for four, if you want to invite your friends.”

“What will you do?” asked Elio.

“Fred is in town,” he replied, “He’s taking me to a new club in the Goutte D’Or.”

“Isn’t it going to be dangerous?”

Jacques adjusted his scarf tight around his throat.

“What is life without the spice of danger? Tasteless, like plain rice,” he replied.
Chapter Summary

The True Heritage

The day before New Year's Eve and we know what will happen then...
The boys talk about mortality and what remains of us after death. Sounds depressing, but it isn’t.
The next chapters will be a smut-fest, so brace yourselves...

Chapter Notes

The Radiant Child by Rene Ricard was published in December 1981 on Artforum.
The Modena show was in May 1981.
Baquiat died in August 1988 of heroin overdose.
The funniest thing I have read about Warhol is that he co-authored a cookbook and one of the dishes was the Greta Garbo omelet, which came with the instruction: to eat alone.
LOLS

I had asked Jacques to drive us to the Pont Mirabeau; it was only twenty minutes or so from Montparnasse and I’d hoped he wouldn’t mind.

“Mind my dear? Bien sûr que non, it’s a pleasure,” he’d exclaimed.

Along the way, he and Mathieu talked about Fred Hughes and the Warhol exhibition which was already in the works at the Centre Pompidou.

“His pieces are scattered all over the world, it’ll take time to organise and finalise the loans. All those Campbell’s soup cans won’t just stack themselves,” he quipped.

Oliver was smirking: he must have noticed Jacques’ borderline lewd glances, but they didn’t bother him. Not so long ago, I would have found that annoying, almost like a kind of defilement; now, what I felt was a mixture of pride, amusement and sensual pleasure. He belonged to me and the rest of the world could stare but would never be granted entrance.

“Did you know him?” he asked, nudging my foot with his.

“I had that misfortune, yes. Before you accuse me of callousness, I’ll have you know that he was an extremely tiresome old queen.”

Mathieu protested feebly.

“We shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”
“I’ve never subscribed to this Calvinist view; death shouldn’t deprive us of the supreme satisfaction of telling the truth.”

“There isn’t only one truth,” Oliver countered, “There must have been people who loved him.”

Jacques laughed.

“When you are rich and famous, love can be easily purchased.”

“He helped many young artists,” I said, “They must have been grateful, at least.”

“If you are referring to Baquiat,” he replied, “He would have done well if not better without Andy’s intervention. Fame is not doing him much good.”

“I saw his works for the first time in Italy,” I said, “Two years before I met Oliver.”

“Was that in Modena?” asked Mathieu, and when I said yes, he added, “I remember your father telling me about it. I was supposed to come to Italy that year, but work got in the way.”

“And a few months later, Rene wrote that bombastic essay about him for Artforum,” said Jacques.

“I read that,” said Oliver, “Didn’t he compare Basquiat to Van Gogh?”

“He does get carried away sometimes, dear Rene.”

“In any case, Basquiat is alive and successful,” said Mathieu.

Jacques sighed, “From what I’ve heard, he’s not doing too well on the ‘alive’ front.”

“At least he won’t die uncelebrated, like Van Gogh,” I said, “Or Celan.”

“Of course,” the art dealer said, “He jumped off the Pont Mirabeau, didn’t he? You are going on a pilgrimage.”

“Elio wrote a composition inspired by Celan’s life and poetry,” said Oliver, “He will premiere it in London at the Royal Festival Hall at the end of February. We’d be pleased if you came.”

I pinched his thigh, but he trapped my hand under his.

“I’ll have to check my diary, but sure, why not? I wouldn’t want to be one of those who ‘missed the Van Gogh Boat’ as Rene would have it.”

“Are you comparing me to Van Gogh?” I asked, incredulous.

Oliver looked as smug as if the compliment had been directed to him.

‘I told you so,’ his expression said, and even though I knew it was a gross exaggeration, I loved how supportive he was and how devoid of any petty jealousy.

It was only afternoon when we got there and already dark.

Unlike the day in which Celan had died, it wasn’t raining, but the sky was overcast.

“You are inviting everybody to my concert,” I said, pretending to be upset.
We were leaning against the iron railings, looking down at the inky water.

“He’s well connected and I like him,” Oliver replied, “Is that okay?”

He put his arm around my waist and I felt the warmth radiate off his body.

“Yes, but I- sometimes I wonder whether I’m on the right track,” I said, “Whether I am not just indulging a whim, like a perennial amateur who only ever skims the surface of things.”

He held me tighter, closer, and kissed my temple.

“You couldn’t be superficial if you tried,” he said, and laughed, “You’re the most obsessive person I know.”

“Aside from yourself,” I countered, “I will always remember how cross you got with your poor translator when she misplaced a comma or chose the wrong synonym.”

“The infamous signora Milani,” he grinned, “Who mixed my pages on the very day you chose to confess your feelings for me. I have long suspected that she was one of your secret agents.”

I clutched at my scarf-covered throat in mock-horror: “My cover is blown! And I thought I’d gotten away with it.”

“Who else was involved?”

“I had Anchise tamper with your bike, so that you’d fall and scrape yourself. I was aiming for the apricot, but I got to see your hip instead.”

“You must have been crushed by disappointment,” he joked, tugging a lock of hair at my nape.

“Nah, it was a very sophisticated strategy: I figured that you would show me your injury only if you were interested in me, at least a little.”

“A little,” he scoffed, “By then I was so desperate for you I’d have shown you anything you wanted.”

His words brought back to me that sultry summer afternoon, the smell of lavender and rosemary, the chant of the cicadas and the fragrance of camomile soap blended with Oliver’s fresh sweat and his suntan lotion. I wanted him even more now than on that day, because I knew what it was like to belong to him.

“I wonder what went through Celan’s mind while he stood on this bridge,” I said, “What it must feel like to have no hope left.”

“Perhaps he only wanted to be free from the guilt of having survived the Holocaust, while his family hadn’t.”

We never talked about the incident of the previous summer, but I still had nightmares about it and it must have been worse for Oliver.

“I wish there was a way to let him know that his words mattered, that they still do and always will.”

He kissed me again, this time on the cheek.

“You are keeping his memory alive,” he said, “I can’t think of a better way of ensuring he didn’t suffer in vain.”
I thought that it would be the same for us: since we couldn’t have children our legacy was our work, the only trace of our presence on this earth.

What thou lovest well remains, What thou lov’st well is thy true heritage: who’d written that?

“Ezra Pound,” he replied, softly. I hadn’t even realised I was saying it out loud.

“You won’t be forgotten” he continued, “I’ll make sure of that.”

We stayed there a while longer, smoking cigarettes to fight back the tears and paying our silent tribute to the memory of a man whose loves and hatreds had been so intertwined they could never be untangled.

What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee, was the verse I’d left out.

They couldn’t be reft from him, so he had to die to be rid of them.

Later, we walked to nearby Avenue Émile Zola, where Celan’s apartment had been, at number 6. The building was like many others: façade painted white, casement windows with unadorned Juliet balconies, a curved lantern above the front door.

There was nothing remarkable in it nor was it squalid: it was dignified and with an air of solitude about it which must have suited Celan.

“Did it help?” Oliver asked, as we boarded the train at the Javel station.

“In a way,” I replied, “I’m feeling more confident about the emotional texture of the piece. Oh god, did I just say that?”

He chuckled.

“Soon you will be pontificating about the intrinsic qualities of your craft.”

I shoved him with my shoulder.

“Don’t,” I pleaded, “If I ever start acting pretentious, promise me you won’t let me get away with it.”

“I promise,” he replied.

His smile told me that he didn’t mind, that he would be there no matter what.

We had agreed to meet Momo and Marzia at Jo Goldenberg’s Deli in Rue des Rosiers and they were already there when we arrived.

They were drinking red wine and were not alone: Bertrand’s blue hair stood out like a peacock’s tail and Lucien’s blond mane seemed even more anaemic by comparison.

“I knew it,” Oliver said, “I was sure they’d tag along.”

“Do you mind?”

“I didn’t like what he said to you this morning.”

I took his hand and squeezed it.
“Let’s just forget about it.”

“Well, at least something good came of it.”

“Yeah, we nearly got caught having sex in Mathieu’s kitchen.”

“You are still pissed because you were seconds from shooting your load.”

I snorted: “Like you weren’t: your dick was so wet I thought you’d come already.”

A couple came out the door, bringing with them the warm, stuffy dining-room air.

They shot us a brief interrogative look: are you going in or not?

“Come on,” Oliver said, and I followed him inside.

We ordered kasha varnishkes and stuffed derma, a beef stew called cholent and a platter of grilled vegetables.

Bertrand had never tried traditional Jewish food and was overly enthusiastic.

“I’m sorry about ce matin,” said Lucien, “I had no right to say those things just because I was angry.”

“It’s already forgotten,” I said, devouring the kasha, which was almost as delicious as Mafalda’s.

“But we thought that maybe tomorrow night we shouldn’t, you know.”

Lucien shrugged.

“Je comprends,” he said, “Bertrand invited me to a party at his friend’s house in the Quartier Latin.”

“I thought you lived like a hermit,” said Oliver, making the blue-haired boy blush. I cleared my throat, casually.

“Maybe he didn’t understand you,” I suggested, “Remember what he said about his English.”

“I understood,” Bertrand said, “Hermit is ermite, right?”

“Ermite,” Oliver repeated, “My accent is not improving.”

“Your accent is charmant,” the boy said, with a little smile.

Marzia was looking at me as though she expected me to react.

“Are you dating then,” I asked, but it wasn’t a question.

“I guess so,” Lucien replied, casting a doubtful glance at his new boyfriend.

“Yes, we are,” Bertrand said and, to my great surprise, he wrapped his hand around Lucien’s neck and pulled him close for a kiss. It was chaste, but suggestive.

Oliver arched his eyebrows and stuffed a forkful of derma into his mouth to hide his smirk.

As dinner progressed, I became increasingly aware of the dynamics at play, and I realised that while Bertrand admired Oliver, he considered him an ideal of masculinity he aspired to rather than a
possible lover.

I had felt the same once: I had been unsure whether I wanted to be with Oliver or wanted to be him. It was only when I had him in my bed and had perceived the cracks under the veneer of perfection that I’d started to love him. It could have gone either way; I might have been done with him after that night and it wasn’t physical need which had drawn me back to him. I’d thought that was the reason at first, until I had spoken to him about my music and he’d been interested, caring, utterly convinced of my talent.

I was shaken out of my brown study by Momo.

“Do we have to be in drag?” he was asking, while Marzia rolled her eyes.

“We are the audience not the performers,” she said, and Lucien told us of the time one of his cousins had gone to Le Carrousel de Paris for a bachelor party and returned home two days later with bruises all over his body and, he said, no idea of how they got there.

“He said bruises but when he showed to me, well, they were hand-shaped.”

“Did they beat him up?” asked Momo, suddenly very preoccupied.

“Spanked him,” I replied, and noticed Oliver’s rapid change of expression. Everybody laughed and he joined in, but there was this electric charge between us that persisted through the rest of the evening.
The Day of Endings

Chapter Summary

It's end of the year as we know it and they feel fine....

A monstrously long chapter, because naturally there is a day before the night.....

Both POVs

More smut to follow in the next chapter

Chapter Notes

Oliver’s dream: I had this dream two nights ago. It was so bizarre I had to put it in the story. Too much CMBYN can infiltrate even your sleep.

The Ilya posture collar is a real thing. I did not make it up.

Fifi Chachnil is a real Parisian boutique which sells underwear, but the items mentioned in the story are sold at Coco de Mer in London.

The Hôtel Amour is in the Pigalle red district, a short walk from Madame Arthur. It did not exist back then, but it does now (hint hint).

The Statue of Liberty is now inside the Musée d'Orsay

Edit: I forgot to add that both Serge Gainsbourg and his father before him played the piano at Madame Arthur and that Serge used to take Jane Birkin there before they got together.

I woke up in a solitary bed.

Although I knew that would be the case – Elio was going shopping with Marzia – for a moment I was like an explorer without his compass.

In London, we spent most of our days away from one another, but here we’d never separated and I had become used to his proximity.

I buried my face into his pillow and smelled the residual scent of his hair and skin.

The night had been unusual: we’d returned early and come up to our room in silence.

“Kiss me,” Elio had ordered, pushing me against the closed door.

I had tried to take my time, but he’d been impatient and had undressed me with near-violence. With his tongue flailing inside my mouth, he’d scratched my skin with his nails and rubbed his clothed
crotch against my naked groin.

“There’s a flat surface over there,” I’d joked; he wasn’t playing.

“I don’t want us to come,” he’d growled, biting my neck none too gently.

“What?” I had protested, but couldn’t induce him to change his mind.

There was something fierce in his eyes which made me hard and wary at the same time.

“Let’s save it for tomorrow night,” he’d said, as he’d stroked my back, my ass and the inside of my thighs until I could hardly stand.

I had fallen asleep with his mouth on mine, my dick half-swollen and my whole body magnetised by his touch. My dreams had been confused, as they often were, but before waking I felt that sense of impending doom which usually accompanies nightmares. And then it came back to me: Elio leaving; not present-day Elio, but his 1983 version, with his shorter curls and plumper cheeks; he was walking away, already distant, surrounded by girls and boys his age, laughing, happy and guileless. He glided farther away from me and never looked back. In my heart was the certainty that he was gone for good; that I would never see him again.

I took a long shower to slough off the aftertaste of that vision, berating my stupid insecurity, unfounded and unreasonable as it was.

“This is the last thing I’d have imagined doing with you in Paris,” said Marzia, as we walked along Rue Rambuteau and past the Centre Pompidou.

It was a glorious sunny day, frosty and dry as a bone and my only regret was the Oliver wasn’t by my side, brushing his fingers against mine as we explored the city.

When I left him, he’d been fast asleep and I had not wanted to wake him up; stubble on his jaw, hair en bataille, a hint of sweat on the back of his neck: I could have taken a picture, but sleep and death look too much alike in black and white photographs.

I pressed my lips to his bare shoulder and tiptoed out of the room.

“What’s so strange about it?” I asked, linking arms with her.

“We are shopping for lingerie at Fifi Chachnil,” she replied, shaking her head, “We are friends and we used to be more than that and now I’m going to see what you’ll wear in bed with your man, who is also my friend.”

“When you put it like that,” I said, smiling, “It’s a secret though, so you can’t tell anyone, not even Momo.”

“You know I wouldn’t. We have known each other since we were kids, the three of us, but what you have with Oliver is different.”

“Yes,” I agreed, touching my ring.

“I hated him for a minute or two,” she said, “When you disappeared without a trace and didn’t have the decency to tell me why. I should have hated you, but it was easier to blame him.”

“I’m sorry.”
“And to make matters worse you came up with that idiotic excuse: I had lots of work to do,” she said, imitating my voice, “Yeah, the American job.”

“You caught me by surprise.”

“And you were wearing his shirt and trying to hide it,” she mocked, “Like I wouldn’t be able to tell, considering how big it was.”

Billowy, I thought.

“God, you’ve got is so bad,” she giggled, “And he’s as gone as you.”

“You think?”

I wasn’t past fishing for reassurance.

“I genuinely believe he’d kill for you. If someone hurt you, I wouldn’t vouch for their life.”

“Sounds very dramatic,” I said, but I was secretly thrilled.

She laughed.

“Hello, am I talking to Elio Perlman, the number one drama queen of Northern Italy?”

“Speaking of which,” I said, after we’d stopped giggling like schoolgirls, “About tonight.”

“Clever segue,” she replied, “What about tonight? Please don’t tell me you intend to surprise Oliver by performing on that stage.”

“What, no, why would I, never mind. No, what I was trying to say is, do you think you could go back to Lucien’s tonight? Mum and dad will be sleeping on the barge with the girls and I was thinking—”

“I have booked a room at the Hôtel Amour,” she interrupted.

“Is that a metaphor?”

She laughed again.

“No, you idiot, it’s a louche hotel, perfect for couples.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Pity, I bet Oliver would have loved it.”

“Maybe,” I replied, but I couldn’t tell her that what I had in mind required a familiar setting, so that I could plan my moves in advance, “Maybe next time.”

“Oh, I really like this,” Marzia exclaimed, “What is it?”

The red-haired, diaphanous girl slid out from behind the counter and picked up the item in question, handling it with great care.

“It’s one of our best sellers, the Ilya cut-out posture collar. Because of the inflexible saddlery leather, the neck is kept upright. It would look amazing on you,” she said, gazing at my neck.
We thanked her and she returned to her post.

“I’m not wearing a collar,” I whispered.

“Okay,” Marzia replied, as though she was only humouring me.

“I want something more allusive, not as blatant.”

“We are searching for underwear, not for a new literary trend.”

I stuck my tongue out and she gave me the finger.

At heart, we were still those two kids who’d played with the mud on the riverbank all those years ago.

Anella had taken her niece out for some unspecified reason which, I suspected, coincided with her intention of giving Vimini some time alone with me.

“Where would you like to go?” I asked her, as she adjusted her bobble hat on her head.

“You are going to laugh at me,” she replied, scrunching her nose.

“Never”

“I want to go to the Jardin du Luxembourg to see the replica of the Statue of Liberty.”

“I thought you’d already gone with Fede.”

“We should have, but I wanted to go with you.”

I let her lead the way: we got off at St-Sulpice, stopped to admire the façade of the eponymous church and snapped a number of photos.

We entered the gardens from the Rue Guynemer’s side and there it was, a smaller version of Bartholdi’s Liberty Enlightening the World standing on a stone plinth.

Vimini stared at it with a pained expression of her face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, fearing a return of her old symptoms.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine,” she replied, taking my hand, “It’s just a bit unsettling, that’s all.”

“What is?”

“It’s like the ending of Planet of the Apes,” she explained, “The Statue should not be taken out of its context.”

“And it wasn’t in the film,” I argued, “It was the world surrounding it which had shifted.”

“The effect is the same,” she said, “It would be like seeing a Pyramid in Crema.”

“Samuel would never recover,” I quipped to make her smile.

She sighed, “Change is hard. I never imagined I’d survive my illness.”
“How are your parents coping?”

“It’s getting better; at least they are no longer talking only about me.”

“You’ll soon get a boyfriend,” I said; she rolled her eyes, “Or a girlfriend.”

“I don’t like many people and not many people like me.”

“That’s not true,” I countered, “Fede loves you and so do the rest of our friends. And my life wouldn’t be the same without you in it.”

She giggled, “We are not even living in the same country.”

“You could come to London after your diploma,” I said, “And stay with us, if you’ll still want to be seen in the company of two old men three years from now.”

“Do you really mean it?”

“Well, I am getting on already,” I started, but she had already wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Will Elio be okay with it?” she asked, as we ambled in the direction of the octagonal lake.

“Elio acts like a curmudgeon at times, but he loves you,” I replied, “You know that, right?”

She answered with a seemingly unrelated question.

“Don’t you ever miss your country?”

“Sometimes, but my home is in London,” I replied; or wherever Elio is, I should have added, although I was sure she understood.

Dad was reading Le Monde in the salon; he’d moved the squishy leather armchair closer to the fireplace and he was drinking caffè latte from a mug.


He explained that she and Fede were doing some last-minute gift shopping for aunt Simona.

“Oliver’s gone sightseeing with Vimini,” he added, “You boys are having a nice holiday.”

He smiled at me with the same tender inquisitiveness he always showed me when he wondered about my happiness. I took out my packet of Gitanes and lit two cigarettes, handing him one.

“The best of my life,” I replied, letting him see that I was sincere.

“You have been lucky to find each other and clever in choosing to be together.”

He folded the newspaper and we smoked in silence, watching the fire roar behind the grate.

The words came out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“Did you really lose touch with Florian?”

There was the merest flicker of uncertainty in his eyes; almost undetectable, but not to me. He sucked on the filter, biding his time.
“I don’t know,” he replied, “I received an anonymous postcard once, five years after he disappeared. It was from someplace in India.”

“What did it say?”

“Just two words: Cor Cordium.”

I went up to him and touched his shoulder; he covered my hand with his and adjusted the glasses on his nose.

When I entered the bedroom, Elio was in the shower.

He’d laid out his clothes for our night out: the only suit he’d brought with him – a black velvet one with skinny trousers and a single-breasted jacket – and a collarless green silk shirt. The latter was new: probably one of the purchases he’d made with Marzia.

Normally, I would have joined him, but not this time.

I wasn’t sure why, but I was wading in a sea of contradictory and random emotions, the uppermost being sexual frustration; it wasn’t because we had not fucked the previous evening; it was that I didn’t know which role I was supposed to play and I was dying to find out. The suspense was killing me.

The mood changed once we went downstairs and met Momo and Marzia. They were both dressed in black: she in a lovely sequinned dress and he – as was the Italians’ favourite trend of the moment - in a blazer and designer denims.

“We look divine,” Momo declared, flicking his long hair away from his face.

“I feel out of place among all these continental hedonists,” I half-joked.

Their had a natural elegance, mine was always a bit too brash, slightly contrived.

“You look amazing,” said Marzia, with a smile.

Our pre-booked taxi arrived and while I was making sure the front door was locked, Elio whispered in my ear, “We’re coming back at midnight. I have a surprise for you.”

Madame Arthur was in the Soho-like Pigalle district and the frontage was painted red like the Moulin Rouge, but without its overstated glitz.

Inside, it was cosier than I’d imagined, with a small stage and a saloon feel in both the bar counter and the old-fashioned wooden chairs.

It was early when we got there, but already packed with people.

Jacques had paid for everything in advance, including the dinner and drinks.

We had lobster and champagne, like the dissolute bright young things we were pretending to be.

The music was a mix of French traditional pop and Euro trash with a smattering of Gershwin, Porter and Kurt Weill.
The compère, a busty middle-aged blonde named Germaine, made her way to the stage from the back of the room and stopped dead in front of Oliver.

“You’re not one of us, Monsieur, are you?” she asked in French.

He shook his head, “American,” he replied.

“May I sit in your lap?” she enquired, wiggling her bottom, which was encased in a silvery sheath so tight it was almost like a second skin.

He let her and she shrieked with joy, while the crowd cheered on with whoops and wolf-whistles.

She took a cigarette from the packet that was on our table and lit it; someone handed her a mike and she started singing Sylvie Vartan’s *L’amour est comme une cigarette*. Many in the crowd joined in, Marzia did too, but I was too occupied laughing like crazy at Oliver’s flushed face and childlike wonderment.

Germaine eventually stood up and walked on stage, where she was replaced by Doriana, a Vartan’s impersonator in a crimson backless dress.

The rest of the evening was a sort of blur: the champagne was constantly flowing, the performers wore fewer and fewer clothes until they were reduced to nipple tassels and minuscule g-strings. An Amanda Lear doppelganger sang *Tomorrow* covered only by her long blond wig, which reached down to barely conceal her sex. There was a raucous rendition of Cabaret in which Sally Bowles was a boy and the MC a serpentine girl. A beautiful red-head with heavy breasts – her name was Minou - stripped to the notes – and sighs - of *Je t’aime moi non plus* and by mid-act I had Oliver’s tongue down my throat and his hands all over me.

Our friends were likewise occupied, and so were the people around us.

Before it could turn into an orgy, the show ended, the lights went disco and the dancing began.

When midnight came, the press of bodies around us was a pulsating beast and I felt wet, hoarse and wild.

Marzia and Momo had disappeared, so we raised our glasses to the New Year and I took Oliver by the hand, guiding him outside.

Elio’s sweat was on my fingers and his taste in my mouth, but he’d gone upstairs and left me in charge of the drinks. I was in the kitchen filling a bowl with ice cubes, when I heard music coming from the salon. It was a piece I’d never heard before, similar to Satie but more dramatic.

I took that as in invitation and went to find Elio.

He was wearing an emerald silk robe and had let it slide down one shoulder. That white patch of skin was like a beacon, but Elio’s posture was regal and there was an aura of aloofness about him which made me even more predatory.

“Is that Satie?” I asked.

He didn’t turn around.

“Lévinas,” he replied, softly.
I was behind him and I couldn’t see his face, but I was struck by the glimmer of something metallic on his neck. I moved closer and saw that it was the clasp of a heavy chain on which was attached a black leather tassel.

Elio’s spine straightened and he ducked his head to expose his nape.

Instinctively, I knew what he needed, as though he’d told me with words: I grabbed the leather cord and pulled it, hard. His head snapped back and the robe fell from shoulders, revealing his naked back.

“Let me see you,” I said, making it sound like an order.

He swung round on the piano stool and stared into my eyes.

I will never forget that moment and the way he looked: on his chest was a silver chain harness with tiny rhinestone spikes it was paired with minuscule satin panties with elastic strapping and suspender clips; the black stockings on his legs were sheer but with a band of black elastic that wrapped around his thighs.

The spikes would dig into his skin and the binding would mark his groin, his ass and the tender skin of his lower abdomen.

Despite these indicators of submissiveness, his gaze was anything but.

“Take your clothes off,” he said, low and firm.

I obeyed, and when I removed my underpants my dick was already drenched.

He licked his cherry-gloss lips and it was like a siren call.

“Feed it to me,” he moaned, opening his mouth.

I pulled his head to my crotch and he sucked me in. My hand went to cradle his jaw but he caught it and placed it on his chest. The spikes were blunt, they wouldn’t break his skin, but they would scratch and torment it. I pressed the metal tips into his nipple and he shivered with pleasure. I was so drunk on bliss I could barely see: his head bobbing frantically, his glazed eyes, his long, nervous legs.

The scent of his lip-gloss mingled with that of our sweat and the noises we made were interspersed with words of love and lust. When I was on the edge of release, I tugged at the tassel and the chain closed around the base of Elio’s throat; he gagged around the head of my cock and that was it. I came and came until my knees buckled.

Oliver’s eyes were on me as soon as he recovered from his orgasm.

He’d parted his lips to speak, but could only breathe heavily through them.

He was kneeling between my parted legs, and his hands came up to stroke my thighs. It was a soft caress at first, but his touch became more and more insistent.

“I want to lick you,” he gritted out, “All of you.”

His tongue traced the path of the strapping of my stockings, first one then the other; when he reached the suspender clip, he lapped at the skin underneath it, licking his way up to where my balls were
slipping out of their satin binding.

“Oh my god, look at you,” he growled then he mouthed at the fabric to get to the desperation underneath. His mouth was all over my groin, but it wasn’t enough.

“I need more,” he said, and laid me down on the carpet. In a frenzied instant, he’d pulled my panties down and trapped them under my sac; he sucked bruises around my navel while his hand played with my harness; I felt dozens of tiny pinpricks on my chest; my nipples were on fire and I was going out of my mind with pleasure.

“Please, make me come,” I pleaded and was expecting his mouth or his hand.

“I have a surprise too,” he whispered and before I could draw another breath, he was taking me inside of him. He was slick, but very tight; our eyes connected and I saw pleasure devour his features like wildfire burning through a forest.

We kissed; my mouth on his mouth, on his neck, on his hard nipples; I bit them and he arched his back driving my dick even deeper into his core.

“Finish me off,” I implored, and he rode me rough and dirty, never taking his eyes off mine. I was the one wearing suspenders and make-up, but he was my man-woman all the same; we knew what we were and in that beat, before I filled him with my semen, he gave me the purest smile I’d ever seen, rinsed clean of fear and regret.

“I love you,” he cried, and I said it back, kissing his tears.
The Infinite

Chapter Summary

The rest of the night: smut and fluff galore.

A shorter chapter since the previous one was sooo long.

Switching POVs.

Chapter Notes

The quote at the start of the chapter is from Widow Basquiat (2014), so Oliver couldn't have read it. I cheated, I'm bad that way.

‘Let me tell you, everybody gets ruined by something— even if you’re a queen in a castle—something’s gonna say: you’re mine.’

I had read it in a book a long time ago and it had stayed with me. Back then I had construed its meaning in the most literal, negative way, but my relationship with Elio had shifted my perspective. We had become each other’s obsession, but there was no destruction in our folie à deux, only boundless love and reciprocal trust.

During our first summer, we had played at translating Leopardi, first in English then back in Italian until the poetry had lost both rhyme and meaning.

My favourite one was The Infinite: Elio had made fun of me - lightly as not to offend me since at the time we were barely on speaking terms – because that, he’d said, was the easiest, more predictable choice.

‘E il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare,’ was the closing line, and foundering is sweet in such a sea, the poet had written.

Foundering, I thought, admiring the line of Elio’s back as he stood in front of the fireplace, staring at the flames; I was drowning into that sea, but that too wasn’t negative nor was it ruinous. He turned to face me, and as he eyes met mine there wasn’t a part of me that wasn’t saying, over and over again: you’re mine.

We had drunk Rémy Martin and I had licked it off his sticky, salty fingers. He’d smeared my lips with his cherry gloss and made a mess of it with his mouth and tongue. I had removed his harness and contemplated the scratches and soft bruises on his chest; his nipples were dusky and painfully erect; the chain had bitten into his neck, leaving slight indentations. He’d asked me to remove the leather tassel from its clasp and to tie it around his neck. He was still wearing the panties and his stockings were laddered. He was my Elio, but also the glimpse of a different version of him; I
worshipped all of them, even those that had not been born yet: if that was to be my ruin, I would gladly embrace it.

“Come with me,” he said, and took me by the hand.

He had wrapped the green dressing gown around his shoulders and it trailed behind him like a cloak. I was naked, filthy and already half-hard.

“Wait,” I replied, and grabbed the bottle of cognac.

I thought we’d be going to our bedroom, but instead I found myself in a cozy sitting room that smelled of dead flowers and dust. There were books in there too, but the most impressive feature was an art-deco purple velvet sofa with gold studding and gold capped feet.

“When did you find out about this room?” I asked, caressing the plush velvet with the back of my hand.

“I’m not telling,” he said, as he sat on the sofa and spread his legs, “Unless you make me.” He wasn’t smiling and his eyes were not as defiant as his words; in fact, they were at odds with each other.

The table had been turned again; I knew what that meant.

I set the bottle on a side table and went to him.

“Get on your knees,” I told him, “Face the back of the sofa.”

He’d shed his robe on the couch, and I could see the red marks my fingernails had left on his skin. The satin was stretched tight on his ass, the strapping criss-crossing over his buttocks.

“Don’t move,” I ordered, and pulled the panties down, just enough to gain access but not enough to allow him to splay his thighs.

I didn’t give him time to adjust: I clutched him by the hips and buried my face into his ass.

He smelled of sweaty nylon and tasted bitter and brackish: I licked him open and felt his pulse on my tongue; when I suckled his balls, he trembled, trying in vain to keep still. He begged me to fuck him, to fill him up, to have him.

“Take it - fucking take it,” I said, and pushed into him in one vicious snap of hips.

His head was lolling on his neck like a string-less puppet and one of his hands went to his erection, but I replaced it with mine. I wanted him to spill all over his lingerie, so I used his dressing gown to stroke him; jacking him off with silk, while I stuffed him full of my cock.

“Pinch your nipples,” I urged him, and he moaned and complied. The instant his fingers squeezed the engorged nub, he seized up and let out a strangled sob.

“I’m coming,” he cried, “Yes, yes, yes,” I shouted, as I ground into him and let my release overtake me.

“You defiled my dressing gown,” I told him, showing him the incriminated item. I’d come all over it
and afterwards he’d used it to clean himself up.

We had gone back to the salon because we were cold and wanted to sit in front of the fireplace.

I was leaning back into his chest and his legs were bracketing mine.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” he whispered in my ear.

“We could have it dry-cleaned,” I argued.

“I’d prefer to keep it as it is,” he said, “Our special Parisian memento.”

“You know what you are.”

“Sick and twisted, yes,” he laughed, “But very, very happy.”

“You liked my surprise.”

He sucked my earlobe into his mouth and hummed.

“That’s a major understatement,” he husked, palming the strapping of my sodden panties. “This is the way to a man’s heart.”

“The heart or another organ?” I joked.

“Can’t deny that my dick was more than up for it,” he replied, “But seeing you like that,” he sighed, “I wish I’d taken a photo.”

“Maybe I should pose for a portrait.”

He wrapped his hand around my throat, stroking the leather tassel that was still tied to my neck.

“I don’t think so, kitten,” he said.

I brushed my cheek against his shoulder and very nearly purred.

“Can I have some more Rémy?” I asked, after a while.

He brought the bottle to my lips and cupped the back of my head; some of the liquid trickled down my chin: he caught it with his fingers and fed it back to me.

“This is great stuff,” I said, “Did you buy it?”

“Hmm, you aren’t the only one who did some secret shopping.”

“And what else did you get?”

“I went to Le Drugstore.”

“By yourself?”

“With Vimini,” he replied, sniggering, “She said she wanted to protect me.”

“You shouldn’t have gone without me.”

“First time we went there together, you were propositioned by a sugar daddy.”
I wiggled my ass.

“I liked his car,” I said, in order to provoke him.

“And you wanted to hitch a ride?” he asked, biting my neck.

“You weren’t driving.”

He tilted my head to the side so that he could kiss me on the mouth.

“You taste expensive,” he murmured.

We kept at it for a long while, until we started longing for our bed.

“Can you walk?” he asked, as he picked up our discarded clothes and my silver chain harness.

“I’ll manage.”

I took a few wobbly steps.

“I can’t go straight,” I complained, and he giggled, “You don’t say.”

I tried to elbow him in the ribs, but I didn’t have the energy or the necessary balance. In the end, he half-carried me and the clothes, while I wore the harness on my head like a spiky veil.

“This is - Oliver - this is, my sweet, darling Oliver, this is amazing,” I blew the smoke in his face, and he glared at me.

“That’s it,” he said, “You are gonna pay for it!” He took the joint from my lips, put it somewhere and tackled me to the bed.

“I warned you, what did I say?”

My tummy hurt from too much laughing.

“You said that if I did something again then something else would happen, but you can’t expect me to remember everything!”

“You are stoned.”

“No shit.”

He moved away from me, setting me free. That should have felt great, but it didn’t.

“What did I do?”

His eyes were glassy: he was high too, so why the change of mood?

“Nothing,” he replied, as he lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“I didn’t mean not to listen.”

“I know, I know.”

“Then what is it?”
He shook his head and pouted.

Silence, more sulking.

I stroked his chest, but that only seemed to make it worse.

“You were always horny when you were stoned... before,” he muttered.

“What are you talking about? We had sex for hours,” I protested, “Look at my dick.”

“I am,” he replied, “That’s what's making me sad.”

“The will is present, but the flesh is exhausted. We are in the same boat.”

“It’s not a boat,” he whined, “It’s a shipwrecked dinghy.”

“And foundering is sweet in such a sea,” I quoted, and his face was illuminated by a beatific smile.

“You remembered,” he sighed.

“I remember everything, Oliver.”
“Oliver, are you in the bathroom?” I called out, but no reply came.

I woke up feeling oddly unaffected by our night of debauchery: no headaches or furry tongue, just a slight ache in my muscles and soreness between my legs.

Perhaps, I thought, the more costly devices of pleasure yielded fewer side effects than their cheaper counterparts.

I looked around the room and found no trace of my lover; he was the neat sort, but not on days like these, when he allowed himself to be as lazy and self-indulgent as a pasha. Maybe he’d gone jogging, even though long gone was the era of strenuous workouts before breakfast. He’d boasted about it back then: ‘I exercised even when I was sick, even when I slept with someone new,’ he’d told me. But he hadn’t, not with me. I was the one who had proposed we’d go swimming after our first night together; he’d have lain with me, held me and cuddled with me until it was time to face the day.

I smiled at that memory and decided it was time for a piss and a shower.

Still half asleep, I trudged to the bathroom and did what I had to do, taking my time to luxuriate in the comforts of hot water and camomile soap.

It was only when I came back into the bedroom wrapped in a king-size towel that I realised there was no trace of Oliver: not only he wasn’t there, but his stuff was gone too.

I sat on the bed, dazed and suddenly very cold; I’d let the towel drop and I was naked; rivulets of water fell from my hair onto my shivery skin.

Reviewing the events of the previous night, I couldn’t come up with a reason why he’d have left like this, without a word. I had not done anything to offend him, except I hadn’t been able to muster up a decent erection, but neither had he: we’d been too tired and intoxicated to perform again, but I surely couldn’t be blamed for my body’s shortcomings.

I put on some clothes and hurried downstairs to find out what had happened.

My parents were having breakfast in the kitchen: there was no sense of tragedy in the air, so I let out the breath I’d been holding. My diaphragm hurt and my sight was blurry with unspent tears.
“Bonjour, mon petit,” maman greeted me, but dad only smiled, distracted by the article he was reading in Le Monde. Had they been out purchasing newspapers on New Year’s Day, I asked myself. It was strange, but not unheard of, considering dad’s penchant for sticking to his morning routine no matter what.

“Have you seen Oliver?” I asked, trying not to sound as desperate as I felt.

“Not yet my love,” she replied, “They said they’d be here before lunch, but I don’t think...”

“They, who do you mean by they?”

“Sit down, have some coffee,” urged dad, without raising his eyes from the paper.

“Oliver and Alice, my sweet,” maman chided softly, “Have you forgotten that they are in Paris for their honeymoon?”

“What, no, this is not, no, no,” I cried out, “We are together, he’s taken my name and he’s given me a ring,” I exclaimed, but when I touched my finger, it was bare.

“Darling,” she sighed, gazing at me with a careworn expression, “We have talked about this and you said you were sure you could do it, that you didn’t need the pills any longer.”

“What pills? What are you talking about? Papà, what is going on?”

Dad drew a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, a tell-tale sign of frustration.

“Elly,” he whispered, striving to keep his exasperation at bay, “Your friends and your cousin are here, you are all having a very nice time. You were doing so well.”

“But Mathieu and Thierry gave us tickets for the Gluck opera,” I insisted. I felt as though I was wading through trickle; my head seemed stuffed with cotton. “They are for tonight.”

“Yes, you are going with me, remember?”

“Last night we went to the cabaret,” I continued, ignoring his question, “Jacques offered us his table and we had a great time. We dined on lobster and champagne. Marzia and Momo were with us.”

“Jacques took the three of you,” he said, “You had fun, he said.”

The floor seemed to melt away and the walls receded, leaving me in a world as nonsensical as that of Alice in Wonderland.

That brought me back to the Alice I knew: she was my friend, lived in New York and wasn’t with Oliver any longer. He’d left her a long time ago, so why would he be married to her now?

“Alice said she couldn’t take time off because of her new job,” I said, to which maman replied with a clicking of tongue and a gaze full of pity.

While I tried to find the right words to counteract the new reality that was being foisted on me like a vile medicine, Vimini approached the table and sat next to me.

“They are saying Oliver is married to a woman,” I told her, and she rolled her eyes. I could see that she wanted to scold me, but she was hesitating because of my parents.

“I told you he’d do that if you didn’t speak,” she replied, with the tone of a teacher who was reciting an oft-repeated lesson. “Speak or die: you chose the latter.”
“I did speak! I did!”

“When it was too late,” she said, with a tinge of contempt.

“When I told him, I didn’t even know he was engaged.”

“We all knew,” dad intervened, “It was in his application. Alice was supposed to come and join him, but she had problems at home and couldn’t make it.”

I feared my head was going to explode.

“I gave him a copy of Armance and took him to my secret place by the river,” I whispered, more to myself than to them, “We kissed and he never said anything about a fiancée, he never mentioned that he was already committed to somebody else.”

“I paid for one copy only,” dad said, “And the bookshop owner told me he could not get a second one because it was out of print and we’d have to wait six months or so. I have that book in my study.”

Billowy, I remembered, and ran up to my room to find that most cherished of mementos. I rummaged into every drawer and inside the armoire, but to no avail.

It was a conspiracy or a joke in terrible taste, but I couldn’t understand why they would be doing this. I did my utmost not to fall apart, because I was convinced that Oliver’s arrival would put a stop to all that nonsense.

When I went back downstairs, I saw him: he was facing away from me and Alice was holding his hand. The glint of the gold band on his finger hit me square in the chest.

“Oliver,” I whispered, and he turned round and gazed at me with a bland smile on his lips; there was nothing left of the love he’d always shown me, not even the embers of the flame between us.

“Oliver,” I repeated, my voice rising in volume until it was nearly a scream.

“Oliver, Oliver, wake up!”

Elio was crushing me; his naked body was on top of mine, his lips inches from my mouth.

“You were whimpering in your sleep,” Elio said, “I couldn’t wake you.”

He rolled off of me and lay by my side.

“What were you dreaming of?” he asked, and I told him of my peculiar nightmare.

“You were me,” he marvelled, “And I was alone, without you. What does it mean?”

I gathered him in my arms: I needed to feel him close to me, to smell him and breathe him in.

“I’m not sure,” I replied, “Maybe we shouldn’t have smoked pot and not had sex,” I joked, feebly.

“Are you regretting giving me a ring?” he asked, “I love wearing it, but if you think-”

“No, don’t ever think that, no,” I replied, squeezing the breath out of him, “If I could, I’d marry you today, you know that.”

He nodded and pressed his lips to my neck.
“Perhaps I’m just too happy,” I continued, “I’m still not used to being so constantly ecstatic.”

He chuckled.

“What, it’s true,” I protested, “I never imagined I would get this lucky.”

“You say that now,” he argued, “Wait until I become a failed penniless musician, moaning about past glories.”

“I’d feel the same, but that will never happen. You’ll become famous, travel the world and regret being shackled to this dusty old academic who writes books nobody reads.”

“Bertrand begs to differ,” Elio countered, “He’s read your book several times and it’s about to be translated into French. Besides, you are not old and – oh, that’s it, isn’t it? You are afraid that I may leave you if I ever make it as a composer.”

It had crossed my mind - since I was nearly seven years older than Elio and not musically endowed - that he would meet someone talented, young and beautiful, who’d turn his head and consign me to the role of impediment standing in the way of soul-binding love.

My silence told him that he’d hit the bull’s-eye.

“You don’t understand,” he said, scratching at my back and ass as though he was trying to imprint his words into my flesh, “I don’t know how to be without you. There isn’t a version of me that could ever choose to leave you. You’d have to be the one who walked away.”

I mouthed at his throat, licking over his Adam’s apple.

“You can’t take the eggs out of the omelette,” I said, aiming for profundity but only achieving comedy. Elio started to giggle, “You’re always thinking about food,” he quipped.

I bit him on the shoulder and he let out a bark of laughter.

“I’m not your breakfast,” he complained, but I paid him no mind.

I made my way down his body and found what I was looking for. I ate him up and drank him down, and he did the same for me. After I’d peaked, he licked me clean, resting his head between my legs.

“What are you doing there?” I asked, massaging his scalp the way he liked it.

“Admiring the view,” he replied, “Have I ever told you how much I like your balls?”

It was my turn to laugh. “You might have mentioned it, yes.”

He licked them with the broad of his tongue. I could feel his laboured breaths on my sex, reaching as far as my anus.

“Fuck, Elio, you’re making me hard again and it’s not humanly possible.”

He moaned deep in his throat and let himself go, slicking me with his saliva, sucking lewd kisses on heated skin, burying his nose in my pubic hair.

When I forced him up into my arms again, his lips were swollen and his eyes glassy.

“Happy New Year,” I said, kissing him all over his face.
He said it back then added, “God, I really hope we won’t hear that song today.”

“We’ll stay away from radios. Anyway, tonight we are going to the opera, so no chance of mawkish pop songs by U2 being played.”

“It is our song though, despite everything, isn’t it?”

I shook my head.

“Not if it makes you sad. My song is every song that played that summer, because each of them reminds me of you.”

“I will make you a mix-tape,” he declared, solemnly.

“Ah, the one and only genuine token of true love,” I joked, “Nothing else compares. I’d been wondering how long before you did me the honour.”

He slapped my arm and made a mess of my hair.

“Kitty got claws,” I said, and he hit me again. We wrestled and laughed until everything was alright with the world again.
The Earth and the Sky

Chapter Summary

New Year's Day, Elio and Oliver's way.
Elio's POV first, Oliver's POV in the second part.

Chapter Notes

In some countries (including Italy - but it's an old superstition), it is considered unlucky to have a female come into your house the first thing on New Year’s morning.

Cotechino (cured leg of pork with spices) and lentils is typical Italian New Year's Day fare.

"We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars" : I quoted Oscar Wilde.

Armand Fernandez was signing his works with his first name as an homage to Van Gogh, who used to sign them Vincent. He then chose to change his name from Armand to Arman.

After Oliver’s distressing nightmare, we had kissed for so long and with such transport that my lips were puffy and sore. The stubble on his face and throat had rubbed my skin raw, and I felt well-used and slightly dazed.

Our breakfast was so tardy that it turned into a brunch; we were sipping our coffees when the doorbell rang, loud and tinny in the post-Réveillon quiet.

It was just the two of us: I supposed that my parents and the girls had stayed at Thierry’s to give us some additional time alone.

“I’ll go,” Oliver said, touching my shoulder as he walked out the room.

“Happy New Year!” intoned two feminine voices I knew well.

Viola and her sister burst in, one of them carrying a Pandoro Bauli and the other holding a bottle of Asti Spumante.

“Isn’t it bad luck for women to come into a man’s house on New Year’s Day?” I joked, while I kissed them both on the cheek.

“And where are the lentils?” Oliver quipped.

“Lentils are to be eaten with cotechino and you can’t eat pork,” replied Viola, as she pressed the Pandoro to Oliver’s chest.
“She has a point,” I said, taking the bottle from Chiara’s hands.

“Want some coffee?” Oliver asked, and they sat down with us.

They looked pale and tired but not unhappy.

“How was the party?” Chiara asked, caressing the rim of her coffee cup.

“There was no party,” I replied, “We went to the cabaret with Momo and Marzia. Lucien made other plans.”

“I bet,” Viola said, rolling her eyes.

“Look,” Oliver started then hesitated a moment before continuing, “Lucien did not behave well, not at all; but he was taken by surprise too, you know?”

“He sneaked out of the house to go meet Bertrand, and he did it while I was in his bed,” Chiara’s sister replied, “If I weren’t involved, it would be almost funny.”

“Yeah, there’s no excuse for that,” I said, not daring to think what I’d have done if Oliver had behaved the same way. “It was a terrible thing to do.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Chiara laughed, “It was bad, but it’s not like Lucien and Viola were engaged or something; not like you two,” she added, indicating my ring. I couldn’t help the blush that spread to my cheeks and throat.

“What are you saying?” asked Oliver, who was eyeing the Pandoro with covetous eyes. We had been eating scrambled eggs and buttered toast, but there was always room for something sweet, especially after the kind of night we’d just had.

“She’s saying that I was having fun with Lucien, but it wasn’t serious,” Viola replied, “I’m still too young for that, I want to have some more fun first.”

“Started already,” muttered Chiara, but her sister went on, undeterred.

“I’d have preferred he told me, but I’m not one to hold grudges. I slapped him-”

“Twice,” I interjected.

“Yes, twice and in public, and I am done with him.”

“Done, as in you don’t want to see him again?”

“As in we can stay friends as long as he doesn’t think he can come back to me when that blue-haired minx is done with him.”

“I don’t think you can stay friends if you plan to insult his boyfriend,” Oliver said, and Viola chuckled.

“No, probably not,” she concurred. “So how was the cabaret?”

“Shall we eat the Pandoro?” I asked, gifting her on a plate the easiest of witty repartees.

“Opening the Pandoro’s box?” Chiara duly quipped, “I wonder what’s hiding inside. Why are you so keen on changing the subject?”
“Did you make out with one of the performers?” asked Viola, “Was there an orgy?”

“It was touch and go,” replied Oliver, “But we left soon after midnight.”

“Afraid that Elio might turn into a pumpkin?”

“He already is a pumpkin,” he said.

“I’m here, you know?” I protested.

In the meantime, Chiara had ripped open the Pandoro’s package and was dusting the cake with icing sugar. She closed the cellophane bag and shook it hard until the Pandoro was covered with white powder, like a snowy peak.

Oliver grabbed a bread knife and cut four thick slices; he placed them on paper napkins and handed them out.

We ate in near-silence, only speaking to praise the cake’s softness or humming at the delicious texture of the sugar.

“Thank god this is not easy to find in London, or I’d be having it for breakfast every day,” Oliver exclaimed. He had a smear of white powder on the tip of his nose and I brushed it away with my fingers. He did the same for me, which made the girls smile.

“You have Christmas pudding,” said Viola, making a face.

“Not the same thing,” I replied, stuffing my face with more Pandoro. I hadn’t realised how hungry I was until then.

“What did you do after midnight?” insisted Chiara, who was never one to let go once she’d scented blood.

“You know what they did,” Viola said, elbowing her sister, “Same as you and Yvan.”

“Or you and that squinty-eyed country boy. What was his name? Pauvre petite biche.”

“His name’s Clément and he does not squint,” replied Viola, with some fire, “You were blowing smoke in his eyes that’s why he blinked. And he comes from Perpignan, which isn’t the country.”

“Why did you call him a biche?” I enquired. “Does he look like a gazelle?”

Chiara looked at me and then at Oliver.

“You must know what dorer une biche means,” she replied, “You are more French than I am.”

“I have no idea,” I replied, even though I sort of did.

“It’s argot for taking a boy’s virginity,” Viola explained, while glaring at her sister.

Oliver poured himself some more coffee and avoided my gaze. I imagined what he was thinking, what he would say and do in bed that night.

“Never heard of it before,” I said, trying to tame my incipient arousal.

“Anyway, he wasn’t a virgin,” said Viola, “He just looks younger than his age, like Elio did when he met Oliver.”
The conversation had taken a turn which wasn’t helping my predicament.

“I did not,” I argued, “I looked seventeen, maybe even older.”

Chiara snorted, “Dream on.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t discuss the intimate life of a stranger,” Oliver said, coming to my aid, “But it’s great that you had fun. Where is he now?”

“Sleeping, I guess,” Viola replied. “He’s cute; we had a moment, nothing more. And you still haven’t answered my question about last night.”

“It’s private,” I replied, “And I’m not going to tell you.”

She kicked my foot, but with no malice. We had more Pandoro, chit-chatted a bit, smoked a couple of cigarettes then they left. I convinced them to come to dinner with us on the following night: Viola would bring her *biche* and Lucien, if he wanted, could ask his minx to come along.

It was another sunny if frosty day, we had only two days left to spend in Paris and we hadn’t seen or done a tenth of what was on offer.

Most places were closed on New Year’s Day, but we’d been told by Jacques that the Centre Pompidou would be open. I wanted to see the Fauvists and Otto Dix’s works while Oliver was looking forward to the photographs of Brassaï and the paintings by Yves Klein.

“But there’s nothing to see,” I argued about the latter, “He’s only famous because he gave his name to a shade of blue.”

“Philistine,” he said, before he realised that I was pulling his leg.

“I prefer his friend Armand though,” I said, “I find his work more engaging.”

“He chose the earth while Klein opted for the sky,” he replied, smugly “Like I said, I am the romantic one.”

“And I am the hussy?”

“Maybe I exaggerated a little,” he chuckled, “But I was drunk.”

“We have a bottle of Asti right here,” I indicated the object in question with a wave of my hand.

“What are you trying to do?”

“Nothing,” I answered, giving him one of my mock-innocent looks, “Only stating a fact.”

“I know you and your facts.”

He pulled me closer and tucked a curl behind my ear, “We better get out of here,” he whispered, and was about to kiss my neck when the phone rang.

“Your turn,” he said, and as I walked out of the kitchen, I heard him curse under his breath.

“It was maman,” I told him when I returned. He was rinsing the dishes, so I helped with the drying. “They wish us a very Happy New Year. They are going to visit some friends, but Vimini and Fede would like to come with us to the Beaubourg.”
“When are we meeting them?”

“They are already on their way. If we go now, we should find them outside the entrance, waiting for us.”

“How did they know we’d be going there?”

“Maman said that Vimini mentioned it to you yesterday.”

“Wait, she only said she liked the escalators,” he chortled, “She’s a master at subliminal persuasion.”

“Or maybe she told you and your mind was elsewhere.”

“Where do you think it was?”

“In the gutter,” I quipped.

“We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars,” he quoted.

“And are you?”

“I’m doing it right now.”

“Romantic.”

“What did I just say?” he smiled and kissed me.

“How was the cabaret?” was the first thing Vimini asked.

“Seems like everybody’s interested,” Elio remarked.

“Why, who else asked?” Fede enquired.

We told them about Chiara and Viola and they were clearly disappointment at having missed their friends’ visit.

“We are all going out to dinner tomorrow night,” I said, “Of course you two are invited.”

“And is Lucien coming too?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, “It depends on whether he wants to meet Viola again and risk another slap in the face.”

“What would be the point?” said Fede, “She’s moved on and so has he.”

Elio gazed at me: we had moved on too, but how different our situation had been!

We had been denying the truth, postponing the inevitable, while Lucien was perhaps only starting to explore what Elio and I had fully discovered in that handful of days and night we’d first spent together: that there was no shame in lovemaking, not even in the most apparently sordid practice, as long as it was consensual and respectful.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said.
“She’s always right,” declared Vimini, making her friend blush.

That’s a first, I thought, and so did Elio, judging by the expression on his face. Fede, like Jack, was never bothered by compliments: both siblings usually took them in their stride or simply ignored them.

Inside the museum, the girls stayed with us at first, but we soon left them to enjoy the works of Braque and Picasso, while we went in search of the sacred grail of Nouveau réalisme.

“Edmund would certainly kill to have these in his gallery,” I said.

We were standing in front of a work by Arman: a burnt and broken armchair embedded in plastic, which reminded me of the Latham we had seen at the Lisson gallery. It was, according to the artist, the chair of Ulysses: the man who had returned home from his travails, which had lasted ten years, to find that the world he’d left behind had been razed to the ground.

Next to it was a panel on which had been fastened the remains of a smashed piano: Arman had titled it Chopin’s Waterloo.

“He smashed this with an axe in front of Menuhin,” Elio murmered, “I wish I’d been there.”

“He’s a violinist, but you’re a pianist: wouldn’t it have bothered you?”

Elio shuddered.

“Yes, but this kind of savagery is also rather exciting,” he said, “Destroying something precious and piecing it back together as something utterly different, more mysterious and as fascinating.”

He never ceased to amaze me; he surely never would.
Chapter Summary

The boys go to the Opera.
Oliver's POV at the start and Elio's at the end.

Chapter Notes

Pasiteles sculpted the beautiful Orestes and Pylades statues, which are also known as The San Ildefonso Group.

The Opéra Bastille was inaugurated by François Mitterrand on 13 July 1989, on the eve of the 200th anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. It was still unfinished.

“It really looks like an enormous wedding cake,” I said, admiring the Palladian-Baroque pastiche in front of us. Marble colonnades, gilded statuary and mock-Hellenic friezes, along with the bronze busts of famous composers such as Mozart and Beethoven, crowded the main façade on the south side of the building.

Elio nodded distractedly, his hand squeezing my arm, which he was holding as though he needed it for support.

Earlier, after dinner, he'd interrogated me about the plot of the Gluck opera, to probe the extent of my knowledge. I’d laughed at that, “I'd be pretty poor at my job if I didn’t know my Euripides,” I’d said. “For instance, there’s no such place as Tauris in the original play, only the land of the Taurians.”

“You sound like my dad,” he’d smirked, “Will you talk etymology to me next?”

“Not while we are in our bedroom,” I’d replied, “It would be like dangling a jar of honey in front of a bear.”

He’d groaned, as he’d pulled up his black skin-tight trousers.

“I never should have told you about that,” he’d said.

“What, that you got horny when I corrected your father about the origins of the word apricot? I’m glad you did, it’s a cute story.”

I’d said it on purpose, in order to provoke him.

“You think it’s cute that I was thinking of biting into your ass?” he’d hissed into my face, while grabbing a handful of said appendage.

“Yeah,” I’d replied, trying to sound cool, but in fact reduced to monosyllables.
“You're lucky that I don’t want to risk being late or I’d show you cute,” he’d said, inserting a finger in the groove between my boxers-clad buttocks.

“Lucky is not the word I’d use,” I’d quipped.

Thierry and Mathieu had outdone themselves and gifted us two of the best seats in the house.

The opening storm scene, with huge black banners rippling across the stage to imitate the high winds and the ship blown off course set the highly dramatic mood; I couldn’t take my eyes off the action, but the one time I glanced at Elio, I smiled at his parted lips and awestruck expression.

At the interval, we silently made a beeline for the bar and I ordered two glasses of Rémy Martin.

“Is that Master Elio Perlman, the virtuoso Ingrid can’t stop enthusing about?”

Pierre Bergé had emerged from the crowd in the company of a tall lean man that looked like his celebrated partner.

Elio flushed and extended his hand, but instead of shaking it, the shorter man hugged him with fervour and kissed him on both cheeks.

He greeted me in a more contained manner; I was expecting he’d introduce us to his friend, but the other man’s progress was intercepted by a group of elegant men and women who were fawning over him.

“How are you enjoying it so far?” he asked us, “I think Frigerio’s sets are superb and Shirley Verrett is on top form.”

“I could hardly draw breath during the second act,” Elio replied.

I agreed and praised the costumes, especially those of the Furies.

“That’s Pagano’s work,” Pierre said, beaming at my comment, “He’s a good friend of ours.” His face turned serious. “He hasn’t been well lately.”

“I hope he’ll get better soon,” I said, even though I suspected it wouldn’t be the case.

“He’s lost a lot of weight and recently had a severe bout of toxoplasmosis,” he enunciated the word with the care and the disdain used in naming a foe.

We drank in silence and then, as though at the flick of a switch, bonhomie and joie de vivre bloomed anew on Pierre's face.

“Tell me about your Parisian holiday,” he said, and we gave him a bowdlerized version of our adventures. He was delighted that we’d managed to enter the Hôtel de Lauzun and amused at our visit of Satie’s cupboard-sized apartment. That brought the discussion back to music and reminded me of Umberto and his mother, whom Elio had invited to his concert.

“We were thinking,” I started, ignoring the glares Elio was shooting at me, “If you have nothing in your diary for the end of next month, we’d love it if you could come to the Royal Festival Hall.”

Pierre didn’t act surprised.

“Yes, Thierry told me about that,” he said, “I have a series of commitments in February.”
"You don’t have to," Elio interjected.

"But I will try my best to be there," Pierre continued, "I love discovering new talent and you have it, my boy; you definitely have it. Who knows? Maybe you will be playing at the new Opéra Bastille next."

"When will it be finished?" I asked.

To my surprise, he laughed uproariously.

"Apologies, my dear boy," he said, after he’d calmed down, "The project is not going as planned - to say the least - but the building has to be inaugurated on 13th July 1989."

"The eve of the storming of the Bastille," I noted.

"Our Président won’t miss that deadline," he joked, but I detected his underlying gravity.

His companion had finally succeeded in escaping from the clutches of his acquaintances, but as he made his way to us, we were called back into the auditorium. Pierre handed us one of his personal cards and waved goodbye.

"We almost met Yves Saint Laurent," Elio said, wistfully.

"I never knew you cared for fashion designers."

We sat down and before the curtain came up and the lights were dimmed, he leaned closer and whispered in my ear, "I will thank you later," while his hand travelled up my thigh. He left it in my lap and mine joined it; our fingers entwined for the duration of the two remaining acts.

Afterwards, we stopped at the famous Harry’s Bar for drinks, because we both wanted to see the place where Gershwin had composed An American in Paris and where Fitzgerald and Hemingway had come to get wasted.

It was a cozy, old-fashioned place, all warm mahoganies and plush carmine velvets. The lights were low, the cocktails excellent and everybody around us was speaking English. Being a renowned expats haunt, it should have evoked in me a nostalgia of my homeland, but I only felt out of place, as if I no longer belonged.

"Pasiteles, Praxiteles," Elio said, as he drank his second Sidecar. "Isn’t it odd that two ancient sculptors should have similar names? And it’s not like it’s a common one, like, I don’t know, Rossi or Smith."

"Maybe it was a common name back then."

He clicked his tongue.

"Those two were more than just friends," he continued. "The way he depicted them: one caressing the other’s face."

We had admired the statues of Orestes and Pylades at the Louvre, not knowing at the time that we were about to see the characters come to life on the stage.

"Lucian explicitly describes their relationship as a homosexual one in his Erotes," I replied.
He giggled.

“For a moment I thought you were talking about our Lucien,” he said.

“I can’t imagine our Lucien as a rhetorician.”

“He may be very skilled with his tongue.”

I rolled my eyes and took a sip of my Manhattan.

“We’ll never know,” I replied.

His batted his eyes.

“Am I skilled with my tongue?” he murmured.

“You know the answer.”

My trousers felt tighter.

“Everywhere?” his voice was a silky caress on my neck, “Because I hate discrimination.”

I cleared my throat which had gone dry despite the drink.

“You needn’t worry about that,” I said, hoarsely.

“Come on, you must have a favourite,” he insisted.

His foot nudged mine.

“They are all favourites.”

“But if you had to choose?”

“There is no right answer to this question,” I tried to laugh it off, but I was so turned on my balls were beginning to ache. “What if I were to ask you?”

“Your tongue on my dick is the last thing I want to feel before I die,” he replied, his lips on my jaw.

“I’d have yours in my mouth... one last kiss.”

His eyes lost their mischievous glint.

“You are not permitted to die before me.”

“You are younger and the skinny ones are always the hardiest.”

“You are stronger and fitter.”

I chuckled.

“We are fighting like Orestes and Pylades in act three.”

He smiled, “That clinches it: they must have been lovers.”

We ordered another round and discussed some more: about the staging of the opera, the meaning of the tragedy it was adapted from; about Aeschylus’ Oresteia, Sargent’s painting of Orestes pursued by
the Furies; about Gluck borrowing from Bach and from himself.

“We should buy Thierry and Mathieu a present,” I said, “Not that we’ll ever find something worthy of what they have given us.”

“They love champagne,” he replied, “We could buy them a jeroboam of a vintage cru.”

It was an excellent idea, considering that books were obviously out of the question, and so was anything connected to arts and culture. Besides, I was sure Samuel and Annella would also buy them a gift and it was surely going to be of a more personal nature, because of their long-standing friendship.

When we got home – tipsy and tactile – we ran upstairs, eager to avoid any possible impediment to our tête-à-tête.

Oliver was rosy-cheeked and dishevelled; he smelled of bourbon and Penhaligon’s cologne. We prepared for bed as quickly as possible and were naked in no time.

“Tell me where else you like to have my tongue?” I asked, as I lay on top of him.

I smeared my face across his chest, back and forth, relishing the sensation of his wiry hair on my lips and cheeks. I blew wet breaths on his nipple, watched it peak and teased it with my teeth.

His heartbeat boomed in my ear and his erection poked me in the stomach.

“That,” he husked, “Keep doing that.”

“Tell me,” I insisted, working the other tit between my fingers.

He gasped and wriggled, but I kept at it, wanting to pull the words from his soul.

“The first time you put your mouth there,” he was breathing hard and his cockhead was wet and oozing.

“Say it,” I urged, biting down on the engorged bit of flesh.

“When you stuck your tongue inside my hole,” he gritted out, “I’d never, you were the first; it was, it is, always ---- everything.”

I crawled up his body and engaged his mouth in a sloppy, sensuous kiss.

“You have no idea,” I whispered against his lips, “No idea.”

“I think I do,” he was panting, but he managed a watery smile.

I wondered if he truly did; whether he knew that there was a fury inside of me, a rage of possession which he quenched and stoked in a never-ending cycle of lust.

“I want you,” he said, “All of you, into me.”

His tongue stroked mine, timidly; I growled into the kiss, deepened and took control of it. His body arched and opened up, surrendering to me.
When the time came and my dick slid into him, he was almost incoherent with pleasure. Instead of pounding into him, I went balls-deep and stayed there, administering short, sharp thrusts which made both of us moan and grunt. My fingers were digging into the back of his thighs and time and again I ducked down to suck at his throat and collarbones. My abdomen was pressing down on his cock and as he spurted ribbons of ejaculate on his torso and mine, he begged me to give it to him, harder, more, again, always. I obeyed, and filled his insides with my release.

“You think I don’t know,” he murmured, while he was wrapped around me, “But I do. What you said about Arman’s work, I get it, all of it.”

“I didn’t mean - I don’t want to hurt you.”

He kissed my hair, the nape of my neck.

“This isn’t pain,” he replied, “Pain was the lack of it, the absence of you.”

“I took an axe to your life and smashed it,” I said, stroking my ring.

“Don’t say it like it’s a bad thing,” he squeezed my waist, “I had my own Furies that had to be chased away.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fear that you’d grown apart from me, that you’d forgotten me and moved on, that you had seen right through me and realised you could do better.”

I took his hand, brought it to my lips and kissed every finger.

“I had the same fears, but I had to be close to you,” I said.

“Always brave.”

“Foolish.”

“Mine.”

“Always.”
I woke up with Elio’s nose embedded in the hollow of my throat; he was clinging to me, whimpering and muttering softly.

“What’s wrong, kitten?” I asked, hoping that he hadn’t caught a cold or worse.

“I don’t want to go home,” he moaned, his face now buried in my chest.

“We can’t stay here forever, as much as I’d like to. I have a job, you have your studies; we have our friends and the clinic in Soho is counting on us; plus if you don’t go back, I’m certain Lev will come and get you and it won’t be pretty.”

He snorted.

“You don’t like him,” he said.

I wasn’t Lev’s biggest fan, that was true, but he was an excellent musician and the two of them worked wonders together.

“He can be very rude,” I replied, and that was an understatement. Once he’d told me he didn’t want me at rehearsals because my bulk was obstructing his energy flow.

“It’s his Russian je ne sais quoi.”

“He’s from Norwich.”

“Maybe that’s his alter ego.”

“What about yours? You had a French one and he was very naughty.”

I caressed his hair, his neck and down the furrow of his spine.

“He’s distracted by the fact that he doesn’t want to leave Paris.”

I wondered if there was more to it than the regret that our vacation was coming to its end.

“Would you like to stay here?”

“You hardly speak French.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He raised his head and looked me in the eye: we stared at each other for a few seconds then he drew
a deep breath and wrapped his arms around me.

"I love London," he said, "And our life is there, I know that. But I adore how open we can be over here; the atmosphere is different, don't you feel it too?"

"Yeah," I concurred, "Not a greedy yuppie in sight and a government which builds concert halls instead of shutting them down."

"I even got used to people openly flirting with you," he said, biting my ear.

"They flirt with both of us," I countered, "And I am okay with it too, as long as they keep their hands to themselves."

"There’s so much we haven’t seen yet."

"You’ll come and play here," I said, "Did you hear what Pierre said? I don’t think he was only joking."

He emitted a high-pitched, strangled sound, like the noise of a squealing piglet.

I chuckled, "What was that?"

"That’s the other reason why I don’t wish to return," he said, "The time will come when I will be playing my music in front of a real audience. What if they hate it? What if they find it boring and leave? What if they dislike it so much they start throwing stuff at me, like discarded coffee cups and chewing-gum?"

"It’s a concert not a political rally."

He pinched my side.

"You know that it’s never going to happen," I said, "The British are too polite to heckle musicians."

"You’re not helping."

"You don’t need my help, because you’ll be magnificent and they will be transfigured by your talent and superhuman beauty."

"Sounds very Wagnerian," he said, smiling.

"The point still stands: they will fall in love with you."

"Oh, like you did?" he asked, tilting his head to one side, "You got upset because I wouldn’t play the way you expected me to."

"You were just being difficult on purpose," I replied, cupping his cheek so that he could lean against my palm, "Because you were flirting with me."

"I was not!" he exclaimed, feigning outrage.

Caressing the curve of his neck, "How disappointing," I said, "And utterly untrue."

The tip of his tongue traced his lower lip.

"And that too," I indicated his mouth.
He laughed, “Caught red-handed,” he said.

“You’ll have them eating out of your hand.” I added, “Only metaphorically, I hope.”

He placed a sloppy kiss on my wrist then he thought of something which made his eyes darken.

“When I am not there, someone might think you’re on your own,” he murmured, “Unattached, I mean.”

“I told you that I will come with you,” I said, “We’ll make it work, I promise.”

“Julian is only waiting for his chance: he’s crazy about you and he hates me. He might get you drunk and try to get into your pants.”

I was flabbergasted and slightly alarmed.

“Did he – what did he do? If he laid a finger on you again, I swear-”

“No, no, I haven’t seen him since that night at the party,” he replied, stroking my chest, “But you cut him out of your life and he wanted you for so long.”

“We could have stayed friends if he hadn’t tried to hurt you. As things went, he was lucky I didn’t punch the living daylights out of him.”

Elio sniggered, “Marzia said you’d kill for me.”

“Wise girl, she knows me better than I’d realised.”

He growled and licked the hair at the base of my neck. I felt his dick harden and lengthen against my hip, mine was on its way to fully erect.

“I’m not defenceless,” he murmured, “But I won’t pretend that it doesn’t excite me.”

“I can feel that,” I hissed, and took his cock in my fist.

He was already so sensitive that my touch made him arch and writhe like a fish slapping about on dry land.

“I have you, I’m here,” I whispered.

His face went slack and his eyes half-lidded: he trusted me completely and I swore to myself that I wouldn’t let anything come between us.

At breakfast, it was a full house: everybody was there, including Thierry.

“How was the opera?” he asked, as he poured coffee into Mathieu’s tall mug.

We recounted our evening, including our chance encounter with Pierre and his famous partner.

“You told him about my concert,” Elio said, smearing a slice of toast with Nutella.

“And I bet Oliver invited him.”

I chuckled and eyed the remains of the Pandoro: there were two slices left, but I wouldn’t surrender without a fight.
Marzia and Momo were quiet: they looked tired and were fiddling with their croissants; Fede and Vimini chatted sottovoce, so I didn’t dare disturb them.

Without missing a beat, Elio put one of the slices on a plate and placed it in front of me. When I gazed at him, he winked, without saying a word. Annella followed the proceedings with a faint smile on her lips, while Samuel and Mathieu were discussing the probable appointment of Édith Cresson as Minister for foreign affairs.

Cast upon us was the pall of ennui which sometimes precedes a severance, an ending. Elio and I had wondered what to do on our last day, but every suggestion was left dangling in the air, like a stringless kite: the Cinémathèque Française, the Instrument Museum, the Jardin des Plantes all succumbed to the same inglorious death. I suspected Vimini would have liked the latter, if only for the chance of visiting the curiously named Manufacture des Gobelins. Elio wished to see the Stradivari violins and Ruckers virginals, but at the same time he didn’t want to think about his own music and worry about its imaginary flaws. We intended not to squander a minute and yet we dallied, as though afraid that every move would push us closer to the moment of departure.

“I’ve found a translator and a publisher for your book,” Thierry announced. He’d taken me aside in order to keep our conversation private. He named someone I’d heard of and whose credentials were undisputed. The publisher was a major one, which pleased and surprised me. “You must have pulled some strings,” I said, valiantly trying to ignore the butter-scented cake on my plate. Thierry nicked a piece of it and popped it into his mouth. “Mon chéri, you know how these things work. I’m sure it’s no different in London or New York. But you shouldn’t underestimate the quality of your book, my dear Oliver, nor the love the French have for philosophy. For us, it’s not only a topic of conversation and the subject of academic lectures; non, for us it’s a way of life. Our philosophers are our pop stars, while your pop stars are your philosophers.”

That was a damning indictment, but I couldn’t quite refute it, since I didn’t know enough about France or its pop stars. I recalled how star-struck Bertrand had been when he met me and was inclined to half-believe Thierry’s boastful assertion.

“With your looks and your talent, if you stayed here, you’d be on television in less than a year.”

“My fifteen minutes of fame?”

“Mais non, mon chou, we are not as fickle as your compatriots. Besides, let’s not talk about Warhol, he depresses me.”

“That reminds me of Jacques.”

He laughed out loud.

“Sérieusement, we would be happy to have you here. Why don’t you think about it?”

“Our life is in London and I don’t speak French well enough to earn a living.”

“You could teach in English at the Sorbonne. We are not complete barbarians, my friend.”

I was starting to discern a pattern.

“Have you spoken of this with Elio?”

He shook his head, “Not at all, but Mathieu has enjoyed having you here. Sam and Annella could easily move to Paris and I was thinking that perhaps you’d be glad to be closer to your family.”
I was about to reply that they weren’t my family, but why lie? After all, Judith might go back to the States with Jack, and anyway she too was part of the Perlman’s extended family.

“You don’t have to make up your mind now,” he continued, “But please think about it. We’d be only too happy to let you stay here, until you find your own place. Mathieu hates being alone here.”

“He’s not alone.”

Thierry waved his hand in a dismissive gesture.

“I have the shop to think of, and the boat.”

I didn’t want to pry, but I gathered that Mathieu didn’t want to give up his house even though he was often away.

“We’ll think about it,” I said, and made to shake his hand, but he enfolded me in a fierce hug instead.

When Sam retired to the salon to read the papers, I followed him.

His wife had understood that I wanted a word with him alone, so she asked the girls to help her do the dishes. Mathieu and Thierry had gone to the bookshop, while Marzia and Momo loitered in the dining room, smoking cigarettes and drinking yet more coffee.

Elio had gone upstairs to pack our bags, since he hated doing it at the last minute; I knew that it reminded him of my departure that summer, when I had thrown my things into my suitcase at dawn while he stared at me with eyes full of tears.

I offered Sam a cigarette and he asked me to sit next to him. He folded the paper he was reading and flung it down on the side table.

“Thierry told you about the book,” he said, “He wanted it to be a surprise.”

“It was,” I agreed, “I don’t know how to thank him.”

“He’s not entirely disinterested,” he laughed, “He likes having young people around, and who am I to criticise?”

“Elio seems reluctant to go back to London,” I said, watching the smoke eddy towards the ceiling.

“He doesn’t like endings.”

“Mathieu would like you to move to Paris.”

“Yes, he mentioned that.”

“And may I ask what your answer was?”

He smiled and gazed down at the carpet.

“Let’s just say that Annella and I are not averse to the idea.”

He saw the expression on my face and hastened to reassure me.
“We are not trying to force your hand,” he said, “Think of it as another ace up your sleeve.”

“If only I spoke decent French.”

“Another adventure,” he replied.

I chuckled, “When will they stop?”

He gave me one of his big, warm smiles, “Hopefully, if you are lucky, they never will.”
The Last Supper

Chapter Summary

And the holiday is coming to its end... but not quite...

Elio’s POV then Oliver’s

"Did you call him?" I asked Marzia. She had agreed to phone Lucien and tell him about our dinner plans.

“He said his parents are still in Neuilly and why don’t we go to his place tonight?"

Oliver shook his head, “I never knew he could cook.”

“He can’t,” she replied, “He’ll order from a restaurant and put in on his father's account.”

“Who’s going to tell Viola?” I wondered.

“He did. He called her at Yvan’s and invited the four of them. He was about to call us when I spoke to him.”

“Yvan’s brother is coming too?” asked Oliver.

“No, I think Viola is bringing her new boyfriend, Clément.”

“The biche.”

“What are you talking about?” Momo intervened, looking thoroughly mystified.

I explained the reasons behind that sobriquet and he made a ‘wish you’d never told me’ face.

“Can’t wait to meet him,” said Marzia, who evidently relished the possibility of a little drama.

“As long as there’s plenty to drink and smoke,” her boyfriend concluded.

“Amen,” I agreed.

Oliver and I spent the afternoon gift-shopping and walking around the Left Bank, imagining what it must have been like during its heyday, when Paris was at the forefront of the cultural zeitgeist.

“This is where Pierre Abélard taught,” I said. “He gave the name to the Quartier Latin.”

“He was a renowned philosopher yet posterity remembers him because of his love affair with Héloïse,” said Oliver.

“It was a troubled relationship.”

Oliver laughed.
“You could say that,” he said, “She had to hide from her insane uncle inside a convent and pretend to be a nun, while poor Abélard was threatened with castration and became a monk.”

“You have to admire a woman who decides to name her son after a scientific instrument.”

“I feel for that poor boy,” Oliver joked, “Having to tell his friends his name was Astrolabe.”

“But his parents were geniuses and their love story has been celebrated in every artistic medium.”

“I doubt whether that provided any material consolation, at the time.”

I thought of the correspondence between the two lovers, which in turn reminded me of Celan and Bachman’s letters.

“We never wrote to each other,” I said, “Those few months before I came to be with you in San Francisco.”

“I wanted to hear your voice,” he replied, and naturally it had seemed more logical that we’d speak on the phone rather than trust the vagaries of the Italian postal service. I wished I had a written testimony of those lost days, aside from my diary.

“Did you,” I hesitated; I didn’t want it to sound accusatory, “I composed so many letters in my head.”

He smiled. “I did too,” he said. “But it was hardly a substitute for the real thing. And besides, writing would have made our separation seem more tangible.”

“How often would you have written?”

“Once a week, but it would have been a very long letter.”

We had arrived at the Panthéon, whose structure had been inspired by its Roman counterpart. We had visited it during our brief stay in the Italian capital, always at night; on those warm, humid, sensual nights. Here it was, instead, a crepuscular winter afternoon, with icy winds and dwindling light.

Foucault’s Pendulum had once been suspended from its dome and the temple itself was the burial place of many distinguished French personalities, among which were Marie Curie and Victor Hugo.

We found the inscription commemorating Saint-Exupéry, whose body had never been found.

“You know that I saw this happen?” I said.

Oliver was staring at the stone pillar with the wide-eyed marvel of a boy.

“What?”

“Not the plane crash, silly,” I giggled, “My parents were in Paris at the time, remember?”

“You said they were here when Celan died in 1970.”

“They were here in 1967 too, when this inscription was unveiled.”

“You were only a baby and I was already learning to play poker.”
I was about to laugh, but realised that he was serious.

“Who taught you?” I asked, as I linked my arm with his.

“One of the older boys at my school,” he replied, “He was the one who started me on the weed too.”

“You smoked pot when you were nine?”

“Goose,” he quipped, as he pinched my cheek. “That happened later, when I was thirteen. It was my way of rebelling against my dad.”

He frowned and his eyes lost their joyous shine.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and let my head rest on his shoulder so that we could breathe each other in. “I wish I had been with you after he passed.”

“I wish I hadn’t convinced you not to come.”

“I should have known better, but I do now,” I replied, and kissed his neck.

We stayed there in apparent contemplation of the engraved stone, while in fact basking in the warmth of our connection. I was the one who broke that sweet impasse.

“Tell me about that boy,” I said, pulling Oliver towards the tomb of Voltaire. “Were you attracted to him?”

He rolled his eyes.

“I admired him because he was a rebel, or at least I believed he was.”

“Was he the first boy who got you hard?” I whispered in his ear.

He swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment.

“At that age, anything goes,” he said, but he was not telling me the whole story.

“Did you go camping and touch each other?”

“Is this turning you on?” he murmured. Before I could answer, he took the camera out of his backpack to snap a couple of photos. I retaliated by taking Polaroid pictures of his profile.

“Yes,” I said, “Tell me more.”

“There’s not much to tell.”

“I bet there is,” I insisted. “Did he make you come?”

“It wasn’t like that at all,” he replied, “I wasn’t as unrestrained as you must have been.”

His admission stopped me in my tracks.

“Sorry if I’ve offended you,” I said, dead serious.

“You don’t have to apologise,” he said, tenderly. “I scarcely understood what it was and not only because of his gender. Feelings confused me; I often mistook them for physical malaise. I was afraid of losing control.”
That sounded familiar: he had – of course – followed the same pattern when we’d met. Once again I wished I’d been there, in his childhood, to hold his hand and help him navigate that confusion which had almost wrecked his life.

“I would like to be in every memory you cherish,” I said.

“You are.”

“That’s impossible.”

“You are impossible, too.”

We laughed, the brief spell of tension already dissipated.

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Is this what I think it is?” asked Marzia, elbowing me in the ribs.

We’d heard that song at Madame Arthur: it had been performed by a platinum blond Dietrich impersonator.

They make our lives hell here on earth
Poisoning us with guilt and shame
If we resist, prison awaits
So our love dares not speak its name
The crime is when love must hide
From now on we’ll love with pride!

I groaned, “Did you put him up to this?”

She shook her head, but she was laughing.

“It was you, wasn’t it? How did you even remember the song, you were absolutely hammered,” I said to Momo, who was trying to keep a straight face.

“Speak for yourself,” he replied, “You’re the lightweight.”

We were outside Lucien’s house and the music was leaking out of an open window.

“Who keeps their windows open in January?” I asked of no one in particular.

“Half of London,” Oliver dead-panned, adding, “English people are obsessed with fresh air.”

“Are we going in or would you prefer freezing to death while listening to Spoliansky?” said Fede. Naturally, she’d know whose song it was.
“Jack had a Weimar period,” she explained, grudgingly.

Vimini giggled. “Was it like Picasso’s blue period?”

“Less productive, infinitely more annoying,” her friend replied.

“I remember,” I said, “It was that summer when he tried to grow his hair.”

“Yeah,” said Marzia and Momo, in unison.

“How long was it?” enquired Oliver.

“Shoulder-length,” I replied, “I think he got bored after that.”

“What about the music?”

“That lasted a bit longer.”

“You said he was always locked in his room studying chess books.”

“Not always,” said Fede, “Unfortunately.”

“Montez!” shouted Lucien, who’d heard us despite the din.

We’d brought wine and a tray of pastries from a Portuguese patisserie we’d found in the Latin Quarter; I almost dropped a decent bottle of Burgundy when we entered the living room and saw that Viola, Chiara and their dates were already there.

“Did you hear the song?” asked Viola, who was partially entwined around a blond boy who looked about fifteen. Yvan greeted us warmly while Chiara hugged and kissed us. Clément shook our hands and didn’t seem intimidated by the situation. Oliver gazed at him then at me and arched his eyebrows.

“What?” I mouthed.

“Not a biche,” he replied, making sure the others weren’t listening.

I wished to interrogate him, but was left nonplussed again by the arrival of Bertrand on the scene. He had been playing DJ, he said, and Viola was praising his choice of music.

“That was so retro,” she exclaimed, ruffling his already tousled hair. He smiled and kissed her on the cheek. Marzia and I looked at each other and shrugged.

From the kitchen came the pleasant aroma of grilled meat and the zest of lemon.

“Smells divine,” said Oliver, and he immediately headed there, allegedly looking for Lucien. Vimini and Fede followed him, carrying the wine and the pastries.

“What’s going on?” Momo asked Clément; he’d spoken in French and was surprised when the boy replied in impeccable English.

“Not much,” he said, “We’ve only just arrived.” Momo offered him a cigarette; he accepted it with a bright smile. He had blue eyes, a shade darker than Oliver’s.

Marzia sat next to Viola. “You and Bertrand?” she enquired.
“He’s nice,” she said, “And I moved on.”

Everything seemed so straightforward and free of pain, serene and uncomplicated.

I went to find Oliver.

“I’m leaving you and eloping with this sausage.” I announced, making Elio snigger.

“Beef Merguez,” Bertrand explained, “There’s a mutton-based version, but beef is tastier.”

Lucien gazed at him as though he were the source of all wisdom. I knew that gaze well. It was inscribed on every memory of our Roman holiday, on every minute Elio and I had spent alone in that city, drunk on the first flush of love. Was I jealous? Perhaps a little, I concluded, but only because I had my happy ending; that and these amazing sausages with Moroccan couscous.

I must have said the last part out loud because Vimini asked, “Would you like my portion too?” and she would have parted with her meat, had I not stopped her.

Several conversations were held at the same time and soon the table resembled a modern version of the Tower of Babel.

From what I gathered, Bertrand had decided to try for the Sorbonne: his self-imposed isolation had been challenged by our arrival and definitely ended by his affair with Lucien. Reality had reasserted its claims, as it invariably did.

Elio was discussing in French with Yvan and Marzia, while Momo and Viola chatted about their Milanese friends with Fede and Vimini.

“Are you a student too?” I asked Clément; he was quieter than the others, but I didn’t believe him to be shy.

“My father owns a large vineyard near Perpignan, in the Roussillon county. I’m studying viticulture and oenology, but I can’t wait to be done with pen and paper.”

I looked at his hands: they were rough and calloused, at odds with his boyish face and body.

“You speak very good English,” I remarked.

He poured himself a glass of burgundy then refilled my glass too.

“My mother is from Tunbridge Wells,” he replied, “She came to France on a wine tour and never left.”

“Elio and I live in London.”

“Yes, Viola told me. She said you are a professor, but you don’t look like one.”

I chuckled and sipped the wine, which was excellent quality and quite strong.

“I’m not very distinguished, I know.”

It was his turn to laugh.
“You just look very young; all my professors are ancient and always wear black, every shade of it.”

“I wasn’t aware black had shades.”

“Believe me, it does.”

I caught Vimini’s amused gaze.

“What?” I asked, once Clément turned to speak to his girlfriend.

“Elio thought you were flirting,” she whispered.

“I was not,” I argued, “He was just telling me about his studies.”

She laughed and exclaimed, “Gotcha!”, but I wasn’t certain that she’d only been joking.

Elio’s attention seemed to be elsewhere, but the way he touched his throat as he spoke told a
different story.
Chapter Summary

We have reached the end of a very long journey.... Wow, I can't believe I wrote 35 chapters of this story, which was supposed to be a one-shot. Lols, that was one long shot.
Thanks so much for staying with the story and I apologise if you felt it went on too long, but I fell in love with these boys and their friends so I could not let them go.
You are fantastic, don't let anybody tell you otherwise xoxo

Chapter Notes

Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was enacted on 24 May 1988, and it stated that a local authority “shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality” or “promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”. It was repealed only in 2003.

Dernier is a version of Switch. It was very popular in Italy in the 80s. The rules were Byzantine and a game could last for hours.

Marzia took my hand and squeezed it.

“Why so sad?” she asked.

We were sharing a cigarette on the balcony, while the others were playing an endless game of Dernier; Vimini – as usual – was winning; she had done the same on my birthday, a little over a year ago.

“Not sad, just wistful,” I replied, waiting for the laughter, certain that it would come. I loved that I knew her so well and that we would always be there for each other.

“You sound like an old man reminiscing about his youth,” she giggled.

“I’m not getting any younger.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I sighed. “I just don’t want to leave Paris. Do you ever feel the same?”

She huffed and let out a tendril of smoke.

“Yes, but it’s different for me. I have already decided that I will move here after my degree.”

“What about Momo?”
“We’ll see.”

“You are good together.”

“We are, but I don’t want to force his hand.”

“Paris needs architects more than Italy, at the moment.”

“Yes, but things change. They seem to have changed for you: I thought you liked London.”

“I love almost everything about it.”

“But.”

I sucked hard on the cigarette before giving it to her.

“But we can’t be as open there; not everywhere, not all the time.”

“What does Oliver think?”

“He wants to buy a house there.”

She let out a low whistle.

“I want that too, but I just- I am sure that things are about to get worse.”

“Section 28,” she said, “Do you think it will be enacted?”

“Dad thinks so and he’s always right.”

“They want to make you invisible again.”

Hearing the truth from my friend’s lips had me almost in tears.

“They are scared of the virus,” she said.

“And the French aren’t?”

She conceded the point.

All of a sudden, I felt very tired.

“We have been living our lives in a protected space, surrounded by people like us. I didn’t realise how constrained we have been until I had something different to compare it with.”

“Does Oliver feel the same?”

“Yeah, I know he does. He’s always very careful when we are outside, unless it’s Soho or Camden.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t leave,” she said, “You should stay and fight.”

I chuckled.

“Look at me: do I look like a fighter?”

She stubbed out the cigarette on the iron railings and flicked away the ashes.
“You didn’t give up on Oliver.”

“I ran away from him.”

“But you got him back.”

“He left his country for me.”

Marzia smiled, like a parent watching their baby’s first steps.

“So I can do something for him now,” I said, slowly.

“There: it wasn’t that hard, was it?” she joked.

“Shut up,” I replied, pulling her hair.

“Ouch,” she cried and immediately retaliated.

Once back inside I sidled up to Oliver; I chuckled when I saw that he was losing.

“Do you need help with all those cards?”

He clicked his tongue.

“I have a strategy.”

“I thought you were the king of card games.”

“This isn’t a card game. It’s more like chess.”

“You don’t play chess.”

“He doesn’t play Dernier either,” said Fede, who was the dealer.

Two eventful rounds later, Vimini shouted “Dernier” and slammed her last card - a six of hearts – on the table.

Clément had only three cards left and was commiserated by his girlfriend, who had accumulated almost as many cards as Oliver.

Bertrand and Lucien had gone down to the cellar to get more wine, while Momo was going through a stack of LPs, admiring the artwork on the covers. Marzia sat next to him and put her favourite records to one side.

Yvan and Chiara had been persuaded to play rummy with Fede and Vimini.

I sat in Oliver’s lap and kissed his forehead.

“I was distracted,” he said, with a pleased hum, “Because you weren’t here.”

“Marzia and I went for a smoke.”

“You’ll miss her.”

“She’ll come for my concert.”
He was drawing circles on my back.

“When is she moving to Paris?”

“Next year, probably,” I said, brushing my hand through his hair.

“I was thinking of this,” he went on, “While I was talking to Clément. His mother is from Kent and he said that when she moved here the only French words she knew were to do with wines.”

“Is that what you were thinking of?”

He slipped two fingers inside the waistband of my jeans.

“That and other things I will tell you later.”

“When is later?”

He grazed the dimple above my ass.

“When I get you out of these clothes,” he replied, smugly.

“Oh, I see: you have a cunning plan.”

“Hmm, a proper invasion,” he agreed, nuzzling my jaw, “Well, not really proper, not at all.”

We kissed and kissed, stopping only when things were about to veer into indecent territory.

“I can’t believe you have this,” exclaimed Oliver, “We were talking about it only the other day, weren’t we?” I nodded, admiring the cover of Felt’s The Splendour of Fear.

“It’s mine,” said Bertrand, “I liked the artwork, didn’t know anything about the band. I figured that if the cover was so good, the music couldn’t be bad.”

“Bowie’s Tonight begs to differ,” argued Clément, and there was no contesting that.

“I love this one,” said Lucien, “The World is as soft as Lace.”

If I knew all about this world
Do you think I'd stay here that's absurd
I'd be the brightest star you heard
We'd be the softest lace on earth

“It doesn’t actually mean anything,” said Vimini, “But it’s pretty all the same.”

“Pretty and meaningless is not always an indictment,” I said, “As long as it creates an impression.”

“You lost me,” said Viola, who was uncorking a bottle of wine while her sister lined up the glasses for refilling. “Why don’t we play something we can dance to?”

“As long as it’s not Roxy Music,” Chiara said, giggling, “Elio thinks they are secretly trying to get into our minds.”
“I never said that.”

“You really did,” said Yvan, who seldom spoke and because of that he was always taken seriously.

Bertrand gazed at me curiously and I felt compelled to explain that at the time I had been drunk, stoned and therefore not in possession of my faculties.

“Was it Avalon?” asked Fede.

“Why, did Jack have a theory on that too?”

“Probably, but that’s not why I asked.”

I nodded.

“Avalon is where King Arthur is taken after his death,” she said, “The enchanted island.”

“I wish it really existed,” said Vimini, looking at her friend, who averted her eyes with a soft smile.

I caught Oliver’s gaze: something was going on there, but it wasn’t for us to pry.

That brought me back to Oliver’s childhood friendship and the confused feelings which had sprung from it: the two things blended together and for the first time I saw Oliver not as an adult, not even as the demigod that had graced my Italian summer, but as a kid, whose incipient desires and attractions had left him shaken and perturbed, determined – without the sympathy and support of his nearest and dearest – to suppress and conceal his real nature.

And here I was, strong inside the fortress of my friends and family, wanting to escape into my own Avalon that was Paris. Marzia was right: a fight was on the horizon and this time I should have to stay and face it head on.

Lucien called a taxi to take Vimini and Fede home. Oliver was made to promise he would make sure to say hello before we left. He reassured her that we had an afternoon flight, so we’d still be there for lunch.

It was late and we could have left too, but we lingered, unwilling to write the word end to our holiday: not yet, not so rashly.

Bertrand rolled a joint and we sat on the carpet in the living room passing it around and listening to Japan’s Ghosts.

"Just when I think I'm winning
When I've broken every door
The ghosts of my life blow wilder than before
Just when I thought I could not be stopped
When my chance came to be king
The ghosts of my life blew wilder than the wind"

After the second reefer, conversation became more unrestrained.
“When did you know you liked boys?” Viola asked Lucien, mirroring the question the latter had asked Mathieu and Thierry.

Bertrand was leafing through a book, pretending to be distracted.

“I’m not sure I do,” Lucien replied, “I wasn’t pretending to like you, if that’s what you think.”

“You still behaved like a dick. Bertrand didn’t owe me anything, but you did.”

Lucien was about to say something, but she shushed him.

“No talking, just listening,” she said, pressing the palm of her hand to his lips, “Next time, you know what you have to do. And by the way, these two didn’t behave any better with Marzia and my sister,” she continued, pointing the finger at Oliver and me.

Clément’s eyes went wide, but he said nothing.

The room was now thick with smoke, so I went to open the window.

Outside, the fog was descending over the river like a milky shroud, and in the distance Notre-Dame was like a phantom ship that had crashed against the rocks.

Everywhere was beauty and beauty was frightening because it contained the seeds of its own decay. If I made the mistake of holding on to it, I would be left with a handful of dust. The ghosts of my life would just have to wait, perhaps indefinitely.

I came out of the bathroom to find Elio lying on the bed. He was wearing a pair of my boxers and an old t-shirt of mine he’d appropriated while we were in Italy.

I sat on the bed and caressed his chest; he sighed and closed his eyes.

“Are you taking a trip down memory lane?”

“Why not?” he whispered; his heart was thudding beneath my fingers.

He grasped my hand and placed it on his throat. I stroked the tender skin, pressing lightly over his Adam’s apple. He emitted a sound between a moan and a growl, and the head of his cock was already pushing out, flushed and glossy.

I wanted to suckle it, but one taste of it would never be enough, so we’d better be done with the talking first.

I lay down by his side and gathered him in my arms.

“Why did you do that earlier?” I asked.

“Did what?”

I kissed the freckles on his nose.

“You know what,” I said, touching his neck.
He held me tighter and nibbled my collarbone.

“I wasn’t jealous.”

“I hope not.”

We stayed silent for a while; I was invaded by a sense of glorious well-being, which was amplified by the pulse of desire throbbing just below the surface of that temporary calm. As the effects of drink and weed subsided, this yearning increased and derailed my train of thought.

“I was thinking about that boy.”

I didn’t need to ask; I let him continue.

“I wondered whether he resembled Clément.”

“A little; not physically, but he has that air of knowing where he stands, confident of his place in the world.”

“Is that why you said he wasn’t a biche?”

I sniggered. “He may be green, but he knows where he’s going.”

“And your friend did too?”

“I thought so, but now I am not so sure. It may have been just bravado.”

“Did you love him?”

“Maybe I wanted to be him.”

“I wanted to be you.”

I felt my dick harden and twitch. Past and present were one and the same, and Elio had succeeded in permeating every single cell of my being. My thirteen-year-old self had Elio’s face and his coltish enthusiasm, and my friend was the Oliver I had been, the one who said ‘Later’ instead of ‘Yes,” and ‘Call me by your name’ in lieu of ‘I love you’. Suddenly, I found it hard to breathe and my eyes were stinging.

He caressed my face, my shoulders, my back, as though he was gentling a spooked animal.

“I know, I know,” he murmured, and I believed him.

Once the swell of emotion retreated, I was all over him: my tongue was in his mouth, on his nipples, his armpits, inside the shell of his navel.

Through the rush of blood in my ears, I heard him beg and curse.

I undressed him and wrapped the discarded t-shirt around his throat.

“Tighter,” he pleaded. I complied and his eyelids fluttered; his chest and stomach were flushed and his dick was rigid and desperate for attention.

I went down on it as though it was the last time and the first time, making obscene slurping noises that had him arch into me like a sacrifice offering. When I felt it was time, I pulled away and let him paint my mouth, neck and chest in thick, white ribbons.
“God, god, god,” he shouted, and I took his mouth with kisses that were a form of possession.

Still wet with his semen, I lapped at his balls and anus, opening him up with tongue and fingers.

“Oliver, please, please,” he cried, and I fell into him.

I was inside him and his face was so translucent I was momentarily seized by fear.

“Are you okay?” I croaked.

He nodded, with a blissful smile.

I stayed suspended on top of him, my whole body in thrall of his.

He clutched a fistful of my hair and pulled. That was all it took to spur me on. I ploughed into him hard enough to make the bed frame rattle; he was clawing at my back and ass, digging his nails in, biting the side of my neck and the meat of my shoulder. As I was about to finish, I took his face in my hands and all the words I had crammed inside of me poured out; he stared as if transfixed then we both trembled and convulsed as one being, light and darkness forever entwined.

End Notes

Your comments and kudos are very much appreciated. I always reply even if not immediately. Much Love xxxx

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